SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF INTERACTIVE MEDIA RESOURCES IN HOW LGBQ+ STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THEIR EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

Sandra Faulkner, Committee Chair

The organization Campus Pride found that LBGTQ+ students were 23% more likely to experience some form of harassment compared to non-LGBTQ+ students. Despite this fact, many LGBTQ+ students do not seek help from campus support resources after they are sexually assaulted because they fear being turned away, judged for their identity, or having their experience devalued. Existing research tells us that the majority of sexual violence resources available on campus reinforce stereotypes about sexual violence, for instance, that it can only occur between heteronormative and cisgender men and women who are strangers. These representations are problematic because they exclude the diverse experiences of LGBTQ+ students that do not align with this idea. For this reason, in this project I explored how LGBTQ+ students used interactive media resources like forums, blogs, and other social networking platforms to access to sexual violence narratives to find support after a sexually violent experience as well as make sense of what happened to them. I found that through interactive media, participants were able to receive support from other LGBTQ+ individuals who experienced sexual violence. They could communicate with them directly (by messaging one another) and indirectly (by just reading over the stories and comments posted on social media without direct engagement). This direct and indirect support and engagement exposed LGBTQ+ to alternative narratives of sexual violence that did not treat their LGBTQ+ identity as separate part of themselves; instead, it helped LGBTQ+ students navigate feelings of isolation that often coincides with both the aftermath of sexual violence as well as a marginalized social position.

To my love muffin

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Society falsely views colleges and universities as ivory towers in that these institutions are assumed to be unaffected by social problems (Katz & McGuire, 2018). Just as sexual violence remains a systemic issue in contemporary culture, it is also a significant problem in higher education. Existing research suggested that individuals within the LGBTQ+ community experience an increased risk of sexual violence because of their identity and social biases (Perez & Hussey, 2014; Powers & Kaunkinen, 2017). Thus, I focused specifically on the context of higher education in this dissertation project because it remains a site of systemic sexual violence and this violence has significant implications for LGBTQ+ students.

Existing research showed the pervasiveness of sexual violence in higher education and campus climate surveys indicated that LGBTQ+ students experience sexual violence in both verbal and physical forms (Kane, 2013; see also Austin et al., 2018; Kaukinen, 2017). Young and Maguire (2003) broadly defined sexual violence as any "unwanted verbal, coercive, physical, and sexual events" (p. 4). These events can include, but are not limited to, assault committed by a stranger, acquaintance rape, date rape, and intimate partner violence (Cuklanz, 1995, 2000; Harris, 2011; Meyers, 1997, 2004; Young & Maguire, 2003). Sexual violence against LGBTQ+ students can include assault, discrimination and harassment, stalking, and other forms of physical and/or emotional violence. However, much of the campus sexual violence research to date has primarily focused on the experiences of white heteronormative/ cisgender women and not on those individuals who consider themselves LGBTQ+. Therefore, this project sought to address this gap and shift attention to the experiences of a marginalized population.

Research Purpose

Because of the abundance of extant research regarding campus sexual violence

prevention, I attended more to what came after a sexually violent experience(s) rather than the experience(s) itself. According to Austin et al. (2018), academic institutions "represent critical contexts which can support or impede the healthy emotional, social, academic, and professional development of LBGTQ+ identified students" (p. 136). Given that LGBTQ+ students may fear social stigma or rejection when seeking help from face-to-face resources, it is critical that LGBTQ+ students have access to supportive interactive media resources following a sexually violent experience (Messinger & Koon-Magnin, 2019). This project is being conducted in an age of ever-evolving media and technology. Whereas in the past those in need of resources were limited to in-person contexts, people can now access information directly from devices like cell phones, tablets, and computers. For this reason, I offered deeper explorations into the interactive media resources used by LGBTQ+ students following their sexually violent experiences. These resources included blogs, forums, social networking sites and/or apps. These explorations proved necessary to understand (1) how LGBTQ+ students made sense of their experiences in the university context, and (2) how LGBTQ+ students navigated their healing journey.

Several gaps in our understanding warranted this project. First, the LGBTQ+ community consists of multiple, diverse identities. However, LGBTQ+ students are often stereotyped and viewed as a collective rather than individuals. As such, researchers must refrain from viewing the LGBTQ+ community as a collective entity because doing so assumes that all students share the same perspectives and/or experiences. For example, the sexually violent experience of someone who identifies as gay or lesbian might not be the same as a trans person; their unique social situatedness lends to an inherently different experience. This is not to say that the commonalities or common threads within and between these experiences do not warrant attention, but rather, we must attend to this violence on both individual and collective levels; both the personal and

political. The uniqueness of these experiences demonstrates the need for resources that do not adhere to social stigmas and stereotypes about sexual violence. Second, much of the existing research into sexual violence against the LGBTQ+ community focuses on those who identify as gay or lesbian; however, the experiences of bisexual, transgender, and non-binary people are absent from these discourses (Worthen et al., 2017). Third, there is a need for more research on sexual violence that goes beyond the man/perpetrator and woman/victim binary (see Erbaugh, 2007; Hines et al, 2012; Katz & McGuire, 2018). In essence, there is a critical need for inclusive resources that both challenge and transform dominant narratives about sexual violence.

Despite the pervasiveness of violence in higher education, the majority of campuses do not have sufficient resources, education, and/or training about these problems (McKinley et al., 2015). Many institutions will only meet the requirements of Title IX and the Clery Act—which requires institutions to report statistics of sexual violence—or in some cases, institutions might want to do more but not have the resources or knowledge to do so (Katz & McGuire, 2018). LGBTQ+ individuals who experience sexual violence must navigate additional obstacles to support and recovery such as prejudice and stigma as a result of their identity (Perez & Hussey, 2014). Therefore, there is a "need for specific and culturally competent services that not only address the victimization and its aftermath but also the unique elements of prejudice, stigma, and discrimination encountered by [LGBTQ+] victims" (Norwood, 2012, p. 146).

The way media institutions—particularly traditional media institutions that dominate broadcast systems—articulate sexual violence plays a prominent role in public perception of the issue (Benedict, 1992; Cucklanz, 1995, 2000; Meyers, 1997; Nettleton, 2011; Pollino, 2020; Pollino, 2022). In this project, I focused specifically on the dominant discourses of sexual violence that circulate broadly within western culture, and as a result, within higher education.

Beyond the institution of higher education, I also focused on how LGBTQ+ students perceived articulations of sexual violence that they accessed via interactive media resources and how these articulations shaped their understandings of their own violent experiences. For instance, I examined if LGBTQ+ students perceived that the resources they accessed only adhered to heterosexual sexual violence experiences, or were the resources inclusive of LGBTQ+ experiences? Much of the existing research regarding socially stigmatized groups centers on the perceptions of those in the dominant social positions (Yep, 2003); in other words, this research ignores those directly affected by these articulations. Therefore, this project specifically explored the role that these articulations played in how LGBTQ+ students who have experienced sexual violence understood what happened to them.

It is important to differentiate between the two models of media. The traditional model of media, which is also referred to as traditional or mainstream media or traditional media, is characterized by the transmission of messages to large audiences. Conversely, the contemporary model of media, also referred to as interactive media, centers on interactive platforms. The current project focuses primarily on interactive media because as Faulkner and Atkinson (2023) discussed, interactive media platforms obscure the divisions between "production, content, audience, and feedback" that remain prominent in traditional media (p. 1). Described as having a rhizomatic nature, "new, alternative forms of media create intersections between different parts of society that would otherwise be disconnected; such intersections are diffused and develop organically" (Faulkner & Atkinson, 2023, p. 1). Interactive media has shifted away from the idea of broad dissemination to individualization. Termed mass-self communication, individuals can now exert agency when seeking out and using media (Castells, 2011). Particularly, individuals can gather content from social networks and engage with it on their own time. Further,

individuals can also create and circulate their own content, or use the content created and circulated by others. In this project, I focused specifically on how LGBTQ+ students used two forms of interactive media, including social networking sites (e.g, Facebook, Twitter, Discord, Reddit) and user-generated content sites (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube).

Description of Project

To explore the role of interactive media resources relative to LGBTQ+ students' sensemaking of their sexually violent experiences and healing journey, I conducted in-depth interviews and open-ended surveys with LGBTQ+ students who experienced sexual violence during their time as a student in higher education. I grounded this study in feminist participatory action research (FPAR) which viewed the researcher and participants as co-creators of knowledge, centered the experiences of marginalized people, and moved beyond the description of social problems to promote tangible change (Manning & Denker, 2015). I conducted a thematic analysis of the interview and survey responses regarding the resources that LGBTQ+ students used after their sexually violent experiences. A critical interpersonal and family communication (CIFC) perspective, in conjunction with articulation theory, normative rhetorical theory, and social support guided this project. Together, CIFC and these theories allowed me to explore how the participants used interactive media resources after their experiences as well as how the articulations within those resources helped or hindered the sensemaking of their experience.

The purpose of this project was two-fold. First, I sought to understand the role that interactive media resources played in how LGBTQ+ students understood their experiences. In doing so, this study strived to combat the symbolic annihilation of LGBTQ+ students relative to sexual violence. Symbolic annihilation occurs when a group is underrepresented or absent from

representation as a result of gender, sexuality, and/or race (Leavy & Harris, 2018; Tuchmann, 1978). Based on existing research of campus sexual violence, this symbolic annihilation happens to LGBTQ+ students and this project aimed to correct this problem by centering their experiences and voices. Second, I developed best practices for sexual violence resources (both traditional and interactive). From a feminist perspective, "research should be empowering, emancipatory, and transformative" (Leavy & Harris, 2018, p. 160). It is important to recognize the significance of representations when it comes to how people in society perceive certain issues. In the case of LGBTQ+ violence in higher education, resources have the power to shape how LGBTQ+ students understand their experiences and navigate the healing process as well as how other people view this problem. For this reason, this project privileged the voices and experiences of individuals directly influenced by this problem.

LGBTQ+ Student Sexual Violence as a Critical Interpersonal Communication Issue

Based on these gaps, research that centers on the sexually violent experiences of diverse groups was needed to understand the extent of sexual violence within higher education. An interpersonal communication perspective allowed for this exploration. Manning et al. (2020) argued that the "communication discipline needs more scholarship that explores genders and sexualities in meaningful ways" (p. 1). This project aligned with this call in three primary ways. First, I explored the role of interactive media resources in how LGBTQ+ students who have experienced campus sexual violence made sense of their experiences. Second, I examined how LGBTQ+ students who experienced sexual violence used interactive media resources as a source of social support. Third, I explored how resources—both on college campuses and in interactive media contexts— could be more inclusive of diverse gender and sexual identities.

Theoretical Contributions

Chevrette (2013) explained that "many scholars have challenged the invisibility of LGBTQ+ individuals in interpersonal and family communication and have called for greater awareness of heteronormativity in the field's research and pedagogy" (p. 174). To date, there is not enough visibility of the broader issue of LGBTQ+ sexual violence within interpersonal communication research. Therefore, I gave visibility to LGBTQ+ individuals and their experiences specifically within the context of higher education. Further, I brought awareness to the role of interactive media resources in how LGBTQ+ students made sense of their experiences and related interpersonally.

Next, interpersonal communication research has traditionally adhered to a postpositivist orientation with limited work taking a critical approach. However, scholars suggested that critical work has much to offer the field of interpersonal communication given its attention to power and subjugated knowledges (Moore, 2017; Suter & Norwood, 2017). This project is one of the few studies to bridge the gap between critical rhetoric and interpersonal communication. Given that many subdisciplines remain siloed, I demonstrated the potential benefits of putting two seemingly disparate areas of research together (Moore, 2017).

Practical Contributions

This project also has practical contributions for LGBTQ+ students affected by sexual violence during their time in the institution of higher education. In accordance with the three components of FPAR— investigation, education, and action—I used the data from this study in a transformative way. Once finalized for distribution, I will share the best practices developed with participants with campus entities that create resources for LGBTQ+ students. Broadly speaking, best practices included ways to create more inclusive messaging, suggested characteristics that

the materials should include or not include, and/or provided information to support services and resources that are more attuned to the needs of LGBTQ+ students.

Research Questions

Based on the purpose and goals of this project, I sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do LGBTQ+ students who have experienced sexual violence use interactive media resources to make sense of their experiences?

RQ2a: How does the content of interactive media resources shape LGBTQ+ students' understanding of their experiences?

RQ2b: What do LGBTQ+ students perceive are the strengths and/or weaknesses of the content in those media?

RQ 3: How do the interactive media resources that LGBTQ+ students use shape their interactions with other people?

RQ 4a: What discourses regarding sexual violence, gender, and/or sexuality do media resources (traditional or interactive) include or exclude?

RQ 4b: What are the implications of these chosen discourses of LGBTQ+ students?

Summary of Chapters

To preview the remainder of this dissertation, Chapter 2 provides background on the pervasiveness of violence against the LGBTQ+ community, particularly concerning higher education contexts. Chapter 2 also presents the interpersonal and rhetorical concepts and frameworks that guided this project. Chapter 3 details my feminist methodology and how it shaped this project as well as the methods used for data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 explores the emergent themes from the analysis of the interview and open-ended survey

responses. Stemming from the interview responses, Chapter 5 examines participants' perception of helpful resources and offers best practices for campus entities to use when creating resources for LGBTQ+ students. Chapter 6 includes a discussion of the themes and practices presented in Chapters 4 and 5 as well as the implications of these findings. Chapter 6 will also conclude this project and detail its limitations and future directions.

CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Before this project details the interactive media that participants accessed following a sexually violent experience, it is important to understand the pervasiveness of sexual violence as a cultural problem as well as an institutional one. Chapter 2 will conceptualize this problem of LGBTQ+ sexual violence as well as dominant representations of this violence, before turning to an explanation of the theories utilized in their project to explore the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ college students.

Understanding LGBTQ+ Terminology

Experiences of sexual violence and the contexts surrounding that violence varies among the subpopulations that fall under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. Individuals who identify as lesbian might experience "social stressors and patterns of prejudice and discrimination" (Lund et al., 2021a, p. 2) that differ from a transgender individual because each individual has a unique social history embedded within their identity and the embodiment of that identity. For this reason, we must consider an LGBTQ+ person's identity and the context of that identity instead of assuming that all LGBTQ+ umbrella people experience the same challenges (Lund et al., 2021a; 2021b). It is important to understand each of these subpopulations.

The following terms refer to identities that fall under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. The term lesbian refers to women who experience same-sex attraction to other women. The term gay refers to men who experience same-sex attraction to other men. The term bisexual refers to individuals who experience attraction—either romantic and/or physical—to multiple sexes. The term transgender refers to individuals who do not identify their gender as congruent with the sex assigned to them at birth (Ream, 2021). According to Ream (2021), the LGBTQ+ community once reappropriated the term queer to refer to all individuals who identify as LGBTQ+. While

historically used as a derogatory descriptor of LGBTQ+ people, the LGBTQ+ community has reappropriated the term queer to inclusively refer to all LBGTQ+ people (p. 12). The term intersex refers to individuals who are born with genitalia or other sex characteristics that are not exclusively male or female. According to the National Center for Transgender Equality, the terms nonbinary, agender, and genderqueer, bigender, and outside gender refer to individuals who might not identify with any gender, have a gender that blends traditionally male and female elements, and/or have a gender that changes with time. Additionally, the terms queer and trans people of color (QTPOC) and queer and trans women of color (QTWOC) are both rooted in intersectionality and center on the intersections of systems of oppression. It is important to note that these terms are not all-encompassing, and an individual may change how they identify during their lifespan.

Conceptualizing LGBTQ+ Sexual Violence as a Cultural Problem

Individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ endure violence at both systemic and interpersonal levels. Studies show that even though social perceptions of gender and sexual minorities appear more inclusive than in previous decades, "estimates of sexual minority victimization rates or disparities have generally worsened or been sustained since the 1990s" (McKay et al., 2019, p. 673; see also Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2012; Toomey & Russell, 2016). According to Lund et al. (2021a), "overt and interpersonal victimization may take a number of different forms, including physical, sexual, and emotional maltreatment" (p. 2). More specifically, this victimization can include but is not limited to rape and/or attempted rape, assault with or without a weapon, verbal abuse, bullying, emotional abuse, economic discrimination, and/or stalking (Lombardi et al., 2008; McKay et al., 2019). Further, this violence can be a single occurrence "or be episodic or even nearly continuous in nature, occurring repeatedly or cyclically over time" (p. 2).

The 2010 Findings on Victimization by Sexual Orientation from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey[1] shows the prevalence of violence against the LGBTQ+ community (Walters et al., 2013). Key findings indicated that compared to lesbian women and heterosexual women, women identifying as bisexual experienced a much higher prevalence of sexual violence (by any perpetrator as well as an intimate partner) in their lifetime. Findings also showed that gay men and lesbian women reported instances of intimate partner violence and sexual violence that were equal to or higher than those reported by heterosexuals (Walters et al., 2013). While this report is the first to provide information on sexual violence by orientation, it does have some limitations. For instance, it does not provide statistics for individuals under 18 years of age and only men and women identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual were interviewed. As such, the findings do not indicate prevalence of sexual violence against transgender or non-binary individuals, nor does it attend to the diversity of identities within the LGBTQ+ community. That said, the 2015 Asexual Community Census found that individuals identifying on the asexual spectrum reported significant rates of sexual violence in their lifetime. In addition, the 2015 US Transgender Survey found that 47% of the 27,715 respondents reported that they experienced sexual violence in their lifetime. The 2015 Asexual Community Census as well as the 2015 Transgender Survey indicated that non-binary individuals were more likely to experience sexual violence in their lifetime. Existing research suggested that the violence, marginalization, and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals can cause stress at the psychological level (Murchinson et al., 2017). This type of stress, known as minority stress, can lead to increased rates of health issues like depression and even suicide among LGBTQ+ people

[1] The 2016/2017 *Victimization by Sexual Orientation* report from the *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey* has not yet been made available. All available reports from the surveys can be found at: https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/datasources/nisvs/summaryreports.html

(Lund et al., 2021a, p. 2).

Culture plays a prominent role in how we understand violence against individuals who belong to the LGBTQ+ community given that it "is increasingly recognized as central to human experience and in understanding intergroup relations, power, social identities and interpersonal interactions in everyday life in diverse contemporary societies" (Moleiro et al., 2021, p. 219). Culture can be conceptualized as a meaning-making process rather than a "statis state or membership" based on one's place within a particular group (Moleiro et al., 2021, p. 220). Further, culture can encompass "cultural and ethnic background, age, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, social status, language and ability, among other possible characteristics associated with cultural norms and values, behaviours and practices" (Moleiro et al., 2021, p. 220).

According to Moleiro et al. (2021), the social norms and values embedded within legal systems can influence the violence committed against LGBTQ+ individuals. Globally, some nations still criminalize individuals because of their sexual orientation. Even in the countries where someone identifying as LGBTQ+ is not criminalized, individuals who do not fit the heterosexual norm can be alienated from their communities and/or families as well as lose access to education, economic, and/or occupational resources or opportunities. These problems that LGBTQ+ people must navigate globally also affect them in social institutions like higher education.

LGBTQ+ Sexual Violence and the Institution of Higher Education

Despite the assumption that universities are ivory towers and exist independent of—and remain unaffected by—larger social issues, scholars suggest that these institutions reflect society and include similar prejudices and issues (Kane, 2013; Katz & McGuire, 2013). Further, these

institutions are complex settings that have educational, work, residential, community, research, and recreational functions. Campus climate surveys indicate that LGBTQ+ students, faculty, and staff experience hostility ranging from verbal threats to physical assault (Kane, 2013). In addition, all of these settings have risks of harassment, sexual violence, and/or emotional violence. A 2010 study conducted by the non-profit organization Campus Pride found that LBGTQ+ students were 23% more likely to experience some form of harassment compared to non-LGBTQ+ students (Rankin et al., 2010). According to Perez and Hussey (2014), harassment can take on a noncontact nature (i.e., jokes, comments) or a contact nature (i.e., physical force). In 2015, the 10, 528 results from Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey shows the gravity of this problem higher education. The survey revealed that LGBTQ+ students ages 13 to 21 experience "anti-LGBTQ attitudes and behaviors within school settings" (Austin et al., 2018, p. 138). These attitudes and behaviors included discriminatory remarks by peers, faulty, and staff. McKinley et al. (2015) note that a hostile campus environment causes LGBTQ+ students to experiences emotional pain. Similar surveys have found that the student, faculty, and staff population on college campuses hold "homo/transphobic and heterosexist beliefs and biases" (Austin et al., 2018, p. 138). For these reasons, research shows that LGBTQ+ students will conceal their sexual identity in order to avoid harassing and discriminatory attitudes and behaviors.

In the 1970s, feminists developed the term rape culture to conceptualize how society normalizes sexual violence through behaviors and attitudes such as victim blaming and slut-shaming. Rape culture encompasses society's tendency to ignore the pervasiveness of sexual violence as well as emphasize victim accountability. According to Buchwald et al. (2005), rape culture manifests itself as "a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks

to sexual touching to rape itself" (p. xi). However, Cuklanz (1995, 2000) explained that misrepresentations of sexual violence continue to pervade public discourse because the idea of a real rape is only categorized as attacks of passive victims by cruel strangers. In an attempt to address this limited conceptualization, scholars draw attention to the wide range of sexual violence situations, such as domestic violence, date rape, and acquaintance rape (Cuklanz, 1995, 2000; Meyers, 1997, 2004; Young & Maguire, 2003). Contrary to the dominant narratives of sexual violence, situations of rape where the victim knew the assailant are common yet rape often goes unrecognized or gets disregarded due to stereotypical narratives of sexual violence (Harris, 2011).

The prevalence of this issue in contemporary culture can be witnessed in the widespread problem of campus sexual violence, and particularly, the violence against LGBTQ+ students. According to McKinley et al. (2015), LGBTQ+ students "were more likely to experience sexual harassment and discrimination and attribute it to their sexual identity than their heterosexual peers" (p. 113). Harris (2019) calls for scholars to go "beyond the rapist" when addressing campus sexual assault, which means challenging the idea that only individuals are violent actors. Harris (2019) also suggests that universities can play a role in violent processes by reinforcing stereotypes of sexual violence, providing insufficient resources, and not taking appropriate preventative steps.

The problem of administrative violence also occurs in higher education. This form of violence "occurs when organizations avoid their own culpability by suggesting that violence involves individuals" (Harris, 2019, p. 12). By situating culpability on the individual, institutions separate themselves from the problem. This separation, in turn, enables institutions to "support the status quo, particularly around issues of difference including but not limited to cisgenderness,

heteronormativity, whiteness, and hegemonic masculinity" (Harris, 2019, p. 13). Individuals who fall outside of the status quo, then, do not always receive the support they need. In this case of violence perpetuated against LGBTQ+ students, administrative violence prevents students from both receiving justice and the resources for healing and wellbeing.

In response to LGBTQ+ oppression, some universities have taken steps to implement nondiscriminatory policies, gender-neutral housing, and LGBTQ+ centers. However, existing scholarship shows that academic institutions continue to reproduce "normative systems that impact queer and trans individuals, even as it also lifts up the ways that these people succeed and are resilient despite these structures" (Lange et al., 2019, p. 523). With this idea in mind, scholars explain that

> The future of theory for [LGBTQ+] and queer studies in higher education relies on scholars who must be (a) committed to intersectional analysis, (b) attentive to historical power relations that inform contemporary realities and structures, and (c) grounded in the lives of queer and trans people. (Lange et al., 2019, p. 520)

In the following sections I will address each of these three elements as they relate to the project. Specifically, I will explain why the study of LGBTQ+ violence in higher education necessitates an intersectional perspective, the dominant historical and culture power structures that influence this issue, and lastly, the need to center the experiences of those directly affected by this violence.

LGBTQ+ Sexual Violence: The Need for an Intersectional Approach

LGBTQ+ students experience multiple forms of oppression and violence because of their stigmatized gender identities, such as barriers to support and recovery resources (Kaukinen, 2017). Intersectionality can provide a complex understanding to the ways that identities are both

constituted and intertwined with broader culture (Moore & Manning, 2019). Further, intersectionality allows researchers to critically interrogate systems of "privilege and marginalization that intersect across differing social categories" (Moore & Manning, 2019, p. 10; see also Yep, 2016). For instance, an intersectional approach to campus sexual violence weaves together gender, sexual orientation, race, class, age, and disability "to demonstrate how sexual violence is a system of persistent institutional inequalities" (Harris, 2019, p. 2). These intersections can contribute to the institutional and/or interpersonal violence that LGBTQ+ students experience (Moleiro et al., 2021). Researchers can use an intersectional perspective to understand "the roots of violence, the barriers and resiliencies to seeking help from violence and social responses to prevent violence and provide safely nets for survivors" (Gill, 2018, p. 560).

A singular narrative of sexual violence does not exist in higher education; therefore, research, policy, prevention, and support must take the complexity of social identity into account. An intersectional approach to LGBTQ+ violence would allow researchers to better understand how "systems of oppression interact to create political and cultural structures that shape the experiences of oppressed individuals" (Garvey et al., 2017, p. 162). It would also give attention to the ways that multiple social identities and oppressions overlap (Marine, 2017).

Barriers to Seeking Help

As a result of the inattention to sexual violence against LGBTQ+ students, in addition to the "pervasive discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity," individuals may choose not to report (Perez & Hussey, 2014, p. 3). In a study conducted by Potter et al. (2012), LGBTQ+ students expressed that when they do not report their sexually violent experiences, it stems from (1) a fear of receiving unfair treatment as a result of their marginalized sexual preferences and/or identities, (2) not feeling comfortable enough to disclose

their sexual preferences/identities, and (3) uncertainty of how their community and/or law enforcement would view them following their disclosure of victimization. Given that students may choose not to report, it is all the more important that these students have access to resources that can help them navigate their experience. Further, due to concerns of social stigma and rejection, LGBTQ+ students may feel unmotivated to physically visit a counseling/resource center (McKinley et al., 2015). As Messinger and Koon-Magnin (2019) noted, "LGBTQ survivors too often face a minefield of risks when seeking help: from service providers turning them away, to having their experiences and identities devalued, to being outed, or worse" (p. 661). Experiences of sexual violence disclosure have significant implication on an individual's healing process. For instance, if someone who experienced sexual violence receives blame, judgement, or is not believed about their disclosure, they are at an increased risk for PTSD symptoms (Ullman & Filipas, 2001). In addition, "the risk of receiving such negative reactions is higher for victims who disclose their assault to formal support networks (e.g., medical professionals, law enforcement) than those who disclose only to informal support networks (e.g., friends, family)" (Messinger & Koon-Magnin, 2019, p. 669). Richardson et al. (2015) found in their study that none of the 308 LGBTQ+ college students who experienced sexual violence went to a formal support provider on-campus compared to 11% of the 2,482 heterosexual students who experienced sexual violence.

However, interactive media resources provide both anonymity and convenience. In order to make these resources as helpful as possible, they should be developed by individuals who understand the unique perspectives and experiences of LGBTQ+ students as not to apply a universal, heteronormative/ cisnormative template to those resources.

De-Centering Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity

The pervasive ideologies of heteronormativity and cisnormativity influence educational settings and directly affect the lives of LGBTQ+ students. Heteronormativity privileges heterosexuality over other forms of sexual orientation, whereas cisnormativity privileges cisgenderness over other forms of gender identity. Further, society positions these taken-for-granted ideologies as the "normal human experience" (Chevrette, 2013, p. 178).

Overall, researchers agree that LGBTQ+ students experience an increased risk of violence compared to heteronormative students (Lombardi et al., 2002; Marine, 2017; Murchinson et al., 2017; Payne & Smith, 2018; Perez & Hussey, 2014; Powers & Kaukinen, 2017). However, much of the research about campus violence centers on the experience of white, heterosexual women and neglects the experiences of LGBTQ+ students (Garvey et al., 2017). Messinger and Koon-Magnin (2019) explained that "a key problem facing LGBTQ sexual violence survivors is that many existing programs and services have been designed from a cisnormative and heteronormative perspective" (p. 670). This limited perspective harms both education and prevention efforts within academic institutions, and further, can foster mistrust and discourage LGBTQ+ students from seeking help. Individuals who fall outside of this cisgender/ heteronormative narrative do not receive sufficient support which can have adverse effects on both physical and mental health, as well as academic performance (Perez & Hussey, 2014). In addition, the factors that contribute to campus violence do not remain the same for all gender, racial, class, and/or sexual groups. The factors that contribute to the sexual violence of a heterosexual student might differ from those of an LGBTQ+ student. In contemporary culture, the dominant narratives regarding sexual violence rely on heteronormative language to center the experiences of straight cisgender women, which diminishes the broader issue of systemic sexual

violence (Garvey et al., 2017; Murchinson, 2017).

Garvey et al. (2017) critiqued a report published by the Association of American Universities because even though it indicated that LGBTQ+ students experience an increased risk of sexual violence, it did not give visibility to the "experiences of queer-spectrum students nor give indications to why these students experience violence at such higher rates than heterosexual students" (p. 156). LGBTQ+ students of color as well as those of a lower socioeconomic status may experience difficulties when seeking help because of structural barriers that sustain hegemony. These barriers can include distrust of social service institutions, fear of the criminal justice system, barriers imposed by religious and/or cultural institutions, absence of a financial safety net, limited or no access to healthcare, and/or fear of deportation (Gill, 2018; Rosentel et al., 2020). Kulick et al. (2018) found that when LGBTQ+ students of color experienced violence by white perpetrators, "the racial status difference may increase the salience of harassment, as sexual and gender discrimination are often communicated with and through racial bias" (p. 1135). Additionally, if attending a predominantly white university in a predominantly white neighborhood, LGBTQ+ students of color and students with low socioeconomic status may need to navigate "unfamiliar environments and experience profiling, negative interactions, and violence from police and residents" (Rosentel et al., 2020, p. 98). Additionally, Miller (2018) examined the intersections of LGBTQ+ identity and disability that undergraduate and graduate students experience. LGBTQ+ students with disabilities—either physical or intellectual— may face obstacles on campus, including discrimination from faculty and/or other students, and lack of access to supportive services. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the complexity of social identities and to acknowledge that LGBTQ+ students will make sense of the intersections of their identities in distinct ways (p. 343).

Historically, colleges and universities in the United States enforce a gendered system where “two binary, mutually exclusive genders (and sexes) are centered in daily operations, institutional practices, and policies” (Marine, 2017, pp. 83-84). According to Wooten (2016), “Beyond a denial or severely inadequate recognition of nonheterosexual experiences of rape and sexual assault, LGBTQ students who have had those experiences are often left without advocates who understand them or resources that reflect their identities” (p. 50). This system is problematic because trans* individuals experience sexual violence at higher rates than cisgender students (Marine, 2017). Specifically, trans* women and trans* women of color experience a greater risk of violence, as do nonconforming individuals who express their gender in more feminine ways (Marine, 2017). This kind of “gender fundamentalism operates by denying and stigmatizing any form of gender nonconformity, in the same manner that heterosexism denigrates nonheterosexual relationships” (Lombardi et al., 2002, p. 91). In other words, this behavior toward nonconforming individuals and groups represents a way to punish those individuals and groups for not adhering to dominant, normalized structures.

Despite these cases, traditional media continue to perpetuate sexual violence as “something that (only) cisgender men do to (only) cisgender women” (Marine, 2017, p. 83). Existing research shows the pervasiveness of sexual violence against women on college campuses; however, Wooten (2016) noted that this research does not take sexual orientation into account. The majority of campus sexual violence literature presumes that both woman and their attackers are cisgender and heterosexual. Despite this dominant narrative, violence can occur between those of the same gender identity (i.e., men assaulting men, women assaulting women). Further, this singular narrative excludes the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals by reinforcing a system that does not recognize the diversity of survivors. LGBTQ+ college students face

additional challenges following a sexually violent experience. In addition to the shaming and victim-blaming that cisgender students endure, LGBTQ+ students must also deal with homophobic and heteronormative attitudes and behaviors as well as oppression related to any minoritized identities. In order to combat this oppression, more attention must be given to the experiences of LGBTQ+ people.

Centering LGBTQ+ Experiences

According to the Murchinson et al. (2017), researchers have used minority stress theory to understand how social stigma (direct and indirect) affects both the physical and mental health of LGBTQ+ people. Existing research indicates that internalized homophobia/transphobia—defined as the "the negative judgements that [LGBTQ+] people make of themselves when they receive stigmatizing messages from their cultural context"— can lead to increased violence against LGBTQ+ undergraduate students. The findings of this study indicate that minority stress increases the risk of sexual violence among LGBTQ+ students because it reduces their ability to respond to threats. The authors find that "anti-LGBQ stigma should be considered not only in bias-motivated assaults, but also in a broader range of violence against LGBQ young adults" (p. 235). With that in mind, it is all the more important that LGBTQ+ students have access to sufficient interactive media resources that not only consider issue of sexual violence, but also their complex social positioning.

According to Yep (2013), discursive violence refers to the "words, gestures, tones, images, presentations, and omissions used to differentially treat, degrade, pathologize, and represent lesbian and gay subjectivity and experience" (p. 23). Interpersonal and family communication researchers can unintentionally replicate this form of violence in their research by using the "comparative framework and the ongoing erasure of queer subjects" (Chevrette,

2013, p. 184). As articulated in the sections above, it is paramount that we address the issue of LGBTQ+ sexual violence in higher education and give attention to the interactive media resources made available to these LGBTQ+ students. To do so, we first need to gain a better understanding of what interactive media resources LGBTQ+ students utilize, as well as the characteristics within these resources.

As a social institution, colleges and universities are not immune from the dominant systems and structures that exist within broader culture. Individuals and groups who defy the norm—such as those who identify as LGBTQ+ — fall victim to oppressive attitudes, actions, and behaviors. As the research presented demonstrates, LGBTQ+ violence in higher education is a significant problem, and yet remains largely understudied. Therefore, I want this project to lend a better understanding to the experiences of LGBTQ+ students, the interactive media resources they draw on for support, and improve the way that the institution of higher education supports LGBTQ+ students who have experienced sexual violence. Based on the above literature, I offer the following research question:

> **RQ 1:** How do LGBTQ+ students who have experienced sexual violence use interactive media resources to make sense of their experiences?

Representations of LGBTQ+ People in the Media

McInroy and Craig (2017) defined a media message as the relaying of experiences via representations (e.g., words, symbols) that create and/or reinforce cultural meanings. In other words, this definition demonstrated that the media that circulates within contemporary society remains embedded with cultural discourses that are continuously produced and reproduced. Media are characterized in two major ways: traditional media and interactive media. Traditional media includes offline technologies whereas interactive media is online. Because of its

computer-based nature, interactive media has increased interactivity compared to traditional media forms as well as a less apparent hierarchical structure (McInroy & Craig, 2017). Research indicated that the structural differences between traditional media and interactive media influenced the representations of the LGBTQ+ community in these spaces.

Traditional Media

According to Morrison et al. (2021), traditional media institutions produce content that aligns with their audience's expectations. Depending on the institution, audiences are predominantly perceived to be heteronormative and cisgender; as such, these institutions stereotypically represent the LGBTQ+ community in a way that conforms to the mindset of said audience. Although still underrepresented and/or misrepresented in forms of traditional media, the LGBTQ+ community has experienced increased visibility since the 1990s. Existing research indicated that the representations of LGBTQ+ people in traditional media have taken a positive turn in that prime-time comedies and dramas now represent LGBTQ+ people similarly to non-LGBTQ+ characters (Dhoest & Simons, 2012; Raley & Lucas, 2006). In addition, McInroy and Craig (2017) noted that an increased number of LGBTQ-identifying writers and producers now contribute to content-creation. Even with these positive steps toward inclusivity, LGBTQ+ representations within traditional media continue to be problematic (Lopez, 2018). For instance,

> From the first representations of LGBTQ identities on television in the 1960s to contemporary representations, LGBTQ people have consistently been stereotyped as comic relief, villains and/or criminals, mentally and/or physical ill, and victims of violence. These stereotypes remain prevalent and may contribute to ongoing societal homophobia and heterosexism. (McInroy & Craig, 2017, p. 34).

In addition, most representations depict LGBTQ+ men or women, but there remains a lack of

representation individuals who identify as transgender and non-binary, as well as diverse representation of age, race, socioeconomic statuses, and cultures (McInroy & Craig, 2017).

It is important to note that this increased representation of LGBTQ+ identities in mainstream media is not wholly inclusive. Some mainstream media companies employ the marketing strategy of gaystreaming which normalizes certain LGBTQ+ identities to align with non-LGBTQ+ audience members. To achieve this normalization, mainstream media portrays LGBTQ+ individuals as "overwhelmingly white, cisgender, able-bodied, physically attractive, affluent, urban, and/or male-identified" (McInroy et al., 2022, p. 632). In a study about lesbian women's perceptions of themselves and/or their relationships in media, Annati and Ramsey (2022) found that participants strategically seek out media content that avoids the lesbian tropes that often appear in mainstream media. For instance, participants tried to avoid media that objectified the lesbian body as well as the trope that portrays the lesbian identity as transient, meaning that lesbian women will "eventually partner with men" (Annati & Ramsey, 2022, p. 313). Even though these traditional media practices situate LGBTQ+ identities in the public eye, they also reinforce harmful and stereotypical perspectives of the LGBTQ+ community.

Interactive Media

Forms of interactive media can include social media networks, blogs, and other sites that permit the creating and sharing of content like images and videos. Whereas traditional media representations of LGBTQ+ people reinforce stereotypes, interactive media representations give increased attention to individuality and the diversity of the LGBTQ+ community. In their study, McInroy and Craig (2017) found that LGBTQ+ individuals perceived traditional media as "a space of social control, rigidity, or commodification, and had limited options regarding LGBTQ content" (p. 41). McInroy and Craig (2017) also found that compared to traditional media,

participants viewed interactive media as "a space for creativity and production because of ease of accessibility and opportunities for interaction" (p. 41). Relative to content, LGBTQ+ participants considered interactive media to have less constraints, more flexibility, and provided multiple ways to engage (e.g., posting, commenting, reading). In another study, Jackson et al. (2018) found that online communities allowed trans women to provide and receive support during the Trump administration and its subsequent anti-trans policies and discourses. The authors explained that social media spaces, as opposed to mainstream spaces, allowed trans women to "communicate about and construct their identities and experiences without the fraught, incomplete, and transphobic mediation of mainstream narratives" (Jackson et al., 2018, p. 1872).

Ng (2013) noted that even though mainstream media networks continue to increase their online presence, interactive media still have the potential to provide content that does not align with dominant conceptualizations of the LGBTQ+ community. Now, this is not to say that interactive media spaces are devoid of flaws and misrepresentations, but rather, that the individualized nature of these spaces give people the means to represent alternative narratives to that of the mainstream media. For instance, in their study of #MeToo representations, Andreasen (2021) noted that while mainstream media framed #MeToo as an exaggerated movement against men, the production of memes via social networking platforms either rendered the issue of sexual violence invisible or frame it as passionate and sexy. Despite the ability for interactive media to challenge the oppressive discourses perpetuated by traditional media, traditional media continues to misrepresent issues like sexual violence.

Traditional Media Representations of Sexual Violence

Given its mass production capabilities, traditional media have the power to bring social problems to the public's attention or to obscure those problems from focus. Much of traditional

media's influence stems from its ability to "create a dominant reality that reinforces dominant power relations, exposing people to events and experiences which are beyond the confines of their own life space and through this secondhand reality shaping their beliefs and perceptions" (Easteal et al., 2015, p. 104). Research shows that traditional media frame violence as a normalized aspect of culture, such as in combat/fighting films and TV shows (Wien, 2014). Wien (2014) conceptualizes this violence as a continuum, meaning that "the more we accept microaggressions at the interpersonal level, the more we accept and allow violence at all levels of our lives" (p. 176). Research also shows a direct relationship between fear and violence; traditional media, in turn, "capitalize on creating fear through undue sensationalism and manipulative means" (Wien, 2014, p. 178). Beyond audience viewership, representations are significant given that media have the power to shape how publics, such as "judiciary, citizens, politicians, experts, industry groups, advocacy groups, [and] journalists" both perceive and respond to sexual violence" (Easteal et al., 2015, p. 105). By continuously exposing publics to "degrading and violent media portrayals of women" as well as those from marginalized groups, the issue of systemic sexual violence becomes desensitized and thus continues to normalize this type of violence in our culture (Elmore et al., 2021, p. 3).

Existing research reveals that traditional media representations of sexual violence often reinforce rape myths that hold victims accountable for their sexually violent experiences if they "dress provocatively, have prior sexual experience, drink alcohol, or engage in activities at inappropriate places and/or times" (Garland & Bennett, 2017, p. 16; see also Adam-Curtis & Forbes, 2004; Pica et al., 2017). A common rape myth perpetuated in contemporary culture is the idea that the majority of rape are false (Weiser, 2017). Even though existing research reveals that false reports only account for approximately 2 to 10% of rape accusations, this myth gives the

impression that most victims “cry rape” because of guilt over an intimate encounter or as an act of vengeance because of unreciprocated advances (Garland & Bennett, 2017, p. 14).

News media representations of sexual violence often focus on controversial rape cases or cases which reinforce dominant rape narratives (i.e., stranger rape) in order to attract viewers (Elmore, 2021; Pollino, 2020). For instance, when traditional media reports on this form of violence it is “typically driven by specific events such as a man killing his estranged partner and/or his children, high-profile sexual assault, intimate homicide, and sexual harassment legal matters” (Easteal et al., 2015, p. 104). This limited coverage does not attend to instances of date rape, acquaintance rape, intimate partner violence, and/or same-sex violence (Elmore et al., 2021).

In addition, scholars have shown that when media do portray instances of sexual violence, these portrayals focus on the experiences of white women. In an examination of sexual violence representations by media resources, Lykke (2016) found that “Victim visibility (or the lack thereof) and denial of sexual violence as an important social problem are mechanisms by which male privilege is preserved and female disadvantage, particularly for Black women, is reinforced and maintained” (p. 253). Further, by highlighting the experiences of white women, traditional media reinforce the misconception that white women are “ideal victims” and thus renders invisible the experiences of people of color, as well as people who do not identify as heteronormative/cisgender. In their analysis of news media’s framing of sexual violence, Morrison et al. (2021) found that traditional media often sensationalized violence against LGBTQ+ people to increase audience interest given the perceived abnormality of LGBTQ+ identities. They also found that traditional media often blamed gay men for experiencing sexual violence because of their perceived promiscuity and violation of “sexual scripts and gender

norms of masculinity" (p. 108). Given the importance of media representations of the LGBTQ+ community as well as sexual violence, I offer the following research questions:

RQ2a: How does the content of interactive media resources shape LGBTQ+ students' understanding of their experiences?

RQ2b: What do LGBTQ+ students perceive are the strengths and/or weaknesses of the content in those media?

RQ 3: How do the interactive media resources that LGBTQ+ students use shape their interactions with other people?

So far, this chapter has reviewed existing literature that demonstrates the pervasive nature of sexual violence against LGBTQ+ people and supports the need for inclusive and culturally competent representations and resources. As Katz and McGuire (2018) argued, "Most of us have been socialized or conditioned to believe in the sexist, racist, heteronormative, misogynistic frameworks that the media, families, religions, government, or communities have taught" (p. 424). When students enter the institution of higher education, they are coming directly from a broader culture embedded with oppressive and marginalizing ideologies. For this reason, it is "only through proactive efforts can these normative ideas be challenged" (Katz & McGuire, 2018, p. 424). I now turn to a review of the theoretical frameworks aimed at challenging these ideas.

Theoretical Frameworks

With roots in psychology, the subdiscipline of interpersonal communication emerged in the 1960s from the adoption and extension of postpositivist theories and ideas. Decades later, "postpositivist standards of theory, research design, analysis, validity, and writing persistently dominate interpersonal communication research" (Moore, 2017, pp. 1-2). As a result, critical

work remains limited within the areas of interpersonal and family communication (Moore, 2017; Suter & Norwood, 2017). Based on analyses of interpersonal communication journal articles published since the 1990s, critical work only accounts for about 2% of published articles with postpositivist work averaging over 80% (Braithwaite et al., 2015; Moore, 2017).

Other communication subdisciplines like rhetoric, media studies, and intercultural communication have integrated critical theories into their scholarship. However, interpersonal communication continues to be "siloed and disengaged from broader critical conversations in the communication discipline" (Moore, 2017, pp. 16-17). Despite the dominance of postpositivist perspectives within interpersonal communication, critical approaches have much to offer the field. Critical theory emerged from a variety of diverse theoretical traditions and "attends to institutional power, ideological power, discursive power, and/or acknowledges the self as constructed, fragmented, contradictory, and in flux" (Moore, 2017, p. 2).

With these ideas in mind, Moore (2017) outlined four ways that critical theory might inform the field of interpersonal communication. First, interpersonal communication researchers can use critical theory as a broad framework. This approach would allow scholars to converse with scholars in other areas, such as critical rhetoric and critical media. Second, interpersonal researchers can use pre-existing critical theories from other disciplines. This approach would allow interpersonal scholars to be in conversations with one another and, in turn, can contribute to scholarship that challenges unequal power relations. Third, researchers can blend existing interpersonal theory with critical theory. This approach would enable interpersonal researchers to implement a critical framework and still adhere to social scientific research principles. Fourth, researchers can work to develop novel theories informed by both critical and interpersonal theory. Moore (2017) noted that "when scholars of interpersonal communication develop new

critical empirical interpersonal theories, the theories can offer a framework for research design, analysis, and interpretation" (p. 11).

Per Moore's (2017) first point, I use CIFC as a broad framework for this project. In accordance with Moore's (2017) second point, I took a critical approach in this project by putting critical rhetorical theory, specifically articulation theory, in conversation with interpersonal communication. As such, this merging of approaches provides another theory that aligns with critical interpersonal and family communication (CIFC) research. In alignment with Moore's (2017) third point, I critically situate other theories within this framework, including, normative rhetorical theory and social support.

Critical Interpersonal and Family Communication

The CIFC framework enables researchers to focus on relationships of power within social contexts by using a "critique-based orientation" to further understanding of social arrangements as well as to challenge such arrangements (Sotirin & Ellingson, 2018, p. 111). Historically, interpersonal and family communication scholars have treated the private sphere and public sphere as mutually exclusive domains (Baxter, 2011). This reconceptualization benefits the study of violence in higher education because it can examine the ways that broader culture influences the institution and the resources it provides. This project examined the power relations within the social context of higher education. These power relations included (1) those between the privileged and marginalized gender and/or sexual identities, (2) those between the institution and the students, and (3) the power relations between society itself and those who do not conform to the status quo.

Studies that employ CIFC can reveal how subjugated knowledges have the potential to challenge dominant discursive formations that create relational forms (Moore, 2017). Subjugated

knowledges refer to inferior knowledges that society has eliminated or ignored. However, these knowledges can challenge existing regimes of truth. My project aligned with CIFC because, as Moore (2017) argued, critical theory functions "as a lens through which to critique and work toward changing operations of power" (p. 2). Thus, this study examined how LGBTQ+ students' engagement with sexual violence media resources shaped their understanding of their experience as well as their interpersonal interactions.

CIFC has three primary considerations: (1) an explicit focus on power, (2) the collapse of the false binary between the public sphere and private sphere, and (3) the critique, resistance, and transformation of the status quo. Through centering power, researchers can examine how power located in discourses as well as the taken-for-granted aspects of these discourses (Suter, 2016). Next, CIFC encourages the collapse of the binary between public and private spheres. CIFC seeks to attend to the interrelations among discourses at both the macrolevel (public) and microlevel (private). Lastly, CIFC calls for the critique, resistance, and transformation of the status quo. Some cultures continuously privilege certain discourses and silence alternate perspectives, which can lead to systems of meaning becoming unquestioned. Thus, CIFC-oriented research challenges taken-for-granted discourses and embraces alterative discourses.

Presently, relational dialectics theory 2.0 (RDT 2.0) dominates much of CIFC research. RDT 2.0 centers on relational meaning making, or the ways that individuals use language to construct both individual and relational identities. With roots in dialogism, RDT 2.0 focuses on the meanings that stem from the struggle of competing and contradictory discourses. While RDT 2.0 enables researchers to examine the discourses embedded within talk, this approach may not be appropriate for all critical research endeavors. In a world where interpersonal relations are wholly influenced by systems of power and discourses, the integration of more critical theory

can benefit further exploration of these relations. To offer another theory for interpersonal scholars who desire to take a critical approach to their research, I adapted articulation theory for this project and situated normative rhetorical theory and social support under the CIFC umbrella.

Adapting Articulation Theory for CIFC

Before delving into articulation theory, it's important to understand its position as a critical rhetorical theory. Critical rhetoric emerged as a way to free rhetoric from the constraints of Platonic thought and its emphasis on standards of reason rather than critical practice. As such, Raymie McKerrow (1989) presented critical rhetoric as an approach that "examines the dimensions of domination and freedom as these are exercised in a relativized world" (p. 91). When put into practice, critical rhetoric attempts to expose discourses of power in an effort to understand the integration of power in society. Further, critical rhetoric works to uncover "what possibilities for change the integration invites or inhibits and what intervention strategies might be considered appropriate to effect social change" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 91).

While situated in different traditions, I demonstrate how CIFC can benefit from embracing articulation theory. Given articulation theory's critical underpinnings, it already aligns with the goals of CIFC and can be easily and effectively utilized by CIFC scholars. While CIFC scholars might be wary of using a rhetorical theory because of its perceived inattention to empiricism, this approach will center on "what rhetoric does rather than what it is" (Moore, 2017, p. 7; McKerrow, 1989). In other words, this theory can provide CIFC scholars with the means to observe and analyze social phenomena while also examining the taken-for-granted elements embedded within those phenomena. In the section that follows, I situate articulation theory's guiding ideas within the goals outlined by CIFC. I will also explain the potential of using articulation theory for CIFC research.

Centering Power. The notion of power is central to articulation theory. Articulation theory holds that we should examine articulations, which refer to the taken-for-granted phenomena of a public discourse, in order to demonstrate the power and hegemonic relations within a social structure (Foucault, 1972; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Shugart, 2008). The examination of discourses of power starts with "the assumption that any articulatory practice may emerge as relevant or consequential—nothing can be 'taken-for-granted' with respect to the impact of any particular discursive practice" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 96).

To better understand the formation of diverse social positions, we must examine the relationship(s) between social categorizations (i.e., gender, race, class, sexuality) and how these categorizations divide society in different ways (Hall, 1985). When these positions are understood, the articulation process enables the alteration of the meanings present within a discourse (DeLuca, 1999). Inevitably, a two-sided social struggle for power emerges:

> On the one side—to articulate meanings and practices by creating or constructing those "unities" which favor a particular disposition of power; and—on the other side—to disrupt or "disarticulate" those constructed unities and to construct in their place alternative points of condensation between practice and experience which enable alternative dispositions of power and resistance to emerge and be empowered. (Grossberg & Slack, 1985, p. 90)

Disarticulating these constructed unities, such as dominant conceptualizations of sexual violence, creates a space for completing discourses that can undermine the dominant systems in power.

Public/Private Binary. The public/private binary characterizes the public and private spheres as mutually exclusive domains. However, given that "there is no surface which is not constantly subverted by the overdetermining effects of others, and because there is, in

consequence, a constant displacement of the social logics characteristic of certain spheres towards other spheres," (p. 180) it is clear that the public and private domains have points of permeation. For instance, Wien (2014) argued that the violence that occurs in schools stems from the pervasiveness of violence on a broader social level, from "battles in Congress to international relations" (p. 176).

Articulation theory assumes that this distinction results from hegemonic articulations, the limits of which shift in compliance with the contextual forces present at a particular moment (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). This distinction between the public and private spheres, then, constitutes the division "between a space in which differences were erased through the universal equivalence of citizens, and a plurality of private spaces in which the full force of those differences was maintained" (p. 181). Here, the concept of hegemony arises.

Hegemony describes how supporters of the "dominant ideology in a culture are able to continually reproduce that ideology in cultural institutions and products while gaining the tacit approval of those whom the ideology oppresses" (Dow, 1990, p. 262). The hegemonic ideology that pervades traditional media representations of sexual violence reproduces discourses that reinforce power relations and a dominant-subordinate dynamic between genders (Consalvo, 1998; Rakow, 2001). Studies show that traditional media coverage of sexual violence focuses on victim accountability rather than questioning the assailant's behavior (Benedict, 1992; Cuklanz, 1995; Meyers, 2004). Oppressive articulations of sexual violence have become so naturalized in traditional media discourses that society passively accepts existing patriarchal power structures that shame and condemn victims (Projansky, 2001). These articulations, which are continuously reproduced in the public sphere via social institutions, permeate the private sphere and the relations within. Therefore, we need to question, then reject, the hegemonic discourse of sexual

violence so that a counter-hegemonic movement may supersede it in a way that is not exclusionary (Gramsci, 1971; Schroeder, 2005, p. 81).

Laclau and Mouffe (1985) introduced the idea of hegemonic universality, which refers to how a universal term—such as equality or freedom—motivates political action. However, the universal nature of this term remains contaminated by its surrounding social contexts and past conceptualizations (Critchley & Marchart, 2004). This idea is important for two reasons. First, it lends some understanding as to why terms like gender, sexuality, or sexual violence still have oppressive connotations; and second, it explains why those oppressive connotations persist despite contextual changes.

As social issues become a site of struggle, aspects of social institutions and governance that seemed finite begin to lose their hold on the public consciousness (Hall, 1985, p. 112). To combat the hegemonic ideology, Gramsci (1971) advocated for a war of position, which attempts to raise mass consensus about an alternate series of goals (p. 88). In the 1970s, the feminist rape reform movement altered television portrayals of sexual violence by supplying "a model for understanding rape that directly and purposely opposed the traditional conception, thus clearly challenging the dominant ideology with a coherent alternative" (Cuklanz, 2000, p. 2). This change exemplifies a war of position because portrayals began to reflect the different types of sexual violence situations. Applying this concept to the issue of LGBTQ+ sexual violence can show how a counter-hegemonic discourse of sexually violent experiences can offer an alternative narrative to hegemonic discourses of sexual violence (Gramsci, 1971; Schroeder, 2005). These alternative narratives contribute to the purpose of CIFC work, which is to critique, resist, and transform the status quo.

Critique, Resistance, and Transformation. Articulation theory can enable the critique,

resistance, and transformation of the status quo. As Foucault (1980) explained, “Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (p. 131). However, these regimes of truth, or dominant articulations, are not permanent and can be changed. However, transformation can only occur in spaces that are continuously unsettled by criticism (Foucault, 1982). The critical examination of these articulations offers a way to understand social issues and their hegemonic underpinnings (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). From here, these issues can be addressed through transformative practices that do not adhere to oppressive structures. Based on existing applications of articulation theory, the practices of antagonisms and delinking align with CIFC’s goal to critique, resist, and transform the status quo (see Deluca, 1999; Pollino, 2020).

Antagonisms. Through antagonisms, articulation theory offers a way to investigate, disarticulate, and rearticulate hegemonic discourses (DeLuca, 1999; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). This concept applies to several significant and timely issues within our culture, including systemic racism, feminism, and relative to this paper, representations of sexual violence. Scholars have used antagonisms to demonstrate how news coverage of sexual violence either fails to address the pervasiveness of the problem or prioritizes sensationalism over the wellbeing of victims (Benedict, 1992; Meyers, 1997). Antagonisms of sexual violence representations are vital to reveal and address oppressive structures that are taken-for-granted (DeLuca, 1999).

While people are born into a cultural system, those adopted beliefs and values are not genetically predetermined but passed on from familial and social institutions (Hall, 1985, p. 109). Individuals remain receptive to different ideological positions at various moments of existence; therefore, ideologies may change over time (p. 106). Reactions to articulations—such as shaming a woman for a particular outfit—reveal the widespread nature of hegemonic

positions and the pervasiveness of gender binaries in public consciousness (Dhaenens, 2013, p. 108). Articulations of race, sexuality, and gender show that "public space is privileged" for hegemonic practices, therefore, disarticulation requires an active approach to break apart dominant discourses (p. 108). According to Hall (1985), ideological sequences become sites of struggle.

> Not only when people try to displace, rupture, or contest it by supplanting it with some wholly new alternative set of terms, but also when they interrupt the ideological field and try to transform its meaning by changing or rearticulating its associations. (p. 112)

Society is trapped within a system determined by those in power; this hegemonic system does not require eradication, but transformation. That is to say, the conversation needs to change.

Delinking. The concept of delinking provides the means to critique and transform the content of media resources. The concept of delinking extends articulation theory by shifting the socially dominant viewpoint toward a position that is more inclusive of social groups (Wanzer, 2012, pp. 647–657). Delinking requires changing the terms of the conversation and not only its content—which entails rupturing the linkages between words and assumptions with words and material objects (Mignolo, 2007, p. 459; 505). When oppressed social groups challenge the dominant ideology without delinking, it becomes another way of finding liberation within the system and not evoking systemic change (Mignolo, 2007, p. 507).

Delinking seeks to fracture the relationship between the hegemonic ideas that govern social understanding and the social system itself (Mignolo, 2007, p. 459). Delinking discourses introduces other epistemologies and principles of knowledge to develop different ethics, politics, and philosophies on a societal level (Mignolo, 2007, p. 453). Delinking functions as a dual movement that unveils the foundations of perceived universal truths and the thought processes

that govern Western knowledge (Maldonado-Torres, 2008). This process enables the critic to delink, or disconnect, the dominant narrative from its hegemonic roots and expose the dominant ideology as socially constructed (Maldonado-Torres, 2008; Wanzer-Serrano, 2015). Delinking, then, gives visibility to those oppressed positions. In this project, antagonisms and delinking functioned as valuable tools to understand and criticize media resources.

Overall, CIFC can benefit from the adaption of articulation theory. Not only does articulation theory align with the goals of CIFC, but it provides the opportunity to expand the framework. For instance, researchers can use articulation theory to examine the coming out process and how LGBTQ+ individuals disarticulate discourses of heteronormativity and rearticulate their nonnormative identity when coming out to their families. Another potential research trajectory might explore the idea of hegemonic universality and how certain terms and their cultural connotations (i.e., heteronormativity, non-normativity, gender, sexuality) influence LGBTQ+ individuals' identity negotiation. Additionally, researchers could extend existing research regarding labeling practices following sexual violence (see Harris, 2011; Young & Maguire, 2003). For example, articulation theory can be used to explore how those affected by sexual violence might articulate their experience beyond the victim/survivor label binary. The adaption of articulation theory demonstrates the advantages of importing theories from other communication subdisciplines. The current project will serve as an exemplar of this adaption alongside the critical situation normative rhetorical theory. In line with the current project's CIFC perspective, I ask the following research questions:

RQ 4a: What discourses regarding sexual violence, gender, and/or sexuality do media resources (traditional or interactive) include or exclude?

RQ 4b: What are the implications of these chosen discourses of LGBTQ+ students?

In addition to a CIFC adaption of articulation theory, I also normative rhetorical theory in this project.

Critically Situating Normative Rhetorical Theory

As previously mentioned, limited scholarship has bridged the gap between interpersonal communication and rhetoric. As one of the few interpersonal communication scholars to embrace this disciplinary collaboration, Daena J. Goldsmith (2017) developed normative rhetorical theory (NRT) "to provide a framework for identifying what makes some types of conversations challenging, describing a range of ways people communicate in those circumstances, and explaining how and why some responses are likely to be better than others" (p. 211). In the study of social support, Goldsmith (2004) used rhetoric as a tool to examine "features of a communicative performance that make it successful at achieving some purpose in a particular social context" (p. 45). In addition, a rhetorical perspective shifted attention to the power of language beyond "matching or adapting one's use of language to various features of a situation" (p. 45). By emphasizing power—the power of discourses, and specifically some supportive discourses over others—NRT practices criticality without labeling it as such.

By situating NRT as CIFC and further, attending to issues of power, the collapse of the public/private binary, and the critique, resistance, and transformation of the status quo, the implications and nuances of the NRT can be expanded upon. Goldsmith (2004) conceptualized what a rhetorical approach to social support would look like:

> A rhetorical approach to the study of support is characterized by a focus on how different ways of carrying out the same task (i.e., coping assistance) may be better or worse at adapting to these multiple purposes as they arise in particular situations. Comparing "different ways of carrying out the same task" involves not only comparing the utility of

> different forms of support (e.g., in a given situation, is it better to give informational support or emotional support?) but also focusing on differences in quality among examples of the same type of support (e.g., in a given situation, why are some instances of informational support better than others?). (p. 47)

With the above description in mind, NRT is not designed to glean generalizable results, but rather, to identify the distinctive aspects and similarities across and within different social locations and/or situations and the power at play. Rather than examining the effectiveness of support on the surface, NRT also examines support on a deeper level. Goldsmith (2017) designed NRT to offer guiding assumptions to shift attention to pertinent aspects of communication situations in order to "document common meanings and practices for a social group" (p. 217). The three assumptions of NRT are detailed below.

The first assumption of NRT suggests that "every time we communicate, we are engaged in some kind of task and also enacting identities and relationships" (p. 217). In other words, every communicative interaction has a purpose (task) that communicators seek to accomplish while having to simultaneously navigate meanings associated with identity and relational meanings (Gettings, 2019). The communicative situations that warrant the most attention occur when the specific task becomes problematic for people to enact a desired identity(s) and/or relational definition(s). Depending on the context, tasks could include encouraging, informing, and/or persuading. In communicative situations, the things people say highly varies as people "give different degrees of attention to and come up with different solutions for doing task, identity, and relationship" (p. 217). For instance, a person may complain to their friend about how hard they are working at their job because they want encouragement and validation for their efforts, however, the friend may incorrectly assume that the person needs encouragement to find

a new job. In the context of this specific project, a person may disclose their sexually violent experience to a family member, friend, or practitioner because they want support and just to talk, however, this disclosure could be met with judgement or perhaps pressure to report the incident. Because different goals may emerge within interactions, challenges and misunderstandings in communication can occur.

NRT's second assumption asserts that in order to understand how activities affect people, we need to understand what those activities mean to them. While meaning can be person-specific or relationship-specific, shared meanings can also exist within sociocultural groups. Therefore, it is important to talk with people who have access to a particular system of meaning in order to uncover the shared assumptions that guide their interpretations and/or actions. We can also witness power in the above situations, particularly in the form of agency. For instance, participants in the current project had the power to talk about their own subjective experiences as opposed to someone speaking about them—in which case they would be deprived of their narrative agency and thus the power of their voice.

Third, NRT assumes that "interpersonal interactions are situated" and thus aims to develop practical theories for these contexts. Given the complex nature of contexts, NRT acknowledges relevance of sociocultural discourses as well as relational histories on communicative situations. NRT seeks to understand "how sociocultural context shapes and constrains salient meanings for individuals in particular speech communities" (Gettings, 2019, p. 480). Further, given that one determines the quality of communication based on their goals for a particular situation, "the first step in moving toward a rhetorical/normative model of communication in a particular context is describing the salient purposes of communication in that context" (Caughlin et al., 2011, p. 412). Similar to CIFC's call to collapse the public/private

binary, NRT recognizes the importance of "broad, macro discourses in shaping local, micro discourses" (Gettings, 2019, p. 481; Goldsmith, 2016).

As Goldsmith (2016) noted, much of the research that utilized NRT centered on social support and family communication about health issues and coping. For instance, Goldsmith et al. (2006) used NRT to examine couples' talk about changes to their lifestyles following medical issues. In addition, Caughlin et al. (2011) used NRT to examine how families communicate and cope to a parent's diagnosis and death from lung cancer. However, despite NRT's focus on health situations, Gettings (2019) drew on NRT to explore the ways that baby boomers discuss transitioning to retirement. Given NRT's purpose and assumptions, it aligned well with the goals of CIFC and provided a useful lens to examine LGBTQ+ students' perceptions of the resources they encountered. According to NRT, researchers can assess the effectiveness of communication "by examining the extent to which the various goals in a communication scenario are attained without undermining other pertinent goals" (Caughlin et al., 2011; Goldsmith, 2001, 2004). Within the context of this project, NRT provided a framework to interrogate if/how the reasons participants sought out interactive media resources aligned with purpose of those resources (e.g., to provide helpful information). Further, NRT functioned alongside articulation theory to explore the supportiveness of resources and how they shaped sensemaking. Social support was an important part of this process.

Social Support. I used social support as a sensitizing concept in this project. According to Charmaz (2003):

> Sensitizing concepts offer ways of seeing, organizing, and understanding experience; they are embedded in our disciplinary emphases and perspectival proclivities. Although sensitizing concepts may deepen perception, they provide starting points for building

> analysis, not ending points for evading it. We may use sensitizing concepts only as points of departure from which to study the data. (p. 259)

Social support centers on the connection between relationships and well-being (Goldsmith, 2004; Campbell & Wright, 2002; Vangelisti, 2009). Albrecht and Adelman (1987) defined social support as "verbal and nonverbal communication between recipients and providers that reduces uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one's life experience" (p. 19). Existing research shows that through positive social interaction, individuals can experience improvements to their physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Yang, 2018, Uchino, 2006). Connecting with other people who experienced a similar stressor—in the context of this project, sexual violence—can "lead to validation, normalization of the experience, a reduction in emotional isolation, and a sense of belonging" (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000, p. 225).

Social support can be characterized as both formal and informal. Formal sources of support can include a variety of services and programs, including health practitioners/ professionals, religious leaders, police, lawyers, crisis centers, and victim services, among others. Informal sources of support can include family, friends, coworkers, and social networks (Ansara & Hindin, 2010). Research has further classified social support as structural (i.e., how a support network is structured) and functional (i.e., the functions provided by members in a support network). This project primarily centered on the latter, and as Taylor (2011) explained, "Functional support is typically assessed in terms of the specific functions (informational, instrumental, and emotional) that a specific member may serve for a target individual and is often assessed in the context of coping with a particular stressor" (p. 193).

This project focused on two types of support: emotional and informational. First,

emotional support "often takes the form of empathy, validation of problems, and words of encouragement" (Campell & Wright, 2002, p. 185). Social support can also refer to an individual's perception that resources are readily available, if needed (Taylor, 2011). According to Campbell and Wright (2002):

> People who do not understand the nature of a condition that a stigmatized individual faces, or who can not identify with what he or she is going through, are unlikely to communicate emotional support in a way that is perceived as satisfying by the individual facing the problem. Therefore, it is important that those individuals who are providing emotional support to be perceived as having dealt with similar circumstances as the individual who is seeking support.

Second, informational support refers to when one person helps another person to make sense of a stressful experience and to determine available sources and strategies for coping and healing (Taylor, 2011). A person can use this information to "determine exactly what potential costs or strains the stressful event may impose and decide how best to manage it" (Taylor, 2011, p. 193).

According to Goldsmith (2004), "the effects of enacted support do not come about mechanistically through the mere issuance of a supportive act but rather through participants' interpretations and evaluations. A communication approach focuses not on behaviors but on meaningful actions" (p. 32). Goldsmith detailed two types of meaning. The first centered on the "interpretation of an act as an instance of support." The second type of meaning centered on the "broader implications or evaluations of these actions" (i.e., Is the advice good/bad? Does it convey that the other person cares for you? Does it privilege autonomy?) (p. 32). The social support that individuals receive stems from their social networks.

Social Networks. Social networks play a significant role in interpersonal relationships,

particularly in terms of providing individuals with a support system (Parks, 2011; Bodie, Burleson, & Jones, 2012). Parks (2011) outlined four principles of network functioning. The first principle suggested that "Interpersonal networks are the living tissue of social structure and culture" (Parks, 2007, p. 362). This principle offered a way of understanding the broader "social implications of interpersonal interactions" relative to how historical/cultural tendencies shape individuals' experiences and communication. The second principle posited that "Individuals actively 'work the network' rather than simply being passive registers for forces imposed by larger network structures" (p. 362). In essence, this principle claimed that people are not confined in the middle of a social network. Instead, social networks provide routes for exploration relative to attaining one's needs. In the third principle, the author noted that "what happens in a relationship often does not stay in that relationship" (pp. 362-363). Ripple effects occur within social networks. Observers have a tendency to model what they see people doing, such as taking out their frustrations of other people and/or sources. Lastly, according to the fourth principle "individuals are rarely aware of the influence of networks on their thoughts, feelings, and behavior" (p. 363). In other words, people don't consider the influences that their social networks have on their decisions.

Social networks can enhance interpersonal communication by providing meaningful connections. Vangelisti (2009) explained that "the meaning that people attach to social support is affected by the qualities of their interpersonal relationship" (p. 41). It is important to note, however, that not all networks are positive and therefore should always be carefully monitored to ensure that networks don't become harmful. The principles presented by Parks (2011) are useful in understanding the complex processes within these networks. In addition, Vangelisti (2009) explained the benefits of social networks:

> Being integrated into a social network may provide people with emotional or psychological resources that enable them to avoid certain stressors. Social integration also might increase individuals' well-being which, in turn, may enable them to cope more effectively with stress. Researchers who study perceived support similarly note that people who believe support is available to them tend to experience less stress than do those who do not. (p. 46).

Given the dominance of media technologies and forms of communication, the ways that individuals provide and/or receive social support changes based on context, for instance, computer-mediated contexts.

Social Support and Computer-Mediated Communication. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has several implications on support process and outcomes. According to Rains et al. (2015), "Online support communities, blogs, microblogs, social network sites, and even email can make it possible to mobilize social support resources online in ways that supplement or sometimes replace traditional offline support networks" (p. 404). Computer-mediated contexts provide a space where "individuals can potentially expand their social networks and receive messages to bolster their self-confidence and worth" (Rains et al., 2015, p. 420). The features of these contexts affect interpersonal communication in different ways. Unlike face-to-face support resources, forms of computer-mediated support can allow individuals to remain anonymous, engage asynchronously at any time—particularly in times of need, and access multiple and diverse perspectives as well as the narratives of other people who may have similar experiences (Campbell & Wright, 2002; Rains et al., 2015). In addition, many supportive interactions in online environments tend to be text-based and thus limit or exclude nonverbal cues. Although the reduction of nonverbals could be problematic in the beginning stages of

relationship development, people can counteract this limitation by making creative use of text-based communication (Burgoon et al., 1989; Walther & Burgoon, 1992). By reducing social cues in computer-mediated contexts, attention shifts to "written discourse—and in particular, the explicit support messages shared during interaction" (Rains et al., 2015, p. 405).

Research has found that computer-mediated support resources can be useful for individuals with stigmatized health conditions (Yang, 2018). This idea could also apply to individuals from stigmatized social positions. The features of computer-mediated support can provide individuals increased privacy in interactions which can lead to less stress (Campbell & Wright, 2002). Additionally, individuals "could be more comfortable in sharing information and providing emotional support, without feeling privacy violation and burden of disclosure" (Yang, 2018, p. 3).

According to Rains et al. (2015), "Mediated narratives blur traditional distinctions between 'interpersonal' and other forms of communication. A blog post may enter into several types of communicative acts and relationships as both purposes and audiences are multiple and evolving" (p. 223). Further, "any given post can be simultaneously interpersonal and not interpersonal with respect to traditional definitions based on relationship development, interactivity, or message exchange" (Rains et al., 2015, p. 223).

Summary of Chapter

In this chapter, I reviewed existing literature on sexual violence specifically related to the LGBTQ+ community, the institution of higher education, and both traditional and interactive media representations. This chapter also discussed how dominant culture represents sexual violence as a heteronormative/ cisgender issue and does not sufficiently attend to alternative narratives of this violence nor the barriers faced by LGBTQ+ people. In addition, I described this

project's CIFC-orientation, as well as the theoretical framework for this study which includes articulation theory, normative rhetorical theory, and social support. Within this theoretical framework, I argue for the potential of critically orienting interpersonal communication theories as well as adapting theories from other subdisciplines in order to further understand the complexities of social relationships and the discourses that shape these relationships.

CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGIES & METHODS

Feminist Methodology

In this project, I drew on feminist methodology which views reality as socially constructed; however, this approach also focuses on how ideology and representations shape this social construction of reality. Feminist methodologies reflect on and question the taken for granted methods in different disciplines and are open to alternative approaches (Leavy & Harris, 2018). Additionally, feminist research remains committed to producing knowledge that opposes the various forms of gender injustices ingrained in social institutions, structures, and practices.

It is important to note that feminist research seeks to challenge the social biases that go unnoticed in traditional knowledge systems (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Jaggar, 2014). In other words, feminist research questions the taken for granted systems that create knowledge as well as organize the social world. Given the gender, racial, and cultural injustices ingrained within these structures, the members within social groups endure "unequal advantages of disadvantages" (Jaggar, 2017, p. viii). Jaggar (2014) noted that "the structures systemically restrict the life changes of individuals who are assigned to devalued social categories, and render them disproportionately vulnerable to violence, impoverishment, and political marginalization" (p. xiii). The LGBTQ+ community is considered one of these social groups.

Feminist research must strive for the "highest standards of soundness, credibility, and trustworthiness" (Jaggar, 2014, p. xi). Feminist ethical principles must also guide all phases of the feminist research process (Leavy & Harris, 2018). Relative to this project, these principles included, but were not limited to, respecting participants, showing concern for participants' wellbeing, and disclosing the purpose of the research (Birke & Hubbard, 2014). Ethical principles must "inform the selection and design of its research programs, its strategies for

gathering and interpreting evidence, and its approaches to publicizing the results" (p. xi). Maguire (2014) argued that "by treating people as objects to be counted, surveyed, predicted, and controlled, traditional research mirrors oppressive social conditions which cause ordinary people to relinquish their capacity to make real choices and to be cut out of meaningful decision making" (p. 418). As such, Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) can enable individuals and/or groups to be "creative actors on the world" (Maguire, 2014, p. 418).

Calafell (2014) argued that scholars "need to denaturalize our assumptions about feminist theory and practice" (p. 267). In order to move feminist scholarship forward, we must question the taken-for-granted assumptions that guide our research. We must also comprehend the idea of Otherness beyond its relation to the structures of Whiteness and heteronormativity (Calafell, 2014; see also, Leavy & Harris, 2018; Yep, 2013). In a similar vein, Gust Yep (2013) introduced the concept of thick intersectionalities, which "attend to the lived experiences and biographies of the persons occupying a particular intersection including how they inhabit and make sense of their own bodies" (p. 123). Together, the ideas of Calafel and Yep guided this project. Specifically, these ideas helped me to center the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students—and the intersections of their multiple experiences—in a way that transcended dominant discourses that oppress marginalized groups and individuals.

Additionally, Hesse-Biber (2007) defined reflexivity as "the process through which a researcher recognizes, examines, and understands how [their] own social background and assumptions can intervene in the research process" (p. 129). As a feminist researcher, it is important that I practiced reflexivity and acknowledged how I approached this research. I conceptualize myself as what Calafell (2014) deems a "mindful heretic," or "a person who consciously and intentionally violates the normative beliefs, behaviors, and/or expectations of a

group or association she deeply reveres in order to maintain reverence for its values" (p. 268). As I explored the issues of LGBTQ+ violence in higher education, I was transparent about the fact that I was questioning and critiquing the taken-for-granted articulations of sexual violence that might be embedded within media resources. I also reflected on how my own social positioning, experiences, and perspective influenced this project by writing reflective memos throughout the research and writing process (Leavy & Harris, 2018). In addition to a feminist methodology, I used a feminist participatory action research framework to design and execute this research.

Feminist Participatory Action Research

Houh and Kalsem (2015) conceptualized participatory action research (PAR) as research that prioritizes action and seeks to make a difference through tangible solutions. Further, "the research and the action must be participatory," meaning that those affected by action will have a role in creating the action (p. 265). In 1987, Patricia Maguire challenged the male bias ingrained in PAR research and prompted PAR's feminist turn. Maguire (2014) conceptualized feminist participatory action research (FPAR) in the following way:

> Participatory research offers a way to openly demonstrate solidarity with oppressed and disempowered people through our work as researchers. In addition to recognizing many forms of knowledge, participatory research insists on an alternative position regarding the purpose of knowledge creation. The purpose of participatory research is not merely to describe and interpret social reality, but to radically change it. (p. 417)

A FPAR design (1) encourages individuals to share their subjective experiences and perspectives, and (2) seeks to "use those perspectives to both foster a sense of inclusion and to encourage projective social change" (Manning & Denker, 2015, p. 136). At its core, FPAR focuses on power. Specifically, FPAR seeks to transform both structures and relationships.

FPAR offers an inclusive framework "to guide ethical and empowering research with rather than on" individuals from traditionally marginalized communities (Singh et al., 2013, p. 94). Researchers have used FPAR to examine issues of marginalization because of one's race, class, gender, and/or sexual identity. For instance, Faulkner et al. (2020) used FPAR to collaborate with underrepresented students to understand their perspectives on what they considered to be welcoming and inclusive classroom practices. Singh et al. (2013) explained how researchers can use FPAR to engage with transgender communities. Additionally, Perone (2022) conducted a community-based participatory action project with LGBTQ+ older adults in Detroit regarding their concerns about access to affordable housing.

Feminist participatory research has three primary components: investigation, education, and action. These components function collectively to provide the guiding framework for the overall study on the interactive media resources used by LGBTQ+ students affected by sexual violence. The investigation component centers on understanding why and how a particular problem exists. Here, I sought to understand how LGBTQ+ students used media resources to shape their understanding of their experience. Next, the education component "provides a way for people to develop an increasingly critical understanding of social problems, their underlying causes, and possibilities for overcoming them" (Maguire, 2014, p. 418). This education stemmed from the findings of the interview responses of LGBTQ+ students and the best practices they developed for resources. Finally, the action component used the knowledge from the previous two steps to strive for the following types of change: the "development of critical consciousness of both research and participants; improvement of the lives of those involved in the research process; and transformation of fundamental societal structures and relationships" (Maguire, 2014, p. 418). I will the share these best practices with campus entities.

Consciousness-raising is a key aspect of FPAR because of its ability to increase understanding of marginalized experiences, locate commonalities among individual that they assumed were "personal problems," and by providing a way to resist dominant social structures (McHugh, 2020, p. 227). This project can lead to the development of critical consciousness because it sheds further light on the sexually violent experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and relationships as well as provides tangible resources designed with the specific needs of LGBTQ+ individuals in mind. The next section will review the methods used in the project and how they were informed by my feminist methodology.

Methods

This study utilized two methods: solo interviews and open-ended surveys. All participants who enrolled in the project were asked to complete both an interview and an open-ended survey as part of their participation.

In-Depth Interviewing

To answer the research questions posed in this study, I used an interview design which enhanced the research process because it enabled the inter-viewing of perspectives which led to results that neither the interviewer nor interviewees could have produced independently (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). According to Hesse-Biber (2013), "interviewing is a particularly valuable research method feminist researchers can use to gain insight into the world of their respondents" (p. 114). In-depth interviewing enables researchers to access individuals' own articulations of their thoughts, feelings, and ideas (Reinharz, 1992). In line with feminist research, I sought to access the hidden experiences and marginalized voices of LGBTQ+ students (Hesse-Biber, 2013). The in-depth interviews allowed me to explore the lived experiences of the participants relative to their interactive media usage and how that usage shaped their sensemaking and

interpersonal interactions.

In addition, interviews provided a useful way to examine the experiences of oppression, marginalization, and violence against LGBTQ+ students that often go uninterrogated. Interviews also permitted me to access the knowledges that remain hidden because of double invisibility (Hesse-Biber, 2007). According to Hesse-Biber (2007), double invisibility refers to the phenomenon where "the daily experiences, thoughts, and feelings may be repressed or quickly forgotten by members of minority groups for whom such experiences are a routine part of daily life" (p. 182). However, the sharing of experiences that occurred in the interviews helped participants remember and/or make connections that shed light on these hidden knowledges.

Open-Ended Survey

According to Manning and Kunkel (2015), "Open-ended (or free response) surveys are data collection tools wherein respondents are asked to answer questions using their own words, thoughts, and feelings" (p. 95). Unlike closed-ended surveys that require respondents to select responses from a list of predefined answers provided by the researcher, open-ended surveys encourage the "open, elaborated, and detailed expression of thoughts and feelings about particular people, relationships, or situations" (Manning & Kunkel, 2015, p. 97).

Open-ended surveys also prove useful in studies that explore sensitive experiences because respondents might withhold certain information in the interview setting. In addition to the interview method utilized in this project, open-ended surveys were convenient and effective given that this type of survey allowed participants to take their time with responding to the questions. Given the sensitivity of the topic of LGBTQ+ sexual violence, the use of an open-ended survey method was appropriate. All participants enrolled in the study were asked to complete an open-ended survey via a secure Qualtrics link about how their media resource use

shaped their interactions with people. Participants were asked to describe if the content of the media resources used after their sexually violence experience shaped how their interactions with other people, including friends, family members, classmates, professors. For instance, the survey asked participants to indicate who the interaction was with, if the resources influenced how they talked in the interaction or what they talked about, and to explain how media shaped those interactions (see Appendix B). The open-ended survey method allowed participants to reflect and think through their responses at their own pace and in a space where they feel safe and comfortable.

Procedures

Recruitment and Sampling. The participants for this study included undergraduate students and graduate students from universities in the United States who identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community and had personally experienced sexual violence during their time as a college student. I interviewed and surveyed both traditional and nontraditional students; however, participants must have been at least 18 years of age.

I used purposive sampling and snowball sampling to recruit undergraduate and/or graduate participants who identified as LGBTQ+ and who had experienced sexual violence while a student (Leavy & Harris, 2019). Given that this project took place in the age of social media, a purposive sample was recruited via a campus-wide email at a midwestern university as well as posts on social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter). The email and posts included: (1) the purpose of the study, (2) participant requirements and limitations, (3) my contact information, and (4) information about the risks and benefits of the study. I also posted flyers around campus and posted announcements in the Campus Updates daily emails. Because LGBTQ+ students that have experienced violence are a vulnerable population, I also used

snowball sampling because of its effectiveness in reaching hard to recruit populations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Each form of recruitment included a QR code and/or link to a survey where individuals could express their interest in participating in an interview. The survey also requested the following information: name, email address, and preferred date/time of interview. In the current project, I ceased data collection after 16 weeks (June 2022 to September 2022). I will explain how I reached saturation later in this chapter.

Participants. The sample included 13 LGBTQ+ students who attended a university in the United States. Each of the 13 participants completed an interview and open-ended survey. Universities included both large and mid-sized public and private institutions located in the Midwest and in the eastern regions. Participants were aged 18 to 33 with an average age of 23 (mean = 23.07, median = 20.00, SD = 5. 345, range = 15). Of the 13 participants, 92.31% were United States' citizens and 7.69% were international students. Seventy-five percent of participants identified as a single person and 33.33% identified as a dating person or non-single person (one person chose not to answer this question). Seventy-seven percent of participants identified as White, 7.69% as Black/African American, 7.69% as Native American, 7.69% as Middle Eastern, and 7.69% preferred not to disclose their racial identity. Relative to university status, 15.38% of participants are in their freshman year, 15.38% in their sophomore year, 15.38% in their junior year, 23.08% in their senior year, 15.38% of participants are master's students, 7.69% are doctoral students, and 7.69% chose not to disclose their educational status. Relative to sexual orientation, 61.54% of participants identified as bisexual, 15.38% as asexual, 15.38% as pansexual, 15.38% as queer, 7.69% as gay, and 7.69% as lesbian. Relative to gender identity, 69.23% of participants identified as a woman, 38.46% identified as non-binary, 7.69% identified as a man, and 7.69% identified as questioning.

Interview Procedures. Before the interview, participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire so that I could better understand their background (see Appendix A). Participants were also asked to complete an open-ended survey via a secure Qualtrics link about how the media resource use shaped their interactions with people (see Appendix B). The interviews took 45 to 75 minutes. Given the sensitivity of these interviews, the interviews took place via a password-secured Zoom room. Prior to the scheduled interview, the participant received a link and the password to enter the Zoom room. At the time of the interview, the participant was asked to review the informed consent form (this form was also emailed to participants prior to the interview). I also asked participants for permission to record the interview and they all agreed. Because all interviews were conducted on Zoom, auto-generated transcripts were provided. Before signing the informed consent form, I asked participants if they have any questions regarding the study. After answering the participant's questions to the fullest extent, I asked participant to sign and date the informed consent via a secure Qualtrics link, thus indicating their consent to participate in the study.

The interview questions focused on the following areas: how participants used media resources following their experiences with violence on campus and best practices for developing media resources. The interview consisted of four parts: (1) building rapport, (2) media resources (e.g., why did you seek about media resources following your experience? What resources did you use or refrain from using), (3) best practices for developing media resources (e.g., what practices would you recommend for entities that develop best practices? What should resources include/ exclude?), and (4) closing. I used a flexible interview guide with open-ended questions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009; Hesse-Biber, 2007). Constructing the interview guide in this manner allowed the participants to exert some control over the trajectory of the interview (see Appendix

C for interview guide). After completing the interview, participants received a $20 gift card for Starbucks via email.

After each interview session, I downloaded and imported the auto-generated transcript from Zoom into the Max QDA qualitative data analysis software. I then re-watched the interview recording alongside the transcript to ensure that the auto-generated content accurately reflected participants' responses. I edited the transcripts whenever I noticed a discrepancy between what a participant said and what Zoom auto generated.

Data Analysis

I used Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic analysis framework for this project to identify, analyze, and report emergent patterns or themes within the data. When conducting a thematic analysis, researchers must give attention to both manifest discourses and latent discourses. Researchers can identify manifest themes more easily because they are "explicitly marked in the content of talk" (p. 158). Latent themes, on the other hand, are more difficult to identify because they are "unsaid, taken-for-granted presuppositions" (p. 159). This framework included six steps.

The first step of the thematic analysis framework centered on familiarization with the data set. In this step, I read and re-read the interview transcripts and made note of preliminary ideas. Seven participants completed their interview and survey between June and July 2022. Because recruitment efforts did not yield sufficient participant enrollment at this time, I decided to conduct a preliminarily analysis of the interview transcripts and survey responses to identify any potential emergent ideas in the data. At this point, I noticed that the concepts of identity, representation, supportive connections, and dominant cultural narratives of sexual violence emerged from the interviews. In the survey responses, I only noticed broader relationship types (e.g., romantic partners, friends, family) and contexts (e.g., campus, health). In August 2022

participant enrollment increased with the start of the 2022-2023 academic year. Six participants completed their interview and survey between August and September 2022. After the thirteenth interview, I read interview transcripts eight through thirteen and the corresponding survey responses for potential ideas.

When I noted similar concepts of identity, representation, supportive connections, and dominant cultural narratives of sexual violence in the interview transcripts, I re-read all thirteen transcripts per the second step of Braun and Clark's thematic analysis framework. In the second step of the thematic analysis framework, I created initial codes and coded any thought-provoking details related to the research questions that emerged in the responses. After I read the survey responses from participants eight through thirteen and I noticed the repetition of relational types and contexts, I re-read all the responses together. By using the research questions as a guide to analyze the transcripts (RQ1, RQ 2a and 2b, and RQ 4a and 4b)[2] and the survey responses (RQ 3)[3] I began to notice the nuances of these broader ideas. Initial codes included alternative identities, non-dominant sexual violence situations, commonalities, relationships, personal experiences, and engagement.

In the third step, I organized the codes into preliminary themes after seeing how the codes related to one another, including: connection, validation, accessibility, sexual violence stereotypes, and relationships after sexual violence. In the fourth step, I reviewed the themes; here, I combined themes, separated themes, or teased out new themes in a way that confirmed

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[2] RQ 1: How do LGBTQ+ students who have experienced sexual violence use media resources to make sense of their experiences?
RQ2a: How does the content of media resources shape LGBTQ+ students' understanding of their experiences?
RQ2b: What do LGBTQ+ students perceive are the strengths and/or weaknesses of the content in those media?
RQ 4a: What discourses regarding sexual violence, gender, and/or sexuality do the resources include or exclude?
RQ 4b: What are the implications of these chosen discourses of LGBTQ+ students?

[3] RQ 3**:** How do the media resources that LGBTQ+ students use shape their interactions with other people?

that the themes fit into the larger narrative of the project. For example, the preliminary theme of accessibility was originally its own theme until I combined it with the preliminary theme of connection. In the next step, I defined and named the themes: finding resources for connection, dominant narratives of sexual violence in Western culture, and relationships after sexual violence. In the final step, I located exemplars in the data that demonstrated each theme. After evaluating all exemplars within each theme, I located subthemes within the broader themes. These themes will be explored in the next chapter.

Saturation. Saturation is an important concept in qualitative research and denotes that the researcher has uncovered all possible themes in the data. I achieved data saturation and theoretical saturation in this project. Faulkner and Atkinson (2023) explained that data saturation "refers to the quality and quantity of information in a qualitative research study and requires a thorough investigation of our data to fully comprehend and explain its implications" (p. 19). Researchers achieve saturation when they have exhaustively explored the phenomena under study. LGBTQ+ sexual violence in higher education is such a complex issue that we will never know everything about it; however, within the context of the current project I achieved data saturation after interviewing and surveying thirteen participants. By this time in the research process, the experiences articulated by participants did not reveal new information. In addition, theoretical saturation occurs when the researcher has comprehensively examined the phenomena under study and has "actualized the depth and breadth of social theory to achieve thorough descriptions, explanations, and interpretations of their research" (Faulkner, 2023, p. 21). Initially, CIFC and articulation theory provided the theoretical framework for this project. However, after I analyzed the data and drafted chapter 4, I realized that the findings did not have sufficient detail and unanswered questions still remained. At this point I reflected on what additional theories

and/or concepts would further bring the nuances of the data to light. Based on this reflection and further research, I added normative rhetorical theory and social support to my overarching theoretical framework. I reached theoretical saturation after I re-analyzed my findings through this new lens.

Data Engagement. In addition to Braun and Clark's thematic analysis framework, Ellingson and Sotirin's (2020) data engagement model shaped how I approached this project. In line with my feminist methodology, the data engagement model helped me to conceptualize and implement my participatory action project as well as incorporate reflexivity throughout the research process. A participatory approach was most appropriate for this project because, as Ellingson and Sotirin (2020) noted, a PAR design privileges the shared power and equity between researcher and participants, seeks to evoke a positive change in the LGBTQ+ community, and advocates for social justice. The data engagement model proposed the following ideas about the research process: "data are made rather than found; assembled rather than collected or gathered; and dynamic rather than complete or static" (p. 5). Using the three steps of this model—making data, assembling data, and becoming data—I will further explain how I navigated this project.

Making Data. Ellingson and Sotirin (2020) suggested that researchers shift their perspective regarding data, specifically that they approach data as something that is made—meaning that researchers should approach data as something embodied and living. In the first step of the data engagement model, which aligned with the investigation component of FPAR, I shifted from the process of data collection to data making. Ellingson and Sotirin (2020) explained that "making data involves inventing, imagining, encountering, and embracing lived experience and material documentation as methodological practice" (p. 5). In addition, this

practice of making data can "release researchers from the rigid, artificial constraints of postpositivist research practices" which aligns with the theoretical argument of this project (p. 6). This process of making data allowed me to investigate the problem of LGBTQ+ sexual violence in higher education in a way that captured the sociocultural history and complexity of the problem without disregarding participants' individual experiences. During the step of making data, I engaged in flexible interview dialogues with participants that centered their lived experiences regarding the intersection of sexual violence, representation, and identity.

In accordance with FPAR, this alternative conceptualization of data making embraced my own participation alongside that of the participants in the creation of data. While talking with participants, I welcomed the additions of my own perspectives in these dialogues. For instance, if a participant articulated an experience that resonated with me, I did not disregard that subjectivity. At the same time, I tried to keep my thoughts and commentaries succinct so that I did not dominate the interview space. I found it important to share my thoughts and opinions to an extent so that participants would also feel comfortable sharing and to reduce the unequal power relationship that the participants' may have perceived between our respective roles. When conceptualizing this project, I was adamant that the interview space belonged to the participants; it was their time to share their lived experiences as much or as little as they chose.

Assembling Data. In the second step of the data engagement model, Ellingson and Sotirin (2020) reconceptualized a data set as an assemblage. This reconceptualization welcomes a nonlinear approach to data organization and embraces the messiness, or complex emotions and experiences, that a postpositivist-orientation seeks to eliminate. In other words, data is not clean or clear-cut and it has jagged edges; however, embracing data and its perceived impurities can reveal more that which might have been obscured. This step was instrumental for the developing

the education component of FPAR; as I wrote and re(wrote) the different parts of this dissertation, the idea of data as an assemblage helped me to better represent the experiences of participants in a way that exposed hegemonic discourses while also centering participants' narratives. For instance, the data engagement model conceptualized researchers as entangled in the research process. Because of the highly personal nature of participants' interviews, approaching my analysis and write up in this manner allowed me to step back from research as this systematic process.

In this step of the data engagement model, I (re)approached my analysis of interview transcripts with an understanding that the data affected me just as much as I affect the data. I recognized that my positionality as a white, bisexual, cisgender woman would influence my perceptions and actions during this project. I also recognized that as someone who has experienced rape—and consequently, the blame, shame, and barriers to sensemaking that still follow the event—that my experience would heavily shape how I engaged with this research. When thinking about my role as a researcher, I found that Suter's (2018) positionality strongly resonated with me: "At the end of the day, I see the role of research as a means to critically examine the status quo and ideally enact social-justice-oriented change to improve the lives and contextual surroundings of individuals, relationships, and families" (p. 126). Whether consciously or not, I always consider broader structures of power and how this power comes to bear on the lives of marginalized individuals and groups.

I also recognized that I have experienced many transitions in my approach to research and remain open to more transitions as I continue my work. For instance, I received my bachelor's (2013-2017) and master's (2017-2019) degrees in rhetoric before transitioning to interpersonal communication in my doctoral program. My specific research interests have both

expanded and become more nuanced after this transition, however, those interests generally remain the same. The biggest change that transpired, and the reason I began the transition in the first place, centered on the privileging of lived experiences and the move toward praxis. During my time as solely a rhetorical scholar, my work—while important—often centered and stopped with critique. I often grappled with the feeling that I was not doing enough to address the problems I researched. I wrote about the problem of sexual violence and its misrepresentation for academic audiences, but I did not feel that my work accomplished what it needed to; it was not contributing to the people directly affected by those problems. Thus, this current project is the culmination of my research journey thus far and represents my goals as a critical interpersonal communication scholar coming to fruition. In addition to clearly demonstrating the problem of LGBTQ+ sexual violence in higher education, it also centers participant subjectivity and the translation of this research into practical applications for those affected.

Becoming Data. The third and final step of the data engagement model focuses on the notion of becoming. This step of the model prompted the researcher to extend their view beyond the data itself and look for broader contextual connections. This step aligned with the action component of FPAR and helped me to examine the pervasiveness of hegemonic sexual violence discourses both within and across the participants' narratives as well as the presence of counter-hegemonic experiences. Through this examination of dominant and marginalized discourses present in the participants' interviews, as well as our discussion of best practices for sexual violence resources, the project offered a way to take action. Chapter 5 of this project outlines best practices that colleges and universities can use when creating sexual violence resources for LGBTQ+ students; further, this chapter explains how I will use the current project to take action.

In addition, the becoming step of the data engagement model demonstrated that data is

not static, but alive and always changing. As a result of my unique engagement with the data throughout this project, I questioned the taken-for-granted assumptions about the research process and re-defined how I view myself as a researcher. I learned that embracing my own subjectivity in the research process does not harm the quality of the project. I also learned that a rigid research process is not synonymous with a productive research process. In other words, the data engagement model permitted me to examine sociocultural phenomena in a flexible and fluid way.

Trustworthiness Criteria

According to Guba and Lincoln (2005), "trustworthiness refers to the quality of an inquiry—whether the findings and interpretations made are an outcome of a systematic process, and whether the findings and interpretations can be trusted" (p. 103). In order to build trust and rapport with participants in this project, I used culturally respectful language, actively listened to participants' experiences, and shared my own personal experiences when appropriate during the interviews (Leavy & Harris, 2018). I also established trustworthiness through credibility, confirmability, transferability, dependability, and authenticity.

Credibility. A research study's credibility is determined by its believability and dependability (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). To create a credible manuscript, I included exemplars from multiple interviews that directly supported my claims rather than examples that "show a participant as profound" (Manning & Kunkel, 2014, p. 43). In other words, I did not choose exemplars based on content alone, but rather, each exemplar served a specific purpose within each theme/ subtheme. I also triangulated the sources and methods in this project (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). I triangulated my sources by collecting (assembling) data about LGBTQ+ sexual violence "from multiple sources of the same type in order to determine if different sources

provide different information" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 106). For instance, even though all participants identified as LGBTQ+, participants did not all identify the same way (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual). I asked all participants open-ended questions that allowed them to draw on their own personal experiences and provided participants with sufficient time to reflect and answer the questions. I triangulated my methods by using two forms of data collection solo interviews and open-ended surveys.

Dependability. A researcher has a dependable analysis "when others can readily see how a researcher got from one point to another" (Norwood, 2013, p. 31). I worked to ensure dependability by describing the research processes and findings as thoroughly as possible. To ensure the dependability of my research study, my advisor and committee members reviewed my process of inquiry as well as my "data, findings, interpretations, and recommendations" to determine its consistency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 318).

Confirmability. Confirmability seeks to ensure that the findings and interpretations of a research study emerge from "a dependable process of inquiry as well as data collection" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 105). To assess confirmability in my study, I used the technique of reflective journaling which required me to remain in conversation with myself throughout the entirety of the research process. As Lincoln and Guba (2013) explained, "The purpose of the journal is to keep a record of the changes occurring to the researcher—the human instrument and meaning-maker—both about the research and not" (p. 2013). My reflective journal had three phases throughout this project. The first phases focused on my thoughts as I created and (re)created the research design as I worked on my dissertation proposal. I struggled often during this phase because I had specific goals for this project but conceptualizing the research designs proved challenging because each design had both advantages and disadvantages. The second phase

began once I started collecting data. I find that this phase was the most difficult for me. Even though participants were not asked about the details of their sexually violent experiences, some participants chose to share those details as well as discuss the emotional aftermath. Based on my research of existing literature, I knew sexual violence against LGBTQ+ students was a significant problem in higher education. However, reading about and listening to participants talk about their lived experiences was a difference I did not fully anticipate in my project design and preparation. The third phase began when I started data analysis and struggled with making sense of the data. During this phase, I often went back and forth between feelings of elation and frustration; for instance, elation when I was able to make a connection between the transcripts and the larger project, and frustration when I could identify a relationship between different experiences but couldn't determine where to thematically place them.

Transferability. Whereas the goal of positivist research is generalizability, critical and interpretive research aim to be transferable. Transferability means that those who want to apply the researcher's findings and interpretations determine the "applicability of the findings and interpretations" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 104). I used the technique of thick descriptions to increase the transferability of this study. Thick description means providing readings with sufficient details regarding "the context of the research study in order to help a reader determine whether or not the findings are transferable to the reader's context" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 109).

Authenticity. In accordance with the tenets of feminist methodology, the procedures of this project focused on creating authentic knowledges and "raising questions not only about the authority of the knowledges produced but also researcher accountability" (Nash, 2016, p. 133). To ensure authenticity, I took the following actions in my study: (1) I used informed consent

procedures, (2) I exhibited openness about my research purpose to participants, (3) I worked to develop trusting relationships with participants, (4) I informed participants that they could have access to the final research write-up if desired, and (5) I demonstrated the practical applications of this research by having a discussion with participants to develop best practices for sexual violence media resources.

Ethical Considerations

I took several steps to ensure that this project remained ethical and in the best interest of the participants. According to Manning and Kunkel (2014),

> Researchers, as the people most involved with a given population and how that population will later be presented, are ultimately responsible for considering how 'rightness' and 'wrongness' play out in their work in the context of what they know or learn about a social scene. (p. 21)

Situational ethics are concerned with the unpredictable and important moments that arise in a research study (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). Prior to data collection, I tried to consider possible ethical issues that could emerge during the interview process and how I would address those issues.

First, talking about the use of media resources following a sexually violent experience may trigger a negative emotional response in participants during or after the interview. Prior to the interviews, I asked participants to create a safety plan that could help guide them through a crisis in the event that they experience a negative emotional change and/or suicidal thoughts. Participants could create their safety plan with this link: https://www.mysafetyplan.org/ or answer the following questions from the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline website https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/help-yourself/ (see appendix D for Safety Plan template).

Given the highly personal nature of a safety plans, participants had the option to share their safety plans with me, but it was not be required. I also provided every participant with the contact information for national helplines in the debriefing form. Each of the resources offer free one-on-one support.

Second, I took steps to protect the identities of participants. I kept all data on my password protected computer. To ensure the data were kept confidential, participants were given the opportunity to use a pseudonym of their choosing for the write up of the study. The recordings of the interviews and the transcripts from the interviews were also stored on my password protected computer. I was the only person to view the interview recordings in order to ensure confidentiality. Interviews took place in a private Zoom room that required a password as a way to keep non-participants from entering the interview space. Participants received digital compensation email for their participation in the study. Lastly, participants' names and emails were redacted from e-gift card receipt records.

Summary of Chapter

To recap, feminist methodology played a strong role in this project from conceptualization to conclusion. This methodology also shaped and reshaped the research process as well as guided my own practices throughout the project. This dissertation used interviews and open-ended surveys to study how LGBTQ+ students used interactive media for support and sensemaking, in addition to examining the discourses of sexual violence embedded in the resources they had access to in other spaces (e.g., on campus, health practitioners, traditional media). A thematic analysis framework guided my analysis of participants' responses and the next chapter will explore the findings that emerged from the interviews and open-ended surveys.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS I

In Chapters 1 and 2, I demonstrated the need to better understand the role that interactive media resources play in how LGBTQ+ college students (1) make sense of their sexually violent experiences and (2) navigate their healing journey. In Chapter 3, I provided an overview of the feminist methodology, in-depth interview and open-ended survey methods, procedures, and analysis process employed in this project. In the current chapter, I will present the findings from the methods mentioned previously. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 showed the implications of LGBTQ+ sexual violence as a broader cultural problem sustained by oppressive discourses as well as the implications of these discourses on the lives of LGBTQ+ students. The theories outlined in Chapter 2 provided a framework to examine the discourses embedded in sexual violence resources as well as the implications of these discourses on LGBTQ+ sensemaking.

Specifically, I used a CIFC-oriented articulation theory, normative rhetorical theory, and social support as a lens to examine the collected data regarding how participants perceived articulations of sexual violence in media resources and how these articulations shaped their own experiences. This data included both the transcripts from the interview recordings as well as open-ended survey responses from 13 participants. I identified three themes in my analysis. The first theme, finding resources for connection, highlights how participants used interactive media to connect with other people who have experienced sexual violence. The second theme, dominant narratives of sexual violence in Western culture, examines the hegemonic discourses present on campuses and campus resources as well as in other spaces. The third theme, relationships after sexual violence, explores how the resources that participants accessed shaped their relationships with the people in their lives. In the following pages I will detail each of these themes before turning to a discussion in the next chapter.

Finding Resources for Connection

The first theme centers on how interactive media resources provided a way for participants to locate supportive environments following sexually violent experiences. Participants perceived that many resources and services they could access on campus did not provide identity-specific information for LGBTQ+ students; therefore, participants used interactive media platforms to find information that considered their diverse identities. Participants also discovered that media offered an avenue for connection with other LGBTQ+ people, even if that connection was not an initial reason why they chose to use social media. Four subthemes emerged from this theme, including: validation and support, "I'm not the only one," personal experiences and perspectives, and accessibility.

Validation and Support

The subtheme of validation and support encompasses participants' desire for spaces that valued the diverse experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and disarticulated hegemonic conceptualizations of sexual violence. Literature showed that the individuals who fall outside of the status quo (i.e., cisgenderness, heteronormativity, whiteness) do not receive the necessary support after a sexually violent experience (Gill, 2018; Messinger & Koon-Magnon, 2019; Richardson et al., 2015). Further, the support they might receive does not articulate the intersections of their social identity. Literature also suggested that a lack of identity-specific support can adversely influence LGBTQ+ students' physical and mental health as well as academic performance (Kaukinen, 2017; Perez & Hussey, 2014). For instance, Emery explained her struggles with finding a supportive space since her rural campus did not have one: "We would have to go down to the closest metropolitan area, which was a 45-minute drive to really get any sort of external support, and even then, that was rough." Emery did not perceive to have

formal social support readily available on campus. Thus, participants expressed how the media spaces they chose to utilize—including online groups, forums, and blogs—created a supportive environment fueled by understanding and acceptance and did not maintain the taken-for-granted discourses of sexual violence. Participants' use of interactive media in this way aligns with Campbell and Wright's (2002) assertion that sources of social support, which can be informative and/or emotional in nature, that do not consider the stigmatized identity of an individual will not be satisfying.

Existing research indicated that sexual violence affects the LGBTQ+ community in different ways. Some participants recounted that they sought out interactive media resources because of the multiple layers of oppression that LGBTQ+ students endure because of their identity and dominant culture's propensity to stigmatize of those who experienced sexual violence. Further, because interactive media resources are not perceived to be as constrained as other resources there was a greater chance that the articulations regarding sexual violence would not be exclusionary and attend to a diversity of experiences. Spencer explained that she sought out interactive media resources for validation and so that she "wouldn't feel so alone." Spencer also explained that once she found asexual and aromantic groups on social media she could connect with "People who related to me, you know, who would understand what it felt like for things to have happened." As Parks (2011) noted, the expansiveness of social networks can allow individuals to the locate the kind of support that aligns with their needs. In his search for resources, Kevin indicated that as a gay man who was assaulted by his ex-boyfriend, he was "looking for support; kind of like a way to understand what happened." Brooke expressed that she sought out interactive media resources like social networking sites and user-generated content sites for information that would provide support and validate her experience:

> I just wanted to get some support, some validation kind of, because a lot of the time, even with stressful experiences, I tend to invalidate myself. I started seeking out experts who knew how to help me through articles and stuff, or through forums where people were showing their personal experiences, and how they cope with it. I thought it'd be really helpful to apply to my situation and my experiences.

Kara also spoke about how the stories and comments she found on social media helped her to make sense of her experience and take further steps toward healing:

> The majority of resources I found were not explicitly LBGTQ+ affirming or even acknowledging…I found discourse in social media comments to be very helpful and affirming. I read experiences of other people like me and even though I didn't make any comments myself, reading them was helpful to make me feel less alone and to help me understand people like me were going through similar things. Seeing that I was not alone in my experience helped me better process things and be more open about them to my queer-affirming therapist because I just felt overall more validated.

For Spencer, Kevin, Brooke, and Kara, social media fostered a sense of connection and provided a space that disarticulated the dominant narratives of sexual violence that render LGBTQ+ experiences invisible. Further, interactive media provided participants with a space where they could access counter-hegemonic articulations of sexual violence that they were not able to locate elsewhere.

For participants, support did not only refer to the amount of information available, but the quality of the interactions (Vangelisti, 2009). Some participants echoed the sentiment that talking with other people who experienced sexually violence proved helpful because they were able to find a space to connect via media that did not reinforce hegemonic ideas of gender, sexuality,

identity, and sexual violence. As opposed to campus resources that were grounded in cisgender/ heteronormative conceptualizations of sexual violence, Spencer noted that with interactive media "It's nice to just be able to talk about [my experience] in a space that I'm allowed to." Additionally, Emery expressed how connecting with another person who also identified as queer and experienced sexual violence provided a semblance of comfort:

> I could find somebody else who didn't have the exact same experience as me, but had something similar, and you know, who was also super queer and how it has impacted our views of ourselves and our identities. That was at least comforting in a way.

In a similar vein, Kendall stated, "I feel like there was some support system, like support groups online, that were just like 'hey? It's okay. You're allowed to feel valid in these things." Kara noted that "Just talking to other people was just so helpful for me…I found that just talking to other people who had similar experiences was what I found the most like validating and helpful." Sammie disclosed that after their ex-boyfriend claimed she was lying about being assaulted multiple times because "that doesn't happen," they were able to connect with people who believed their experience of repeated sexual violence:

> I know a lot of people now who have been raped at least five times…Especially once you factor in manual and oral penetration and things like that, there's so much sexual assault, there's so much rape. I wish I had found these people earlier because it's like I'm not alone and I'm not a freak and I'm not doing something super wrong. I attracted people who wanted to knock me down and they tried to.

The hegemonic idea that sexual violence can only be a singular occurrence remains a barrier to healing. However, LGBTQ+ individuals were able to use media spaces to disarticulate this false idea and supplant it with their own experiences.

Based on conversations with participants, interactive media like Reddit, TikTok, Instagram, and Discord among others provided a supportive space that they could not find or did not perceive they could access elsewhere. As Rains et al. (2015) suggested, communication via interactive media can supplement or entirely replace traditional sources of support. Although not every participant received the extent of support needed via interactive media resources, for some it removed barriers that had halted recovery and/or sensemaking by giving power to LGBTQ+ narratives (Campbell & Wright, 2002). The connections that participants made with other individuals—whether through direct or indirect engagement—helped them receive the validation they wanted. In addition to participants using media resources to find validation and support, these spaces also allowed participants to discover commonalities among their experiences.

"I'm Not the Only One"

The subtheme of "I'm not the only one" captures how participants' use of interactive media resources helped them navigate feelings of isolation caused by their experiences as well as reveal the common threads amongst their experiences. Identifying these common threads can direct attention to the widespread nature of LGBTQ+ sexual violence and function as a form of critique and resistance against discourses that exclude the experiences of LGBTQ+ people. Despite dominant discourses that articulate sexual violence as a solitary issue, the following exemplars demonstrate some participants' need for resources that fostered a sense of connection as they navigated the aftermath of their sexually violent experiences.

Due to the stigma and prejudice that LGBTQ+ individuals face, coupled with the stereotypes regarding sexual violence that circulate within public discourses (such that it is a heteronormative and cisgender issue), they may choose not to disclose their experience or suffer in silence (Richardson et al., 2015). Consequently, the lack of support alongside feelings of

isolation can be detrimental to health and wellbeing (Yang, 2018). Here, a site of struggle emerges between sexually violent experiences as a cause of isolation and sexually violent experiences as a common thread that can foster connection between LGBTQ+ individuals. We can see this site of struggle via misrepresentations of sexual violence that persist in traditional forms of media that reinforce hegemonic viewpoints as opposed to media spaces that interrupt this ideological field by representing counterhegemonic experiences.

Several participants talked about how some of the interactive media resources they discovered alleviated the concern that they were alone in their experiences. In other words, participants explained that interactive media spaces permitted LGBTQ+ individuals to articulate—even if their experiences were not welcomed in the privileged public space—which in turn, exposed participants to articulations of sexually violent experiences that resonated with their own. For instance, Morgan stated that "I normally read the comments and there was always a lot of like 'I've experienced this, too. I can't believe I'm not the only one.'" Dakota also explained how she wanted to connect with other people to help make sense of her experience because it differed from hegemonic articulations of sexual violence:

> I kind of just felt like it was a strange experience, and maybe it was. It was kind of that weird situation where you always think that it only is happening to you. Nobody else has experienced that kind of thing. So I wanted to be able to connect with people.

Emery described how she initially struggled with feelings of isolation when she could not locate articulations that recognized her experience because it did not align with the hegemonic heteronormative conceptualization of sexual violence:

> It was it was super disheartening. Even though I knew that I could not be the only one, it was still incredibly isolating. It felt like—"the irrational brain" as my therapist calls it—

> was taking control and going “Oh, you are the only one, this weird oddity.” It felt like shit… with that isolating feeling and…that kind of numb emptiness feeling, where it was just like, “Oh, maybe you can't find help. Maybe there is no help. Maybe the world actually doesn't care about the events like this.”

However, Emery eventually came across an interactive media resource that resonated with her experience:

> For me, one of the things that I found was one particular person who had written about her own experience on Tumblr—it's like social media blog/forum. I found her blog just absolute happenstance and just sort of read through it and I was just like “Oh, thank goodness. I knew I wasn't the only one.”

These exemplars show how connection and identifying the common threads of experiences can aid the sensemaking process and disarticulate the incorrect notion that LGBTQ+ individuals are alone in their experiences. Further, these exemplars also align with Campbell and Wright (2002) and Goldsmith (2017) in that emotional support can resonate more with an individual when they perceive that the person providing support—whether intentional or not—has navigated a similar experience.

Despite hegemonic sexual violence articulations that shame and blame those affected by sexual violence, interactive media resources allowed LGBTQ+ students to share their own and/or read about other people’s stories, and thus, articulate alternative narratives. Some participants also used interactive media resources—particularly those with user-generated content— that allowed them to understand the pervasiveness of sexual violence beyond what’s traditionally represented in the media. For example, Dakota noted:

> There was a lot more equality to the fact that things happen to everybody and not just a

> specific demographic. It's not just specific to your identity. And so, I think that that kind of helps bring a more positive up uplifting feeling to me that I wasn't just the only person who had experienced something.

Additionally, Spencer stated:

> I go out of my way to join a lot of asexual groups or aro (aromantic) groups, because all those people have the same type of experiences as I have. I'm actually shocked at just how many people there are…It's crazy that different people have so many different experiences that we all have so much in common regardless.

Even though the majority of sexual violence representation centers on the experiences of white women and heterosexuality, interactive media resources provided a space to disarticulate this taken-for-granted misconception by representing other identities and abilities.

Some participants also described how they found interactive media resources that fostered their understanding of their own experiences through commonalities with other peoples' experiences. Even though there were differences among their experiences, some participants embraced the sense of connection between themselves and other members of the LGBTQ+ community. For instance, Kendall explained that "I was heavy into Instagram and heavy into Pinterest. I never was really into Twitter, but I used a lot of YouTube. I saw a lot of YouTubers that kind of were going through experiences like me." Spencer further explained that "Being around other people that had, I guess, similar feelings, you know, towards what was happening, and just the same sexuality that people seem to not know much about was pretty nice." Given the stereotypes and misconceptions the circulate about asexuality, Spencer found a space that recognized the complexities of her identity and aided her sensemaking, but also centered alternative sexual violence articulations.

This subtheme illustrated the power of LGBTQ+ people's diverse articulations and disarticulations of sexual violence in combatting feelings of shame and isolation that can result from these experiences. As participants discovered the common threads that connected their experiences with other people, the power of personal narrative and agency emerged as visible in the next subtheme.

Personal Experiences and Perspectives

The subtheme of personal experiences and perspectives highlights participants' use of interactive media resources that privilege LGBTQ+ individuals' own articulations when sharing their stories. Resources can include, but are not limited to, hotlines, statistics, surveys, and counseling services. While participants utilized some of these resources, others indicated that they would prefer informal, user-generated resources that centered the diversity of personal experiences by LGBTQ+ individuals.

By claiming their narrative agency and articulating their own personal experiences and perspectives, LGBTQ+ individuals are given the power over oppressive sexual violence discourses. The narrative agency that interactive media spaces offer LGBTQ+ individuals allow them to control the articulation of their lived experiences should they choose to post. For instance, Spencer stated that "Personally, I'm very open to everybody about my experience. I think it can help people to recognize their own experience if similar, or them connecting with it some other way." In addition, when LGBTQ+ individuals are able to articulate their experiences without the confines of hegemonic sexual violence discourses, they simultaneously disarticulate those hegemonic discourses that stigmatize alternative experiences.

Interactive media spaces also allow other LGBTQ+ individuals to access the personal experiences and perspectives of other people that are not limited by the hegemonic assumptions

of what counts as a sexually violent experience (e.g., a woman assaulted by a man who is a stranger). In addition to objectively written resources that participants encountered on campus, several participants discussed their preference for subjective content. For instance, Brooke discussed how she gravitated toward media resources that include the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals:

> I tend to use more [resources] like people talking about their own experiences, because I felt that was more validating. So while I did look at articles published by, you know, experts, and clinical psychologists, and all that, I definitely looked more at forums. You know things on Reddit. For example, I would like to look through the comments, see people's stories or through like essay blogs themselves. So reading the comments and going in the forums with the lived experiences."

Brooke continued:

> [Personal experiences] seem a lot more humanizing. When you read a research article, or maybe a medical article, it's feels…a lot less personal. And they use the word 'victim' a lot, and feeling like I was a victim didn't I feel that great, you know? That's not the only part of me. So it felt like I was just the experience; just getting boiled down to [victimhood], and not a lot beyond that. Essentially there was a sense of detachment...Like how will this [experience] affect me going forward? How can I get over it?

Some participants similarly expressed that they used social media resources because they could access the subjective experiences of other individuals who have experienced sexual violence. For instance, Morgan expressed:

> With Instagram, it was a lot more informative, like it might not have been from personal

> experience, but it was like these are things that can be happening that you might not know about. I think the strength, especially with TIK TOK, is that it was a lot of personal experience. It was a lot of people that had already gone through this kind of thing and noticed this within themselves.

Kevin stated he preferred resources that included some type of interpersonal communication and personal experience rather than statistics:

> What I sought was engagement, the actual personal perspectives on [sexual violence]. And informed opinions about it. I kind of view the other kind of things, you know, like sometimes when you Google concerning questions, the first thing they put up is like a national hotline at the top… That's not what I need at the moment. And then statistics and numbers. It's very superficial. I mean we know the statistic of like 1 in 5 college age women experience sexual violence; it helps with your perspective, but it's still detached from pathos. It's just kind of something to view to read. I guess the stat itself. You could feel a little less alone right so you could feel it's like "Oh, there's x amount of people that kind of experience what I go through" but it kind of stops [being helpful] after that.

Objective resources offer important information about the pervasiveness of LGBTQ+ sexual violence—even though many instances of sexual violence go unreported due to fear, uncertainty, or not being comfortable with disclosure—however, several participants preferred resources where they could learn about the experiences of other LGBTQ+ people and possibly use it to help themselves. Many participants gravitated toward the subjective articulations that individuals shared via interactive media because in addition to the sense of connection provided, these narratives and/or interactions served as a source of emotional support in the form of empathy and validation.

Some participants also noted that engaging with the personal perspectives of other people who have experienced sexual violence helped them navigate their own experience. For example, Kevin described that he prefers to use forums like Reddit as a resource because "You have a real answer that is coming directly from users…In a way, it's more like people directly talking about [their experiences] on social media networks. That's always going to help me compartmentalize and kind of understand [my experience]." Kevin further explained the importance of personal perspectives in the resources he utilizes:

> I think it's obviously finding like-minded people…like people that have been through the experience because it's hard…You're going to find other people that had their experience, and they can share how they got over, how they felt about it. It's kind of like where you can get that kind of personal perspective on it, and then use that to kind of inform your own, or compare it, or feel like less alone.

Kara also discussed how the interactive media resources that she came across helped her to better understand how she reacted to her sexually violent experience:

> Some of the obvious places that I looked was RAINN, which is obviously a great resource for like people who have experienced sexual violence. I found some of their online resources to be somewhat helpful. There was actually this one Instagram account I followed for a while that was actually based in the UK. I think it was called like 'say it out loud' or something. I found that to be super helpful, mostly because you could read people's comments. And I found a lot of the comments that people would write on the posts about their experiences resonated with me and made me better understand my thoughts. My reaction [to my experience] was weird, and I was like "oh, other people have reacted the same way."

As Goldsmith's (2017) Normative Rhetorical Theory (NRT) contended, it can be more satisfying for those who experienced sexual violence to access narratives articulated by people who truly understand what it is like to be a marginalized member of society while also navigating the aftermath of a trauma and healing journey. Furthermore, because interactive media resources permit narrative agency, participants were exposed to content that was delinked from dominant cultural conceptualizations of sexual violence. These personal narratives functioned as antagonisms in that they disarticulated traditional narratives of sexual violence and changed the terms of the conversation. Rearticulating the diverse personal experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals showed that there is not a universal sexually violent experience (Mignolo, 2007).

While the sexually violent experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals are often rendered invisible because of their perceived violations of social norms, the interactive media spaces used by participants permitted narrative agency. Now this is not to say that participants did not want to view statistics about sexual violence within the LGBTQ+ community, but rather, some participants wanted access to a diverse array of information: both objective and subjective. As participants discussed the strengths of personal experiences in their sensemaking, the idea of access to these resources emerged.

Accessibility

The subtheme of accessibility centers on participants' discussions of interactive media resources that they could find easily, engage with on their own terms, and that offered identity protection and acceptance when desired. In the aftermath of a sexually violent experience—whether immediate or an extended period of time later—LGBTQ+ individuals must have access to identity-affirming resources that can aid their healing and sensemaking. Because of the barriers to support that LGBTQ+ students may experience because of their identity, access to

interactive media resources can help combat the risks associated with such barriers (Campbell & Wright, 2002; Gill, 2018; Messinger & Koon-Magnin, 2019; Ullman & Filipas, 2001).

Some participants emphasized the need for resources to be easily accessible in that accountability for finding resources should not be placed on those recovering from a sexually violent experience. Just as the notion of victim/survivor accountability frequently emerges in hegemonic representations of sexual violence, it appears that LGBTQ+ individuals are also accountable for locating their own support. Emery explained how she struggled when she couldn't find resources on campus that aligned with both her identity and experience because the resources that were available on campus centered on hegemonic sexual violence:

> It was still kind of a little isolating not really being able to find anything, at least so easily or even amongst the people that I know, like in real life, because you know, who wants to talk about that sort of thing?

Dakota expressed that LGBTQ+ people become discouraged when they cannot find resources, and as a result, try to help themselves navigate their healing process without seeking further help—both in terms of formal and informal sources of support:

> I think that a lot of people who identify as LGBTQ+ struggle to find the resources that they need, and so, they try to help themselves. They don't reach out to other people and they don't reach out to other resources because they're not getting the help that they need for their specific thing. I think that being able to diversify [resources] and [being] accepting of LGBTQ+ [people] would help those individuals be able to get what they need.

Sage brought up the point that "[Resources] should be easier to access. I only started seeing those videos after it happened and after I realized what my sexuality was. I feel like there should

just be a way that it would be a little easier to find." In these cases, participants did not have resources that were easy to locate nor readily available. Instead, they remained accountable for locating resources and thus went to interactive media. With this idea in mind, participants talked about how once they found helpful interactive media resources, they could access it easily without barriers. For instance, Morgan claimed that "I think one of the common strengths is that it is so widely available to a lot of people. Anyone can see this kind of thing." Morgan further explained the wide reach of resources:

> One of the really big [resources] that I think a lot of people experience is Tik Tok. [The videos] would just start showing up on my For You page and I was like "wow, like that really makes sense, like I've experienced that." Then I would just look deeper into any of the tags that were on there, and the same would go for Instagram. I would be just scrolling through and there would be, you know, five signs of things that could be happening after you've experienced sexual assault.

Based on the previous comments, campus resources were embedded with dominant conceptualizations of sexual violence and did not explicitly embrace the experiences of LGBTQ+ students. However, interactive media resources provided counterhegemonic representations of sexually violent experiences and healing that resonated with some participants because they disarticulated exclusionary narratives.

A strength that some participants noted was the ability to control their level of engagement with the interactive media resources. Some participants explained that they would not engage with other people on the resources they chose to use, but just immerse themselves in the available content. For instance, Kara explained:

> To be honest, for a long time I was not open about anything that had happened to me, just

> from a shame and stigma standpoint. I wasn't really ready to process what we're talking about. So I was just like lurking. I would just read comments and I wouldn't really write my own, or engage, but I would read them and I found that helpful. I wouldn't even 'like' the posts, I would just like look at them.

Dakota noted that her level of engagement varied: "I tried to connect with people mostly through social media. Like Instagram, Tiktok, as well as I would like to scroll through Reddit pages and stuff like that, just reading." The ability to control if/how/when LGBTQ+ students engaged with the media resources accommodated the variety of places that participants were at in their healing journey. Kara expressed that a key advantage that interactive media resources offered was "Things that people know they can do on their own time and when they're ready are helpful to me. I feel like it's something that some people need time to process. So yeah, just easily accessible kind of stuff." Because of possible stigmatization and/or feeling unsafe, LGBTQ+ students may refrain from visiting counseling centers or making use of campus resources (Messinger & Koon-Magnin, 2019). The ability to access resources without exposing their personal identity can prove advantageous for those in need of resources (Rains et al., 2015; Yang, 2018).

Identity also served a primary role in the resources that participants decided to use. The need for identity protection informed the resources that participants used, and as Jesse voiced, "We don't want to reveal our identity so it's part of one of the advantages of the media when looking for help." Kevin also noted that "With forums and stuff, or like just going online, there's degree of like anonymity to it. And I think that helps a lot of people because it is difficult to seek help for any variety of reasons." Additionally, the notion of identity acceptance also emerged when participants described why they sought out media resources. Kevin disclosed that online

resources enabled him to search for the help he needed:

> I feel like there is a lot of stigma, especially as a as a gay man, to reach out or to bring it up with the counselor. You know? Fear of judgment. But online, it was kind of where you can get people's real perspectives or get a little bit of help without being involved…Obviously, the stakes are lower. It's difficult to reach out about these things. So that's probably the extent of like the media sources I seek out.

These exemplars demonstrate the advantages or computer-mediated/ interactive media contexts when individuals want to find support but do not want to go through formal channels (Rains et al., 2015). Spencer also spoke about her need to locate inclusive resources and interactive media spaces because of her experiences with health practitioners:

> I remember the first therapist that I saw about one of the bad relationships that I had, when I was trying to explain that a part of the problem in the relationship was that I wasn't being respected in that way [about my asexuality]. She almost insinuated that I might have like hormone issue or something and almost like threw it back at me, almost blaming me for the problem.

Unlike the therapist who did not understand asexuality, interactive media—specifically groups via Discord—gave Spencer access to a supportive network that provided emotional and informational support. Kara also echoed the need for inclusive spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals:

> I just feel like when it's very clear that it's a queer safe space, I just feel better immediately…If you're already processing and describing trauma, then coming out about your identity in a potentially not-affirming space was something like, “I can’t even go there, right now.” Not that I have any shame or self-stigma about queerness, but I just felt like I didn't even want to bring it up.

It becomes problematic when resources, especially formal support resources like health practitioners, are not knowledgeable about the diversity of one's identity. This lack of identity-specific support essentially forces LGBTQ+ individuals to disregard an aspect of themselves in order to align with the heteronormative perspectives that undergird formal sources of support. For these participants, interactive media platforms offered an avenue to potentially locate resources that lacked judgement and did not reinforce hegemonic perspectives of sexuality.

Some participants also mentioned the need for resources to be readily available and easy to access so that they can find information that will allow them to make sense of their experience. Kara mentioned:

> I feel like when I know more about a topic, understand data about it, and look at options for myself in an analytical fashion, that it helps my brain. I feel like my brain just like clicks into 'Let me read everything I can about this' mode, so I could turn to different resources online and I learn more data and more statistics about my options.

Emery explained how she did not realize that her experience was sexual violence, but once she did, sought out interactive media resources to make sense of her feelings:

> It was very much a case of "Oh well, that suddenly explains a lot of the weird, conflicted feelings that I had been having." I didn't really have anyone I could particularly turn to, so I just sort of went on my trusty private browser started like Googling things like "what does it mean to be assaulted by someone of the same sex?" "How do you come to terms with that" and that sort of thing.

Emery also talked about the strength of one blog, in particular "The strength with this particular blog was that I was able to reach out, and I didn't really expect to hear back from this person, but she actually responded."

In sum, the theme of Finding Resources for Connection encompassed how media spaces allowed LGBTQ+ students to seek help when they struggled to find it elsewhere.—such as on campus and via other formal support sources. The first subtheme discussed how participants used media resources to validate their experiences that dominant culture rejects as well as receive support from other LGBTQ+ people who are also navigating the aftermath of sexual violence. The second subtheme discussed how media resources' diverse articulations of sexual violence showed participants that they were not alone in their marginalized experience. In the third subtheme, participants conveyed power of reading the personal experiences of other LGBTQ+ people and learning about alternate perspectives regarding sexual violence within the LGBTQ+ community. Lastly, the fourth subtheme addressed the issue of accessibility when locating resources and how participants want resources that are easy to find as well as resources where they can control their engagement and protect their identity.

Dominant Narratives of Sexual Violence in Western Culture

This theme centers on the pervasiveness of dominant narratives of sexual violence that manifested within the resources that LGBTQ+ students used or refrained from using. Four subthemes emerged from this theme, including: centering of heteronormativity/cisnormativity, reinforcing myths and misrepresentations about sexual violence, and exclusion of alternative experiences and relationships.

Centering of Heteronormativity/Cisnormativity

The subtheme of centering of heteronormativity/cisnormativity focuses on how the dominance of heteronormative and cisgender discourses in social institutions prompted LGBTQ+ individuals to seek out alternative resources via interactive media. Dominant culture positions these discourses as the norm which excludes, neglects, and/or misrepresents the experiences of

LGBTQ+ students. Problematically, research indicated that LGBTQ+ students are at an increased risk of sexual violence (Perez & Hussey, 2014; Powers & Kaunkinen, 2017). Therefore, this subtheme addresses participants' need for inclusive articulations of LGBTQ+ sexual violence.

Several participants mentioned the need for inclusive resources that articulate the experiences marginalized identities rather than erase them. For instance, Kara expressed that "I feel like there just needs to be more resources for queer people and more representation that these things happen to queer people, in general, because it's always just these heteronormative narratives." Morgan noted that "There were a few things about marginalized identities, but for the majority it was women, it was for women." Sammie stated, "I felt rejected by society and I felt rejected by dominant cultural narratives about consent and bodily autonomy and gender." Spencer said:

> I guess people in general either don't know what asexuality is or don't acknowledge it. So it's like, to even be able to talk about what happened I have to almost educate them about it…it's just way easier to go into a space that you don't have to tell people almost why something happened.

The above responses show the privileging of heteronormativity and cisnormativity in broader cultural narratives about sexual violence and how these narratives affect the usefulness of available resources. Dominant culture positions heteronormativity/cisnormativity as synonymous with sexual violence; however, the presence of these counterhegemonic experiences disarticulates that fallacy and proves otherwise.

In addition, some participants talked about how they refrained from searching for and/or using resources on campus. Emery shared that she did not think the resources available on

campus would benefit an LGBTQ+ person:

> I didn’t really try to find anything on campus…The school I’m at now, and the school I was at when it happened, are both fairly rural state universities…It's not that I don't have faith that they have resources, I just don't know if they would be resources that would be helpful for a non-heterosexual person.

Sammie discussed the absence of affirming resources on campus that articulated their identity and experience:

> In my undergraduate program, it was difficult to see myself reflected in media materials concerning rapes so I just had nothing to do with the materials as a result. It was like I picked them up and put them right back down because, you know, because they just they weren't about me. Now, one of my major complaints would be that non-binary people are left out. It would be nice to not just always be tacked on as an afterthought.

Kendall mentioned that even in instances where resources represented the LGBTQ+ community, those representations were not entirely inclusive:

> Even though the LGBTQ+ community was being represented, it was the like mainstream perspective of it. It was the ones that benefited from white privilege and have been privileged, and it was the ones that could pass in society. It wasn't the overly feminine man, or the overly masculine woman. It was the ones that could walk into a business setting and not be told that they were being [unprofessional], or that they were rubbing their sexuality into other people's faces.

Dominant narratives of sexual violence consider victims/survivors and perpetrators as heterosexual and cisgender. When this narrative is reflected in resources, the diversity of sexual violence situations as well as those affected by this violence. The exemplars above also show

how surrounding sociocultural climates influence academic institutions. At the beginning of this project, I mentioned how people consider colleges and universities as ivory towers in that they remain free of the issues and ideologies that circulate beyond their boundaries. However, as the CIFC literature contended, just as the public sphere and private sphere are not mutually exclusive domains, neither are academic institutions and the communities in which they reside (Moore, 2017; Sotirin & Ellingson, 2018). When looking beyond these binaries, it becomes apparent that the political, religious, cultural, and/or racial aspects of an institution's location (e.g., rural, urban) also shape the sexual violence resources—or lack thereof—within those institutions.

Participants also discussed that resources from mainstream media often represent sexual violence situations from a heteronormative/cisnormative perspective. Kara articulated concerns about the absence of resources for LGBTQ+ individuals:

> Heteronormative, white experiences are mostly what's seen. I feel like Rainn—I have looked at their page a couple times—and they do say like "happy pride month" and stuff, but I feel like queer experiences just aren't really a narrative. I've found some other resources. I follow this Instagram that's called queer sex therapy and that has some helpful posts about sex after sexual violence and that's been helpful, but that's like one of the only narratives I've seen where it was targeted at queer people. I just feel like it's so unfortunate that you don't see more of that [representation] just because there's so many harmful narratives, like queer people are dangerous or abusers or like pedophiles and stuff. I feel like there's not as much representation of just the queer experience being on the receiving end of violence. It's a missed opportunity for sure.

Emery described how resources that resonated with her experiences were not readily available: "I couldn't really find anything [because] so much of the stuff was particularly geared toward

heterosexual violence…I had to dig around a little deeper on a couple social media sites to find anything." Brooke also indicated that "I got the impression that most of them were heterosexual and cisgender experiences, I think just from where I was looking at it. It didn't have a focus on marginalized identities." Sammie reinforced this idea when articulating how their identity remains absent from these mainstream representations: "Sometimes a misrepresentation when it's like 'one in six women are sexually assaulted,' then I've got to go like 'Okay, well then what does that mean for me because I'm not a woman.'" Interactive media offers a prime opportunity for LGBTQ+ individuals to delink the pervasiveness of heteronormativity/ cisnormativity from sexual violence representations by articulating experiences that collapse this binary. To reiterate, the practice of delinking can give visibility to alternative narratives by disconnecting a social problem from its hegemonic roots. In the case of sexual violence representations, delinking can not only make a space for LGBTQ+ experiences but also disrupt the notion that sexual violence is only a heteronormative/ cisnormative problem.

Besides the missing representations of LGBTQ+ identity, participants recalled that they did not come across resources that acknowledged the intersections of gender/sexuality and race. Research indicated that the experiences of POC are often rendered invisible given that traditional media situate white women as ideal victims. Morgan reflected that "For me, it was kind of rough. I am not a white woman; I am a person of color and it is kind of frustrating when everything tends to be geared towards white people." Morgan further explained that "There was a very clear lack of people of color, especially black people. Every once in a while, you would see one for people of color, especially like black women. It was mostly geared towards like white women." Emery also mentioned the absence of marginalized identities in materials found on campus:

> All the information that they gave out was again very cis and it was also very painfully white. I know that rural Missouri is overwhelmingly white, but still some of the representation that they had was a little suspect. I was 18 and I didn't know things.

Despite dominant articulations, a singular narrative of sexual violence does not exist. Sexual violence does not only happen to white women who identify as heteronormative and cisgender. By only focusing on that narrative, the complex intersections of gender, sexuality, and race remain ignored as well as the individuals whose identity is situated at this intersection. Therefore, the (re)articulations of sexually violence by LGBTQ+ individuals via interactive media served to transform the exclusionary representations of sexual violence that pervade mainstream spaces.

While existing research showed that most representations of campus sexual violence center on women victims/survivors and men perpetrators, violence can occur to individuals who identify in a diversity of different ways. In addition to the pervasiveness of heteronormativity and cisnormativity in sexual violence discourses, participants also noted the absence of alternative representations of experiences and relationships.

Exclusion of Alternative Experiences and Relationships

The subtheme of exclusion of alternative experiences and relationships focuses on the sexually violent experiences and relationship types that do not receive attention because they fall outside of the hegemonic perspective. Specifically, this subtheme acknowledges the multiple types of sexual violence situations that remain ignored because of misconceptions that sexual violence only occurs between men and women who are strangers (Cuklanz 1995; 2000).

Some participants explained how their identities and experiences did not have a place within campus resources. Sammie talked about how sexual violence in the LGBTQ+ community

is such a pervasive problem, and yet, the discourses surrounding this violence do not attend to it: “Stuff is really messed up and not talked about enough, and when it is talked about, it's like these things don't apply to us in certain ways.” Even when resources were present, the articulations within those resources centered the hegemonic perspective of sexual violence and this oppressed alternative experiences. Kevin reflected about how, as a gay man, he navigated feelings of exclusion because of his identity and the nature of his experience:

> I was raped by my then boyfriend. And since then, you know, I’ve still not come to terms with it. I mean, it was even like two days ago where I still Google things like “When do you get over it?” or like, “How do you get over it?”

Kevin further reflected about how he understands that resources scantly relate to his experience as a marginalized gay man:

> You get used to being a minority, but you never really get truly used to it. It's like “I’m still here”, you know? It influences everything that you do. It's always at the back of your mind, no matter what it is. It's like, you're kind of used to it, that that reflection of the world would be represented in your media. So you're not going to find an abundance [of representation]. That's kind of why I turn towards universal media resources, obviously, that I know are geared towards women.

Because of the nature of hegemonic representations of sexual violence, Kevin has come to accept that he will not find resources for his identity and experience. Emery reflected about the effect of her exposure to hegemonic articulations of sexual violence hindered her sensemaking experience:

> I think that was one of the reasons it took so long for me to come to terms with it is because [representations] give the very cis-het version, where you know, it's the person

> you've been dating for years. I had very much assumed “Oh, what happened to me wasn't this, it was something else entirely.” Like, university-wide movements, it was always about intimate partner violence and in my case, it was not a person I was dating. It was someone that I was friends with, and I didn't really find anything in regard to when it's not someone you're dating, or not a total stranger, but when it's someone you've known for years.

Sammie, Kevin, and Emery did not find media resources on campus that reflected their LGBTQ+ identities and/or experiences. Emery did not find resources that aligned with their experience because their relationship with the perpetrator was not that of a relational partner or stranger. These examples demonstrate the need to disarticulate and rearticulate resources so that they no longer exclude discourses of sexual violence in relation to the LGBTQ+ community.

Participants also discussed the lack of sexual violence representation between people of the same sex. Morgan articulated how the exclusion of representations, particularly representations of same-sex sexual violence, adversely affected her:

> Especially within the LGBT community, it can be hard to because it's kind of different when you're a woman and you've been assaulted by a woman. It's kind of different than when you're assaulted by a man. There's different feelings, there's different things to get over, especially for women. We've been taught at a very young age, you know, you always need to stay safe. Especially when you're around men, you know, you need to carry pepper spray or don't walk at night, don't talk to random men. You've always been taught to be safe and be careful and no one really talks to you about when you're in a same sex relationship that these things can happen, a lot of people don't think that you can be sexually assaulted by a woman, if you are a woman.

Kendall reflected about how the lack of same-sex relationship representations affected her:

> It affected me greatly, especially going into relationships… when I had my first girlfriend, I got into very toxic relationship because I didn't know what a relationship with a woman looked like…If I had had more representation of what a healthy relationship looked like between two girls then I would have been able to see the signs beforehand. I would have been able to see myself out of that situation, or at least attempted to reach out for help.

Sammie expressed their desire for unexplored aspects of sexual violence and relationships

> Loving your rapist would be something I'd love to see covered. That, you know, you might still have feelings for someone, whether it's love or just like whatever college love is, you know that you might still have feelings for someone and what it means to be dealing with domestic violence on that sort of level. I see domestic violence framed a lot in terms of like 30-year-olds in marriages and not in terms of like a couple of 18-year-olds. One thing that it took me a long time to get through was like having feelings for people who had sexually assaulted me, and I needed it spelt out for me, and that would have been helpful.

These exemplars show the false notion that sexual violence is only a heteronormative phenomenon. By articulating their experiences, Morgan, Kendall, and Sammie disarticulated the notion that sexual violence is something that only affects people in certain social positions; it can happen to anyone regardless of how they identify. That said, certain social positions—like people who identify as LGBTQ+ as well as LGBTQ+ POC—experience this violence at higher rates.

Alongside the exclusion of alternative experiences, participants often came in contact

with misrepresentations of sexual violence present within resources.

Reinforcing Myths and Misrepresentations about Sexual Violence

The subtheme of reinforcing myths and misrepresentations about sexual violence centers on the misrepresentative articulations of sexual violence that circulate within social institutions and thus become embedded within resource materials. These myths and misrepresentations can include, but are not limited to, victim blaming, shaming, gaslighting, or claims that victims/survivors make false accusations in order to hide shameful behaviors and/or as a form of revenge (Benedict, 1992; Pollino, 2020; Projansky, 2001).

Several participants also discussed how hegemonic ideas of sexual violence situations permeated some of the resources they found. These ideas included idealized sexual violence situations as well as blaming victim/survivors and holding their account their experience. Morgan talked about the idea of the perfect rape:

> I feel like for a lot of people, that's not their experience. I mean for some people, it is someone that they were very close to, or it could have just been a random stranger, or who knows, it could have been whoever. There's no such thing as a perfect rape or a perfect scenario of a rape because everything is so different for everybody.

Sammie voiced the different types of myths regarding sexual violence that reinforce victim blaming:

> There's very much the idea of the perfect rape, the perfect victim, the perfect perpetrator…A lot of these materials do concern stranger rape, they concern the "Oh well, you are the one who messed up because you left your drink unattended, you were the one who messed up because you were hanging out with the wrong guy."

Morgan also explained how she found posts that both helped and hindered how she understood

her experience:

> I think one of the weaknesses, especially like Instagram, is for every one good post, there was like five bad posts. It was like there's this one really informative post about things that could happen, and then there's a post about how "You know this isn't real," "this doesn't happen," "it's what you were wearing," "it's what you were doing."

Sammie also addressed about the misconception that healing from a sexually violent experience has a timeline:

> A lot of [resources] wind up taking a tone like "that's the end of the story." When you are raped you can try to put the pieces back together, you can do the yoga and you can do the therapy, but then if that doesn't work and you're not fully whole within like a calendar year it makes you feel like you're broken.

The participants' experiences with resources above show the power of hegemonic discourses of sexual violence. Even in resources that are designed to help victims/survivors of sexual violence—individuals who already experience marginalization in dominant culture—hegemonic discourses still manifest in the content and further marginalize LGBTQ+ individuals.

Some participants reflected on how representations of sexual violence that did not align with their experiences affected them. For instance, Brooke reflected on her perception of how dominant narratives of sexual violence exclude experiences that do not appear violent enough:

> I feel like my experiences were a lot less severe than the things that I was like reading, either on the forums or in the articles. It felt at times I was like, "oh, maybe what I experienced wasn't enough to seek help." It just didn't feel like it was bad enough to reach out.

Sammie also talked about their journey toward understanding the different forms that sexual

violence can take, beyond those represented in dominant narratives: “One Rape Crisis Center in London wouldn't take me after my campus rape there because it was only an oral rape and they were like that doesn't meet our criteria.” Sammie continued to describe how they began to learn that sexual violence does not meet specific criteria:

> I'm Facebook friends with that Roxane Gay and I became more familiar with her work. I became more familiar with her really good essay on ‘gray rape’ and that was when I started feeling the ability to speak out about my own experiences…There were times that I said no, and people kept going with things that I didn't want. I didn't realize that digital penetration should count as rape. That wasn’t anyone's definition of anything like that. It just seemed like an unfortunate event; like that guy’s an asshole, not that the [experience] was something traumatic, even though looking back at it, it's like “okay, this definitely shaped that whole year of my life.”

Kevin discussed how, in the media landscape, limited resources exist for men who have experienced rape:

> When I look these things up, a lot of it is geared towards women. Just because of the nature of society, and what I’m searching for is a marginalized community. So there's less. On Reddit, there's certain subreddits. One's just like It's like, ‘Ask women’. So it's like, ‘How'd you get over it?’, ‘When do you get over it?’ But it's pretty universal advice, you know? I think you can break down that gender barrier.”

This absence of representation reinforces the idea that men do not experience sexual violence.

Participants expressed the importance of challenging myths and misrepresentations about sexual violence. For instance, Sammie disclosed how their ex-boyfriend blamed them for their repeated sexually violent experiences and suggested that it didn’t really happen: “It happened too

many times, so you must be doing something wrong, or you know that just doesn't happen, so it couldn't have couldn't be the truth." However, after becoming involved with social movements about sexual violence, Sammie was able to better understand their multiple sexually violent experiences as well as abusive relationships:

> It was one of the strengths to see those acts of violence and to see more and more small acts of violence within larger acts. Rape is not just one violent activity, it's actually the culmination of many violent activities.

Here, Sammie shows how sexual violence can go beyond a singular incident. In addition, Kendall countered the idea that if an LGBTQ+ person seeks help they are not harming the community:

> Asking for help is not going against your identity. Asking for help and seeking out resources is not going against your whole community. Anybody who tries to tell you that is wrong, and they are inhibiting that kind of behavior, encouraging that kind of behavior from the other person. And that is not right. I feel like including that in the conversation would be beneficial.

The marginalized situatedness of the LGBTQ+ community may make some LGBTQ+ people fear speaking up about their experiences because someone might use their identity against them.

In sum, the theme of Dominant Narratives of Sexual Violence in Western Culture demonstrates the pervasiveness and privilege of hegemonic sexual violence discourses in the resources that participants discovered. The first subtheme revealed that participants perceived resources on campus and in the media to center heteronormativity and cisnormativity. In the second subtheme, participants reflected on the exclusion of alternative narratives and experiences in most resources they initially encountered. The third subtheme showed the prevalence of myths

and representations regarding sexual violence that participants contended with as they searched for helpful resources. The final theme of this chapter will concentrate on relationships after sexually violent experiences.

Relationships after Sexual Violence

This theme centers on how participants interacted with other people following their sexually violent experiences and how media representations influenced these interactions. When looking at these interactions, it appears that media representations shaped how participants acted with other people as well as how other people interacted with them. As witnessed in previous themes, hegemonic articulations of sexual violence persist in public discourses, such as traditional media representations, and can shape how people understand and react to sexual violence situations. Based on my analysis of the interview transcripts, a variety of relational contexts emerged. Therefore, this theme has three subthemes: romantic relationships, relationships with family and friends, and relationships in higher education and health contexts.

Romantic Relationships

The subtheme of romantic relationships focuses on how the media resources that participants utilized shaped their existing and/or potential romantic relationships. Limited research exists relative to non-heterosexual relationships, both in terms of navigating romantic relationships after a sexually violent experience as well as navigating an unhealthy romantic relationship.

Some participants talked about how inclusive media resources about romantic relationships following sexually violent experiences—or lack thereof—influenced their interactions. For instance, Morgan discussed an interactive media post she discovered about navigating relationships that she perceived as helpful after she experienced sexual violence:

> One [resource] that really resonated with me was a post about how you handle relationships after being sexually assaulted. It talked a lot about self-sabotaging a relationship that is going good, because you feel like you're not in control or you feel like something is going to happen, so you have to sabotage it now.

Morgan explained that the articulations—particularly the disarticulation of dominant narratives that do not center what comes after sexual violence—in this resource helped her make sense of her feelings in romantic relationships and signs to be self-aware of as she navigates those relationships. While Morgan found a resource that resonated with her experiences, Sammie reflected about how they were affected by the absence of resources regarding disclosure to future partners:

> I didn't encounter any resources that advised me about disclosing to future sexual partners so that I could maybe protect myself and make the decision of whether or not to disclose. You can't have a positive sexual relationship with someone who doesn't know like "hey babe, if you touch me unexpectedly, I'm going to scream at the top of my lungs because I think I'm being attacked." And then you know you're apologizing at the last minute and you're not really disclosing in a productive way and you're potentially traumatizing yourself because you hadn't entered into a sexual situation without preparing for this first. Now you're in the middle of a sexual situation and you've got to try to bring up your trauma. That would be something that I would like to see addressed more in research.

As existing research demonstrates, healing after sexual violence is not a linear process; it can move forward and back again for an unidentifiable period of time (Harris, 2011; Pollino, 2021; Young & Maguire, 2003). As Sammie articulated, disclosing to relational partners—particularly beyond heteronormative relationships— is something that needs to be further explored given the

importance of relationships in our lives, and further, the potential implications that these relationships may have on support and healing. As Goldsmith's (2004, 2017) NRT suggested, communicative situations—in the context of this project, situations where support is needed by a relational partner –require attention. Further, it is imperative that we not forget the implications of sexual violence articulations that circulate in contemporary culture, for these articulations also shape communicative situations as well as individuals' responses within those situations.

Additionally, the information that Kendall received via interactive media resources shaped her perspective about her future relationships and made her aware of warning signs of an unhealthy relationship:

> I think that you should say that in any relationship, no one should be forcing you to do anything. No one should be pressuring you to do anything. No one should isolate you from your friends, your family. You should be allowed to still have your life and pursue your passions and not fear retribution from your partner, because your partner should be the one that makes you feel safe. Your partner should be the one that makes you feel welcomed and be a part of that safe space. Your partner should not be prohibiting you from accessing all of your other safety resources because that would not be healthy. I feel like utilizing those kinds of terms teachings.

The information that Kendall accessed via interactive media addressed the gap that exists in resources about interpersonal violence and toxicity in LGBTQ+ relationships. As Kendall explained in her interview, she believed she became so immersed in an unhealthy relationship because of the marked absence of resources that portrayed healthy and un-stereotyped same-sex relationships. Beyond romantic relationships, interactive media resources also played a role in non-romantic relationships.

Relationships with Family and Friends

The subtheme of relationships with family and friends centers on participants' interactions in these contexts in the aftermath of sexual violence. As noted previously, LGBTQ+ students who experienced sexual violence might refrain from seeking formal support—such as health practitioners, crisis centers, support services—for a variety of reasons. As such, family and friends can comprise an individuals' informal support network which can function as a resource for LGBTQ+ individuals in the absence of formal resources.

Some participants also talked about how they interacted with family and/or friends after a sexually violent experience. Dakota reflected on how misrepresentations of queer sexual violence that she witnessed in mainstream media manifested in an interpersonal interaction:

> The media heavily depicts queer individuals who have endured sexual violence as "dirty." I have felt dirty ever since, and refuse to discuss what happened with friends, peers, and family members. I have only had one interaction because of my media-influenced fear. This was with my mother. She responded exactly how the media had depicted it, and because of this, I have hidden away in my little shell ever since.

Jaime also discussed how media representations influenced her interactions because they worried that the exclusive representations of sexual violence perpetuated in media would lead people to negative judge them and their experience:

> I did not interact with people regarding my sexually violent experience until years later. I have been aware for a long time that people who identify as bisexual are often mischaracterized as overly sexual people and I was worried people would attribute my assault to my sexuality. I purposely do not disclose details because of this characterization and fear of judgment.

Sammie talked about the advice they received from her family:

> I have been raped over 100 times because I was kidnapped, so one guy got to go ahead and do that as much as he wanted. I've crunched the numbers and they're very depressing. I was encouraged by my family to commit suicide because they thought that it'd be less painful for me than living with what it happened to me; and it's like, you could just support me. That's kind of easier, you know, and like funeral costs are expensive. Like just be nice to me, that's free.

This subtheme encompasses the fluctuations of support present in participants' responses. In some cases, support was lacking, whereas in others, support was present. This presence, however, did not necessarily always prove helpful to participants. For instance, in line with NRT literature, while some participants perceived that a family member/friend offered support in a way they believed was helpful, that support may not have been what the participant needed at the point in time.

While some participants had negative interactions as a result of mainstream media representations, other participants expressed how interactive media resources led to productive interactions. For instance, Sutton explained how the interactive media resources she found helped her to articulate her experiences to family and friends: "I was able to clearly explain what had happened to me. Before I saw media regarding LGBT experiences, I wouldn't have been able to properly describe my experience." Brooke explained that "The media resources influenced what I talked about in conversations with my friends. I felt less like a victim and definitely second-guessed myself less about my previous experiences. I felt more comfortable sharing my experiences." Additionally, Spencer explained her experience with the support groups she joined on social media platforms like Facebook and Discord:

> The groups I joined helped to validate my experiences, broaden my horizons to the spectrum of asexuality, and make connections. Articles, blog posts, etc. by non-asexual people about asexuality are both positive and negative, as they often do not touch on a lot of important aspects of asexuality, are downright incorrect, or offensive. The fact that a conversation is being had at all, however, is positive. Not all of the information being shared is inaccurate, either.

While the above exemplars showed how some participants used interactive media to disarticulate dominant representations of sexual violence and rearticulate their healing journey in a more inclusive way, Emery talked about how those dominant discourses of blame, shame, and disbelief still affect her:

> It wasn't until this last year or so ago that I realized that what I had experienced was sexual violence - since that realization, conversations that I've had has been mostly focused on very basic realizations and in some cases a new thing to bond over. Though really in the end I haven't spoken about my experiences that much, in part not wanting to reopen old wounds, and also I'm not sure who would believe me since it happened so long ago.

Emery’s remarks remind us that the presence of supportive resources does not negate the fact that healing is a non-linear and highly personal journey that may continue to be shaped by dominant sexual violence discourses. That said, the presence of resources that were made accessible via interactive media still allowed participants to make sense of their experiences and engage relationally. However, the dominant discourses embedded within mainstream media sources also affected these relationships which goes to show the need for continuing disarticulation of these exclusionary representations.

Relationships in Higher Education and Health Contexts

The subtheme of higher education and health contexts centers on how interactive media resources affected participants' relationships with people at their respective universities as well as in health settings. Both of these contexts, and the relationships within said contexts, have the capability to provide LGBTQ+ students with support that can prove significant in their healing journey.

Media resources—both mainstream and interactive—shaped participants' interactions in academic contexts. For instance, Sammie explained how they learned about sexual violence movements via interactive media that influenced her engagement with people on campus:

> It wasn't until I became aware of Slutwalk in graduate school that media perceptions began to impact how I interacted with people. I became less ashamed with everyone I interacted with and began to dig deeper into statistics, especially those intersecting with Nativeness and bisexuality.

Before Sammie gained knowledge about efforts to combat sexual violence misrepresentations, mainstream media's oppressive articulations of sexual violence heavily influence their perception of their own sexually violent experiences. However, interactive media alongside their involvement with Slutwalk, encouraged Sammie to disarticulate those oppressive notions and move forward in their sensemaking process. In addition, interactive media allowed Spencer to connect with other students on her campus and create a community of support both on and offline:

> There is a Discord server that I'm on on-campus that has a ton of people who are ace, aro, and agender. It's nice because we meet up sometimes, and it's nice to have peers who are local who have similar experiences, much less. You know a Facebook group of people

> which is great in itself, but these people are here, you know? Like I can ask them to go to lunch with me.

Each of the above exemplars shows the power of interactive media. Not only did interactive media resources help participants dismantle hegemonic conceptualizations of sexual violence and its aftermath, but also prompted them to connect with other people relationally.

Interactive media resources, while considered informal sources of support, also enabled some participants to connect with formal sources of support like therapists. For instance, Morgan explained how media resources helped her get to a place where she was able to talk to her therapist about her experience and the effect it had on her relationships with her college professors:

> I interacted less with my professors, fearing that there would be some push back for taking time to process this kind of trauma. Instagram and Tik Tok was where I got most of my media resources. These resources showed me that how I was feeling and what I was doing to cope with the trauma was normal. It allowed me to talk more openly with my therapist and express how felt.

Here, the content of the interactive media resources helped Morgan articulate her experience and better convey her feelings in a formal support setting. In addition, Kara described how the absence and presence of interactive media resources shaped her healing journey, especially regarding articulating her experiences to formal support providers:

> I usually didn't bring up my queer identity and how it impacted my experience with sexual violence when talking to a primary therapist and a victim advocate because I had no representation of queer survivors. I also didn't always know if I was in an LGBTQ+ affirming space. Once I was seeing a LGBTQ+ therapist I was able to be more open

> about it. When I found queer-specific resources (on @queersextherapy) and now that I have an explicitly queer-affirming therapist, I just felt so much more comfortable and able to really dive into what happened and how being queer impacts my experience. This was such a relief. I've made more progress in spaces where I can be 100% myself.

Kara also talked about how the website information and other materials at her current practice influenced how she engaged with her therapist:

> The therapist office I go to now particularly focuses on queer communities and communities of color, so in that space—like going into it and knowing that they focus on queer communities and stuff was just a huge relief for me because I know I can just like say whatever about being queer and they're not going to react in any kind of way. Like even before I met the therapist at my current practice, just like reading on their website that they're like focused on queer communities and communities of color was just like "oh good, like I feel safe in that space." I also just feel like the pre health survey they sent out had all the gender options and had all the sexuality options. Another therapist I had seen a couple months ago, grouped together something like pansexual and questioning, and I was like these are very different things, like a queer person did not make the survey. I'm like "what am I getting into?"

In addition to being able to openly talk with her therapist, Kara's experiences with queer-affirming health practitioners illustrates how the acknowledgment and welcoming of LGBTQ+ identities and experiences can influence help-seeking and support in a positive way.

Summary of Chapter

In this chapter I discussed the findings of the interviews and survey responses regarding how participants perceived articulations of sexual violence in media resources and how these

articulations shaped their own experiences. I identified three themes in the data, including finding resources for connection, dominant narratives of sexual violence in Western culture, and relationships after sexual violence. Each of these themes explored the resources used by participants and how the articulations of sexual violence embedded in those articulation shaped both their sensemaking and relationships. In the next chapter, I will further explore participants' perceptions about resources and develop best practices that can be shared with entities that create resources for LGBTQ+ students.

CHAPTER V. FINDINGS II

Best Practices For LGBTQ+ Sexual Violence Resources

The previous chapter demonstrated the importance of both sexual violence articulations in interactive media resources as well as the influence that these articulations have on sensemaking and healing. Chapter 4 explored how the resources that participants accessed on campus centered cisnormative/ heteronormative perspectives, reinforced myths and misrepresentations of sexually violent situations, and excused alternative narratives and experiences. Chapter 4 also explored how interactive media resources participants used supplanted dominant perspectives and narratives with alternative representations and provided spaces for connection that were easy to access. Based on the resources that participants used, or refrained from using, this chapter offers the following recommendations for best practices when developing materials for LGBTQ+ individuals who have experienced sexual violence.

The final part of the interviews with participants centered on a discussion of best practices for entities that create resources for LGBTQ+ students (see Appendix C). This discussion included questions about what participants recommended for creators of resources, characteristics that the resources should include/exclude, and how resources can meet the needs of LGBTQ+ students. As a feminist participatory action research project, my goal was to take the findings from my interviews—the lived experiences of participants—and transform them into praxis by compiling and then distributing a list of best practices for LGBTQ+ sexual violence resources. Like in Chapter 4, I used Braun and Clark's thematic analysis framework to analyze the interview transcripts pertaining to best practices. This chapter overviews the broader themes, or recommendations, that I identified within the participants' interviews that center the ideas of personal experience and narrative agency, inclusivity, diversity, and accessibility. Specifically,

these recommendations include: Attend to the diversity of LGBTQ+ identities, embrace the diversity of sexual violence and healing, and create easily accessible and inclusive resources. Within each of these broader recommendations, I highlight best practices that resources can incorporate to achieve this recommendation. At the end of this chapter, I include a table with best practices, their definitions, and examples of what this best practice might look like when applied (Table 1 shows the summary of best practices discussed).

Attend to the Diversity of LGBTQ+ Identities

Participants' responses in Chapter 4 demonstrated that interactive media resources were useful when they included articulations about individuals' lived experiences but also articulated the commonalities and differences among experiences. These commonalities were important because they allowed participants to understand that they were not alone in their experiences as well as enabled them to learn about alternative narratives of sexual violence, but alternative narratives of LGBTQ+ people. Further, these differences were important because they reinforced that a universal experience of sexual violence does not exist, which challenges the hegemonic conceptualization of the perfect rape that mainstream media perpetuated. Participants recommended that LGBTQ+-identifying and/or LGBTQ+-affirming individuals and/or organizations should have a primary role in creating sexual violence resources for LGBTQ+ students.

As discussed in Chapter 2, NRT assumes that to understand how a phenomenon affects individuals and/or groups, we must privilege the voices of those who have experienced that phenomenon and/or who have access to a shared system of meaning that allows them to speak to a phenomenon. This notion applies to sexual violence for LGBTQ+ students. The LGBTQ+ community is a community of diversity, intersectionality, and complexity. When an LGBTQ+

student experiences sexual violence and seeks out resources, the resources that they can access should not disregard this diversity, intersectionality, and complexity. Therefore, individuals who develop resources should identify as LGBTQ+ or be an ally that understands how one's identity can influence their sensemaking experience. For instance, Spencer explained that "I think it would be beneficial if a lot of the people involved in that conversation were queer themselves, because I mean, who's going to know how to handle it better than an actual queer person." Morgan stated:

> An ideal resource would be something that was just for survivors of sexual assault to talk about our own experiences, separate from everybody else. Just being able to talk to someone that has experienced it and knows what it feels like and to try to regain yourself afterwards. It's always so much better talking to someone that knows, because you feel like you're being heard and that you're not crazy for feeling this way when you talk to people who haven't gone through that kind of experience.

Brooke recommended that campuses have support groups so that individuals can talk about their experiences:

> Several people have actually said that a support group would be amazing here. If you don't have to register, you can just go and talk with people who have gone through things….Have a group session where people can talk about what happened—that could also be kind of like group therapy. Being able to talk about [your experience(s)] with other survivors might be helpful as well.

The request for support groups also resonates with some participants desire for connection and a space to safely speak about their experiences. Based on the above recommendations, it is important that resources center the agency of those who are situated within a sociocultural space

and who understand the the complexity of one's identity and marginalized social situatedness.

Research has shown that LGBTQ+ students experience sexual violence at alarming rates, and yet, a significant number of resources exclude LGBTQ+-centered experiences and perspectives. Emery mentioned the need for intersectional resources and the importance of not speaking for others:

> It's really hard to speak on an experience a person might have if you are not a part of that community. I can't speak for people who are Black or Latino or Native American. I can't speak for the experiences that men go through. I just fundamentally, do not understand if—even if it is from a place of goodwill— I don't know if [resources] could be properly done if it is not specifically for the community from the community.

As Emery said, even if colleges and/or organizations create resources with the best intentions and do not aim to purposely exclude, they still cannot speak to the experiences of someone located beyond their social situatedness. With that idea in mind, participants noted that a similar social situatedness fostered connections among LGBTQ+ individuals via interactive media that influenced their sensemaking in a positive way. Thus, resources could benefit LGBTQ+ students more if they were transformed in a way that embraced the diversity of their LGBTQ+ social situatedness rather than urging LGBTQ+ students to attempt to align their experience with that of the dominant heteronormative narrative.

Participants also suggested the need for campus entities—even if they are do not have LGBTQ+ staff or practitioners—to help students find LGBTQ+-affirming sources of support off campus. For instance, Sammie stated:

> Helping students find therapists in the area that are not just the student campus counseling because campus counseling is broken in more ways that we can get into in

this time. And they're usually so backed up that it doesn't matter in the first place.

Kara offered the following practice:

> Even just like saying somewhere on a resource page ‘we're LGBTQ+ affirming. I’m at another place in my life where I don't want to see a doctor, I want to see a therapist, I want to go to a resource. I don't necessarily try to hide my queer identity, but I also don't volunteer information about it because sometimes it's just seems too much when you're already like dealing with something else.

Even if campuses are unable to provide the resources LGBTQ+ students need, they can still guide LGBTQ+ students somewhere that will help.

Fear of social stigmas or being blamed can discourage LGBTQ+ students from seeking help from formal support services and even sources of informal support. However, resources that resonate with LGBTQ+ experiences and are visibly inclusive can be another way that LGBTQ+ receive support.

Embrace the Diversity of Sexually Violent Experiences and Healing

As I discuss in previous chapters, even though a universal sexually violent experience does not exist, many resources do not reflect the nuanced nature of this systemic problem. Thus, participants offered recommendations for how resources can be transformed in order to attend to the diversity of identities and perspectives that exist.

Some participants recommended that resources should not use restrictive and exclusionary definitions and conceptualizations of sexual violence that reinforce hegemonic narratives. For instance, Sutton expressed that “they should really take into account the diversity of these situations” and talk about the need for broader definitions of sexual violence. Sutton also stated that “It doesn't fit a certain definition. I've always been a strong advocate of like having a

broad definition [of sexual violence] because if you get it too narrow then it's just more repressive." Dakota's recommendation echoed a similar sentiment: "Instead of just creating the single narrative, [resources should] acknowledge the fact that it is a whole spectrum. It's not just binary." Chapter 4 shed light on participants' perceptions that many sexual violence resources on their respective campuses centered heteronormative/ cisgender experiences and relationships. Therefore, Kara recommended that resources go beyond this exclusionary view:

> Any acknowledgement that this happens to queer people would be great, or just like when they like share survivor stories, I feel like—and obviously there's nothing wrong with sharing these types of stories—but I feel like anytime you read like sexual or other violence stories it's like "young female was perpetrated by male." I just feel like there just needs to be examples of this happening to queer people and how it impacts us. Like maybe just even an acknowledgement of the intersectionality of dealing with this [violence] and also being queer.

In addition, because sexual violence exists on a spectrum, Emery recommended that definitions and conceptualizations of sexual violence should not be limited to one type of context:

> My biggest request, I guess, would be not just focusing on when [sexual violence] happens in romantic relationships, but highlighting the fact that it can happen in all sorts of relationships. And how it can look different than what is traditionally presented because not everyone is cis-het.

Kendall also recommended that resources that do portray interpersonal violence, whether romantic or otherwise, be balanced in their representation: "Don't glorify the unhealthy, but don't just focus on the healthy. You need to showcase them both the same way that you showcase straight relationships." Based on the insights and recommendations offered by participants,

resources could be more effective if the articulations of sexual violence within did not adhere to dominant sexual violence narratives (e.g., sexual violence only occurs between a heterosexual man and woman; sexual violence only occurs between strangers; interpersonal violence can only be in romantic relationships).

Some participants also recommended that campus resources should be more comprehensive relative to the notion of consent. Spencer talked about how misunderstandings often surround consent and voiced that "Consent isn't just agreeing; it's wanting it. That's something that needs to be screamed." Dakota recommended one way that campuses might further explain what consent means, particularly in relation to LGBTQ+ students

> You know how, during like freshman orientation, they have the discussion about consent? Maybe having something in there that for survivors of sexual violence or any kind of violence, and then also having something for specific like LGBTQ+ violence, are also just readily available. And talking about it, I think that that would really help just proving that there are people who are willing to listen.

Participants also recommended that resources should give attention to the aftermath of a sexually violent experience and the idea that healing is ongoing. For example, Dakota talked about how resources could diversely articulate sexual violence:

> The biggest thing that would have helped me be able to feel better about what happened, and be able to get move forward with recovery, would have been to actually just acknowledge the fact that there's not just one way about how it goes. There are multiple different ways. There are different progressions, and usually violence isn't just some random person in the street a lot of time. It's somebody that you know, and it's just acknowledging the fact that some people are afraid all the time for their safety, even with

> people that they trust, because those people that they trust can turn into somebody who is violent. So, most of these resources need to be identity-specific and go into all of the different [experiences].

Resources should also reflect that each experience is unique and individuals process and heal on their own time. For instance, Kara stated:

> Anything like assuming about how the right or wrong way to process it or like right or wrong reactions. I feel like everyone processes things differently, and one of the resources I found—because I was having like a weird reaction to it and I dealt with it—but one of the resources I found was like "this is a somewhat common reaction that few people talk about" and I was like "oh my gosh, this is exactly how I processed it." Just stuff like that, like not assuming people are doing things right or wrong or on the right or wrong timeline or dealing with it in the right or wrong way.

These exemplars show that there is not a universal way to process or recover from sexual violence, and as such, resources should reflect that individuals can navigate their processing and recovery on their own terms. Resources should not sustain dominant narratives of sexual violence, but rather, support individuals' subjective and unique healing journeys.

In addition to diversifying the representation of LGBTQ+ identities and relationships, some participants had recommendations about the specific messaging and tone of resources. For instance, Sammie recommended that resources also attend to emotional healing and moving forward:

> I guess I almost would prefer like you know these materials be a little bit more philosophical and a little bit deeper, and you know, less about "make sure you get tested for STDs" and "protect yourself and be vigilant" and stuff like that. [The campus

> resources were] either very victim blaming or didn't address the actual realities of what happened. There's plenty of things about preventing assault that doesn't actually prevent assault, but then there's very little about “what do I do emotionally now?” Especially as someone who's queer, especially as someone who's racialized, especially as someone who's disabled autistic. It would be great if there were more to these resources. Like pamphlets, like there's plenty of pamphlets that can be made in the world. Why wasn’t there a pamphlet for me?

Brooke spoke about the importance of a resource’s tone and how it shouldn’t make light of the situation even if that resource is designed to attract people to the event:

> I don't mind if it’s a flyer, but when it's talking about something important a lot of the time it gets portrayed as like bubbly and fun and while they're trying be optimistic; it’s not a super serious kind of look. That kind of turns me away from it because I want to have a serious space to talk about what I need to talk about or get the resources I need. So just not being like super peppy like “Come talk about your really hard experiences and get a free Cookie!” like “let's have fun.” It's good to be positive and try to bring up people's moods, but that's not always the way to go about it.

Dakota also recommended “material that focuses on the individual, rather than having that sort of detachment feeling like with statistics or just repetitive information. That would be really, really helpful.” However, it is almost important to note that individuals have different preferences for their resources and the messages they contain. For instance, Kara discussed how she prefers statistics:

> Sharing statistics about this happening to queer people would be helpful. I don't know if that's helpful for everyone, I’m just a big data person, and I feel like you just don't even

> really hear about this that much in the queer community.

These exemplars reinforce that there is not one perfect resource, but perhaps a diversity of resources is best. Dakota further reflected about why providing inclusive resources is so important to the well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals:

> They don't reach out to other people and they don't reach out to other resources because they're not getting the help that they need for their specific thing. I think that being able to diversify [resources] to be accepting of LGBTQ+ would help those individuals be able to get what they need.

Kendall also touched on the broader implications that inclusive resources can have on the LGBTQ+ community:

> I think that it's important for people, especially young people, to know that it is okay to be themselves. It is not disgusting, it is not gross, it is not wrong, and I believe that that should be included in all resources.

The recommendations offered above demonstrate the necessity of resources that are both easy to locate as well as welcoming of all identities. As both existing literature as well as the Chapter 4 articulates, a universal sexually violence experience does not exist, nor does a universal approach to healing. Therefore, there should be an abundance of diverse resources to meet the sensemaking needs of different people.

Easily Accessible Resources

As Norwood (2012) suggested, LGBTQ+ individuals who have experienced sexual violence need access to inclusive and competent resources, meaning that not only should these resources provide support about the event itself, but also consider the implications of stigmatization and discrimination on sensemaking.

Some participants recommended that campuses should be more communicative about the resources that are available for LGBTQ+ students should they ever need them. Some participants talked about how LGBTQ+ students bear the responsibility of locating resources after a sexually violent experience. For instance, Sutton stated that "[Resources] should be easier to access…I feel like there should just be a way that it would be a little easier to find." Dakota also voiced that "I think that a lot of people who identify as LGBTQ+ struggle to find the resources that they need, and therefore, they try to help themselves." Kevin also recommended that when resources refer to LGBTQ+ sexual violence, they do so in a more inclusive and representative way:

> "A tab on the website about the support that they can offer towards LGBTQ+ persons. So being upfront about it, you know? Upfront when mentioning it. It's like that's all you got to do— not just make us a bullet point."

Dakota also recommended that universities should draw more attention to resources that LGBTQ+ students can access:

> We already know that the counseling center is there, and all these resources for mental health are starting to become more prominent, which is a good thing. I completely agree that that should be a thing, but I think that we can expand on that by providing more resources for LGBTQ+ people as well.

Based on these insights, campuses not only need to have resources for LGBTQ+ students, but campuses need make efforts to further promote the resources that exist—even if those resources are not located on campus. For instance, Kara voiced that it could make a significant different for LGBTQ+ students if campuses provided information about where they can access LGBTQ+-affirming resources:

> Just like acknowledging queer-friendly resources would be good as well. I found that

> these kinds of resources make me feel so much better—when like queer-specific places like have resources, I don't know why, it's just like "Okay, these people are safe and they get it.

In the event that campuses cannot provide these identity-specific resources and/or sufficiently support students for reasons such as available funding, insufficient staff, and/or lack of expertise, these institutions can still make efforts to direct students to possible resources off campus.

Some participants also recommended that they need access to resources that use inclusive language as to not to exclude anyone and their experiences. For instance, Emery discussed how the use of "they" would enable resources to resonate with more people: "I would go with like super gender inclusive word choices. I personally am a huge fan of singular 'they' in cases when you don't know how someone identifies. Forget the 'he,' forget the 'she,' just go with 'they.'" Kendall also mentioned the importance of having access to resources that use both gender inclusive pronouns as well as images: "My opinion is that when you talk about a healthy relationship, you should use gender-inclusive terms. And then also, when you use pictures, you shouldn't just include heterosexual people." Morgan similarly echoed, "For the majority of people, it is a woman being sexually assaulted by a man. That is very over saturated in the media and that's mostly what gets focused on." Some participants also recommended that the resources available for LGBTQ+ students—whether text-based on in-person services— should affirm all identities and not treat heteronormativity as the norm. For instance, Kara strongly recommended how resources can increase inclusiveness:

> Affirming care or resources. Just not like saying it, but also like training staff in not assuming cis-het [cisgender-heteronormative] things about me. For example, I was just at the OBGYN and she asked me "do you have any immediate risk of sperm exposure?"

> and I was like, “I love the way you asked that.” Sometimes you go to the doctor and they're like “do you have a boyfriend?” So just training counselors to not assume everyone is cis and het because it's not helpful to queer people. At least use gender neutral language and not assuming people are straight.

Spencer further emphasized the need for LGBTQ+ individuals to have access to resources that attend to different types of identities:

> There’s an overall lack of resources and mentioning of asexuality and aromaticism as a whole. It needs to be mentioned that different types of relationships do exist. You're allowed to have a romantic relationship that isn't sexual. You are allowed to not want a relationship at all; you know, not because of a certain person, but just because you don't have any interest in one with anybody. It's okay to just have relationships that don't fit the stereotypical norms.

Spencer continued:

> I think it's important to bring up the binary of gender and sexuality as a whole. Even people who aren't asexual, but people who maybe are like bisexual, pansexual, or any other identity—there is a binary. Nothing is set in stone just because you carry a label; it doesn't mean that you are identical to somebody else who might carry the same label. But I think that's just really important for people to acknowledge binaries.

Morgan recommended how an online resource might be organized so that LGBTQ+ individuals can easily access information:

> You've got your tabs at the top and it's like ‘have you been assaulted by a man?’ ‘a woman?’ ‘Somebody who's nonbinary?’. Like kind of having different kinds of resources for those different feelings or like when you open up the page, selecting how you identify

and then going into [a resource] that can be a more personalized experience for you. Kevin also recommended that an online resource or pamphlet might include specific messaging that can make it feel for accessible for a diversity of identities: "An ideal header, maybe like 'sexual violence resources for you'. Something that isn't exclusionary." As Chapter 4 showed, navigating the aftermath of sexual violence—especially as an LGBTQ+ person who is situated in a marginalized social position—can be isolating and detrimental to one's health and wellbeing. (Re)sources of support that reinforce dominant ideas of sexual violence as well as marginalize alternative identities of relationships can be all the more damaging to LGBTQ+ individuals as they try to make sense of their experience. However, as the participants have drawn on their own experiences with resources to recommend how sexual violence resources can be more accessible and thus better aid in this sensemaking and healing process.

Table 1. Best Practices for LGBTQ+ Sexual Violence Resources

Practice	Definition	Example
LGBTQ+ Identifying and Affirming Staff	Staff who are trauma-informed and understand the complexity of LGBTQ+ identities	Universities, particularly offices/divisions that provide support for sexual violence, can employ an LGBTQ+ person who has expertise in this area. Alternatively, universities can collaborate with local/regional LGBTQ+ organizations that can be a source of external support.
Provide Referrals to LGBTQ+ Resources	Help LGBTQ+ students find identity-specific support services if the institution cannot provide them	In the event that universities do not have the resources to offer services for the needs of LGBTQ+ students, they can cultivate a list that will find this identity-specific support.
Attend to Intersectionality	Acknowledge and attend to the diverse identities, cultures, backgrounds, and social situatedness of LGBTQ+ students	Resources for LGBTQ+ students should not be written from a heteronormative/ cisnormative perspective.

LGBTQ+ Support Groups	Host support groups for LGBTQ+ students who have experienced sexual violence	Universities can offer support groups for LGBTQ+ students that are facilitated by trained experts in LGBTQ+ trauma
Broader Definitions of Sexual Violence	Restrictive definitions of sexual violence can exclude experiences that don't fit within these confines.	Universities can create resources that do not include restrictive definitions of sexual violence (i.e., rape occurs with vaginal penetration).
Diverse Survivor Stories	When resources include survivor stories, they should not all include the "male/man and female/woman" binary. They should also acknowledge the various contexts in which this violence can occur.	Universities can create resources that include the stories of survivors from a diversity of backgrounds and identities, such as LGBTQ+ individuals and POC. These resources can also attend to the spectrum of sexual violence situations, like same-sex violence.
Acknowledge that Healing after Sexual Violence has no Timeline	Those affected by sexual violence will heal at their own pace. The might also experiences steps of moving forward and moving backwards on their healing journey.	Resources can include messages which reinforce that healing is an ongoing and highly personal process. For instance, resources should not indicate that any healing milestones should occur within a specific time period.
Easy to Access	Resources—whether available on campus or virtually—should be easy for participants to locate and use on their own terms.	Universities can advertise information about where LGBTQ+ students can find sexual violence resources. For instance, they can post information on campus bulletin boards or on social media so that students know where to locate a resource.
Thoughtful Messaging	Resources should take the content and tone of their messages into consideration as to not make light of a complex topic.	Those who are creating resources on campuses should consider their target audience and the tone they want to set for the resource. For instance, if the resource is a flyer for a support group where LGBTQ+ students will be talking about their

		experiences, a flyer with a more serious tone might appear more credible.

Summary of Chapter

This chapter offered recommendations for best practices when developing materials for LGBTQ+ individuals who have experienced sexual violence. Broadly speaking, each of these recommendations fell into one of the following three categories: Attend to the diversity of LGBTQ+ identities, embrace the diversity of sexual violence and healing, and easily accessible and inclusive resources. Entities that create sexual violence resources can implement these practices in order to develop resources that are inclusive, diverse, and meet the unique and identity-specific needs of LGBTQ+ students.

CHAPTER VI. DISCUSSION

As we delve into the final chapter of this dissertation, the project thus far has shed light on the complex problem of LGBTQ+ sexual violence in higher education. Given their marginalized social position, LGBTQ+ students may hesitate to seek out and/or use formal and/or face-to-face support resources for fear of rejection and social stigma (Messinger & Koon-Magnin, 2019). However, interactive media resources—given their potential for identity protection and user-generated nature—offered another space for LGBTQ+ individuals to find help and support.

Therefore, in Chapter1 and Chapter 2 of this dissertation project, I presented the need for extended research on the interactive media resources (e.g., blogs, forums, social networking sites and/or apps) that LGBTQ+ students used after a sexually violent experience. While much research exists relative to campus sexual violence and prevention efforts, limited work exists that attends to the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and how they navigated their healing journey and sensemaking. To address this limitation, Chapter 3 explains how I conducted in-depth interviews and open-ended surveys with LGBTQ+ individuals who experienced sexual violence during their time in higher education. In Chapter 4, I used a collaboration of a CIFC-guided articulation, normative rhetorical theory, and social support to examine the lived experiences of participants regarding the resources they used after their experience with sexual violence. This examination revealed the need for resources to offer connection and support in the aftermath of sexual violence, disarticulate and re-articulate hegemonic sexual violence discourses that exclude alterative narratives, and address the complicatedness of relationships after following sexual violence. To help attend to this need, Chapter 5 offered best practices that creators of resources can use to make their resources more accessible and diverse.

In the current chapter, I will first discuss the findings of this project previously presented in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 by answering each of my research questions and discussing their implications. Second, I will discuss the broader implications of this project for both communication theory and praxis. Finally, I will present the limitations and future directions for this project before concluding.

Research Question 1

How do LGBTQ+ students who have experienced sexual violence use interactive media resources to make sense of their experiences?

The findings of the current project support existing literature that indicated LGBTQ+ students encounter barriers to help seeking and formal/informal support as a result of their alternative identities and experiences; these barriers included fear of exposing their identity, fear of rejection, and fear of blame and/or judgment (Gill, 2018; Kaukinen, 2017; Messinger & Koon-Magnin, 2019; Perez & Hussey, 2014; Ullman & Filipas, 2001). To bypass these barriers, the LGBTQ+ students interviewed in this project spoke about how they chose to use interactive media resources like forums, blogs, and other social networking platforms to gain access to articulations of sexual violence that did not reinforce heteronormativity/ cisnormativity.

Through interactive media, participants had the opportunity to locate informal support from other LGBTQ+ individuals who experienced sexual violence by communicating with them directly (e.g., messaging one another) and indirectly (e.g., reading over stories/comments posted on social media without direct engagement). This direct and indirect support and engagement exposed participants to counterhegemonic narratives of sexual violence that did not treat their LGBTQ+ identity as a mutually exclusive aspect of themselves and thus supports work by Campbell and Wright (2002). Specifically, Campbell and Wright (2002) posited that sources of

social support can be dissatisfying if they do not attend to an individual's stigmatized identity. The current project attests to this claim about the relationship between identity and satisfaction with the support from resources. Because the support that LGBTQ+ individuals received via interactive media took the complexity of their stigmatized identities into account, they were better able to make sense of their experience.

Interactive media also helped LGBTQ+ individuals navigate feelings of isolation that often coincides with both the aftermath of sexual violence as well as a marginalized social position (Yang, 2018). Helgeson and Gottlieb (2000) argued that connecting with other people who experienced similar trauma can reduce these feelings of isolation. The current project supports this existing research; for instance, participants explained how the connections they made via interactive media helped them feel less alone. Because dominant articulations of sexual violence do not recognize the diversity of sexual violence situations, participants spoke about feeling excluded and feeling that their experience did not warrant support. However, interactive media offered a space where individuals could share and/or consume these alternative narratives and thus disarticulate the misrepresentation that sexually violent experiences must appear a certain way.

Research Question 2a

How does the content of interactive media resources shape LGBTQ+ students' understanding of their experiences?

Research Question 2b

What do LGBTQ+ students perceive are the strengths and/or weaknesses of the content in those media?

The findings of this project demonstrate that the content of media—particularly the

representation of that content—shapes how LGBTQ+ students understand their experiences. The findings support existing literature which argues that oppressive articulations of sexual violence remain embedded in social institutions (Pollino, 2020; Projansky, 2001). Participants explained that the resources that they encountered on their respective campuses—such as through the counseling/ health centers and/or via sexual violence awareness materials— centered heteronormative/ cisgender conceptualizations of sexual violence. Given that higher educational institutions reflect and are heavily informed by broader social structures, it is not surprising that dominant discourses of sexual violence manifested in the resources provided.

The findings also showed the marked difference between sexual violence representations in traditional media and interactive media. The findings support existing media research that indicated that interactive media does not have the same constraints as other social institutions given its individualized nature and emphasis on user-generated content as opposed to institution-generated content (Atkinson, 2023; Morrison et al., 2021). For instance, the content from interactive media resources emphasized the narrative agency of LGBTQ+ individuals who experienced sexual violence. Through this narrative agency, LGBTQ+ individuals who experienced sexual violence had the opportunity to articulate their experiences—experiences which are often ignored in favor of dominant, oppressive discourses—and generate content that, in turn, disarticulated these dominant discourses. These re-articulations of sexual violence situations disrupted some of the barriers that barred LGBTQ+ individuals from sensemaking. When resources only included content of heteronormative/ cisgender encounters alongside constrictive conceptualizations of what entails a sexually violent experience, those resources exclude all of the experiences that do not align with those conceptualizations. However, the content that participants engaged with via interactive media did not reinforce those barriers to

support; instead, they moved beyond dominant discourses and showed the diversity of sexual violence. The content that participants in this study found dispelled misconceptions such as sexual violence only occurs between a man and a woman and only includes vaginal penetration.

Research Question 3

How do the media resources that LGBTQ+ students use shape their interactions with other people?

Based on the findings, both traditional and interactive media had implications for the interactions between LGBTQ+ students and other people in a variety of different relational contexts, such as in romantic relationships, relationships with family and friends, and relationships in both higher education and health contexts. Broadly speaking, participants contended that the interactive media resources that focused on what comes after sexual violence shaped their interactions with other people the most because it helped them to better articulate their experiences. In addition, traditional media representations had more significant implications on the reactions that other people had toward their experience. As Easteal et al. (2015) argued, traditional media produces a space that strengthens dominant power relations and exposes the public to experiences and situations that exist beyond the boundaries of their own lives. It is through this exposure, or "secondhand reality" that tradition media shapes people's perceptions and beliefs regarding sexual violence (Easteal et al., 2015, p. 104). Consequently, traditional media often reinforces rape myths that shift accountability to victims/survivors, deems that most accusations of sexual violence are false, and that rape can only occur between strangers (Elmore, 2021; Garland & Bennett, 2017; Pica et al., 2017). Thus, these representations that people consume via traditional media can influence their reactions.

In romantic contexts, interactive media resources helped individuals navigate

relationships after a sexually violent experience. These resources explored behaviors that some people who experienced sexual violence exhibited, for instance, self-sabotaging their relationships because they needed to feel in control. Interactive media resources gave attention to aspects of the healing journey that traditional resources do not encompass. For instance, participants found that resources they found outside of interactive media lacked information about disclosing a sexually violent experience to future sexual partners. Relatedly, these resources also included limited, if any, information on how to both navigate and talk about post-traumatic reactions to sexual encounters. Even though traditional resources did not include this much-needed information, interactive media spaces allowed LGBTQ+ individuals to share content about their experiences with disclosure and sexual relations after sexual violence. Interactive media also helped some participants gain an understanding about what toxic behaviors looked like in same-sex relationships by enabling people to articulate their experiences in these situations.

Interactive media resources also shaped LGBTQ+ students' interactions with their family members and/or friends. Existing research indicated that family and friends comprise part of a person's informal support network. In the case of LGBTQ+ sexual violence, this informal support network is particularly important because those who disclose their sexually violent experience to a formal source of support have an increased risk of receiving a negative reaction compared to those who disclose to informal sources of support (Messinger & Koon-Magnin, 2019; Ullman & Filipas, 2001). Despite this research, the findings of the current project shows that LGBTQ+ students can receive both positive and negative reactions to their disclosure from informal sources of support.

Based on the experiences articulated by participants in this project, it appears that

representations of LGBTQ+ sexual violence affect relationships with family and friends. As an exemplar, Dakota spoke about how traditional media often represents LGBTQ+ people who experience sexual violence as dirty. Dakota explained that when she disclosed her experience to her mother, her mother responded in much the same way as media depictions: she equated Dakota's experience with being dirty. This reaction was embedded with the hegemonic articulation that sexual violence makes someone unclean or disgraced, and as such, it proved detrimental to Dakota's relationships because she internalized her experience and isolated herself from other people in her life. Therefore, this dissertation supports existing research about media representations of sexual violence, particularly that the way that these prominent institutions articulate social issues seriously affects how the public perceives and responds to those issues (Benedict, 1992; Nettleton, 2011; DeLuca, 1999; Pollino, 2020).

This dissertation shows the implications that media articulations of sexual violence have on people's responses when they are confronted with this issue, either publicly (e.g., via the news or on a television drama) or privately (e.g., when someone discloses their experience to them). Whereas negative reactions to the exposure of sexual violence situations in the public sphere serve to sustain this problem at the broader cultural level, negative reactions in the private sphere during a sexual violence disclosure have remarkable implications at the interpersonal level. Not only can a negative reaction to sexual violence harm the relationship between the person who disclosed and the person who was disclosed to, but as witnessed in Dakota's lived experience, this reaction harmed her interpersonal relationships with people beyond that interaction. Further, this lack of support and following isolation put Dakota at an increased risk of PTSD as well as decreased health and wellbeing (Uchino, 2006; Ullman & Filipas, 2001; Vangelisti, 2009; Yang, 2018). Based on these implications, it is critically important that we

continue to critique, resist, and transform the way that sexual violence is talked about at both the cultural and interpersonal level because these articulations do not just affect one person.

The findings support existing research about social support and computer-mediated communication, specifically that computer-mediated contexts provide a space for people from stigmatized communities to share information and connect with others without exposing their identities unless they choose to do so (Rains et al., 2015; Yang, 2018). The findings showed how media platforms allowed LGBTQ+ individuals to connect with other people who experienced the intersection of sexual violence and a marginalized social position. While these connections initially began on interactive media, in some instances participants were able to shift this relationship from the virtual to face-to-face. In other words, interactive media provided LGBTQ+ students with a space to find information about sexual violence and/or engage in relationships. For some participants, these relationships even experienced a transition in that they began in a computer-mediated context and moved to offline communication. For instance, one participant talked about how they met people on a Discord server and eventually met up with them on campus. The findings contribute to our understanding of trauma and the healing journeys that those who experience sexual violence navigate. For some participants, at the beginning of their healing journeys they were only seeking information for sensemaking and did not want to engage with other people regarding their experience. However, as this sensemaking progressed, they desired that engagement—not necessarily face-to-face, but through computer mediated communication. However, it is important to reiterate that healing does not always progress linearly. One participant spoke about how they became to engage with other people on Reddit but sometimes returned to seek information without engagement at times when they experienced setbacks in their healing.

The findings of this project also support existing research regarding the significance of sexual violence representations by traditional media, specifically that misrepresentations of sexual violence (e.g., stereotypes, stigmas, shaming and blaming those affected) negatively affect public perception of the problem (Benedict, 1992; Easteal et al., 2015; Elmore et al., 2021; Garland & Bennett, 2017; Katz & McGuire, 2018; Lykke, 2016; Marine, 2017; Morrison et al., 2021; Pollino, 2020; Projansky, 2001). As CIFC assumes, the findings demonstrate that the public and private spheres are not mutually exclusive domains, and as such, the articulations that circulate within the public sphere via traditional media institutions directly affect the relations between LGBTQ+ individuals and their families/ friends in the private sphere (Critchley & Marchart, 2004; Moore, 2017; Hall 1985). The findings of this project revealed that traditional media representations of the LGBTQ+ community as well as the issue of sexual violence influenced how some participants' family members responded to their disclosure. In some cases, participants received support, but it was not helpful because it was informed by oppressive discourses. For instance, some family members perpetuated discourses of blame, judgement, and even the inability to recover like those which are often present within traditional media. As a result of this reaction and perceived lack of support, some participants developed a negative view of themselves as a result of their experience and proceeded to distance themselves from their friends, peers, and family members. In some cases, participants chose not to disclose their experience to family and/or friends because they feared a possible unsupportive reaction which constitutes another barrier to support as discussed by Potter et al. (2012).

Interactive media also had implications for the relationships of LGBTQ+ students in higher education and health contexts. For instance, the information and engagement that LGBTQ+ students received on interactive media motivated some participants to become

involved with sexual violence advocacy on their campuses and become involved with larger social movements against sexual violence. Interactive media resources also helped participants to talk with their therapists and better articulate their experiences and feelings, as well as understanding certain trauma responses that they were experiencing.

Research Question 4a

What discourses regarding sexual violence, gender, and/or sexuality do the resources include or exclude?

Research Question 4b

What are the implications of these chosen discourses of LGBTQ+ students?

As made clear throughout this dissertation, social institutions and the resources they provide privilege heteronormativity and cisnormativity and neglect identities and experiences that fall outside of the accepted and expected space such as same-sex sexual violence, sexual violence that does not include vaginal/anal penetration, and/or recurring sexually violent experiences. Therefore, this project sought to combat the symbolic annihilation of LGBTQ+ perspectives and experiences within the area of sexual violence research and diversify representations of this problem.

By attending to these alternative narratives in our research, we can better understand the most effective ways to support LGBTQ+ individuals who experience sexual violence. As existing research has mentioned, when seeking help after sexual violence LGBTQ+ students have an increased risk of resources causing secondary victimization by devaluing their identity and experience; this devaluing can, in turn, adversely affect the healing process (Ullman & Filipas, 2001). For instance, resources that only reinforced hegemonic narratives of sexual violence prevented some individuals in this project from recognizing that their experience was

sexual violence. Conversely, diverse and inclusive resources discovered via interactive media allowed some participants to understand that what they experienced was sexual violence and start their sensemaking.

Barriers to healing, including fear of judgment, identity exposure, and/or fear of being denied help, can harm a student's health—both physical and mental—their relationships, as well as their performance in classes and other aspects of their lives (Messinger & Koon-Magnin, 2019; Perez & Hussey, 2014). However, we can dismantle some of these barriers by representing sexual violence in ways that center, not reject, alterative narratives.

Implications for the Field

The findings of this dissertation have several implications for the field of communication. First, this project meets the call from Manning et al. (2020) mentioned in Chapter 1 of this project which argued that the communication discipline needs to diversify its scholarship in ways that examine the complexities of gender, sexuality, and identity. This dissertation addresses an important gap in interpersonal communication research regarding the limited presence of alternative narratives and experiences and their implications on those affected. As discussed above, this project asked LGBTQ+ students who experienced sexual violence to reflect on their lived experiences regarding their use of interactive media in order to better understand the different discourses that circulate within resources and the effect of these discourses on their sensemaking. For example, the subtheme of personal experiences and perspectives demonstrated how interactive media was used to combat the oppressive articulations of sexual violence that often render the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals invisible. By having a space to engage with diverse articulations of sexual violence that attended the intersectional nature of one's gender, sexuality, and identity, participants were able to make sense of their experiences. Most

importantly, these diverse articulations of sexually violent experiences came from LGBTQ+ people who experienced this violence themselves and thus could personally attest to how they navigated their healing (Campbell & Wright, 2002; Goldsmith, 2017). Therefore, this project not only sheds light on how the complexity of one's gender, sexuality, and identity shaped their sensemaking and their navigation of the healing process, but also the need for resources to critically consider these aspects of a person.

Second, this dissertation contributes to the critical turn taken by several scholars in interpersonal communication research (Manning & Denker, 2015; Manning & Kunkel, 2015; Manning et al., 2020; Moore, 2017; Moore & Manning, 2019; Sotirin & Ellingson, 2018; Suter, 2016; Suter & Norwood, 2017). The critical approach taken in this project shows how interpersonal communication theory can be used to critique, resist, and transform the status quo. For instance, this dissertation explored how people challenged hegemonic articulations of sexual violence that centered heteronormativity and cisnormativity and used their own experiences to re-articulate this issue in a diverse and inclusive way. For instance, Sammie talked about how most formal support services they sought out did not recognize their non-binary identity nor that non-binary people experience sexual violence. However, the connections they made via interactive media, particularly on Facebook, helped them find support and disarticulate the misconception that sexual violence only happens to heteronormative and cisnormative people. By critically examining LGBTQ+ students' use of interactive media alongside the discourses of sexual violence, gender, and identity embedded within these resources, this project offered a better understanding of how computer-mediated contexts functioned as an interpersonal tool for individuals to give and/or receive social support and dispel stigmas, stereotypes, and misrepresentations of LGBTQ+ sexual violence.

Third, this dissertation bridges the gap between interpersonal communication and rhetoric and demonstrates the potential of such collaborations. The predominantly siloed nature of the field can prevent researchers from understanding a topic in a comprehensive and critical way. As Moore (2017) contended, a significant portion of the interpersonal subdiscipline remains disconnected from ongoing critical dialogues in the broader communication discipline. However, this project alongside other critical projects in the field display the potential of critical approaches and how critically approach out research and praxis. By embracing critical rhetoric and interpersonal communication in this dissertation project, I was able to examine the issue of LGBTQ+ sexual violence as well as the taken-for-granted discourses embedded within the representation of this problem. I was able to talk with participants about their lived experiences and explore how both dominant and marginalized articulations of gender, sexuality, identity, and sexual violence circulated within those experiences. For instance, in the interview with Kevin he talked about how in his search for resources he explicitly looked for advice on "how you get over it?" and "when you get over it?" As Kevin articulated his experience, the myths that (1) sexual violence ends after the specific encounter and (2) that healing has a specific timeline became apparent (Pollino, 2021). Despite these misconceptions being exactly that—misconceptions—they remain a taken-for-granted aspect of dominant sexual violence discourses not because they are true, but because they are constantly repeated and reinforced within our culture. Thus, in addition to drawing on interpersonal communication theory to explore social support and sensemaking, this collaboration with rhetoric enabled me to dive deeper into this phenomenon to uncover how privileged cultural ideologies of gender, sexuality, identity, and sexual violence affect LGBTQ+ students on both individual and relational levels.

Implications for Praxis

This project has practical implications for LGBTQ+ students affected by sexual violence during their time in higher education and reinforces the need for diverse and identity-specific resources. In line with FPAR and CIFC, I used the data from this study in a transformative way by working with LGBTQ+ students to develop a list of best practices for sexual violence resources. Broadly speaking, best practices included ways to create more inclusive messaging, suggested characteristics that the materials should include or not include, and/or provided information to support services and resources that are more attuned to the needs of LGBTQ+ students. For example, best practices indicated that (1) LGBTQ+ people should be involved in the creation of resources; (2) the resources should inclusively represent what comes after a sexually violent experiences, such as navigating the healing process and seeking help; and (3) resources should represent non-cisgender/ heteronormative experiences and relationships. Once prepared for distribution via a Google Drive folder, I will digitally share the best practices developed with participants to campus entities that create resources for LGBTQ+ students. I will begin this sharing process at my current institution and expand from there. At each respective institution, I will potentially share the materials with the following places if available: LGBTQ+ and/or gender equity resource centers and offices of diversity and inclusivity.

Limitations

This project had several limitations that warrant addressing. First, 12 individuals who indicated their interest in participating in the study chose not to proceed to participation in an interview and open-ended survey. Based on existing literature regarding sexual violence against marginalized communities, I believe that the sensitive nature of this topic as well as concern over identity exposure contributed to this withdraw. In future projects, I will try to further mitigate

LGBTQ+ individuals' concerns about participation in such projects so that I might be able to include the voices of individuals from the transgender community. I will try to mitigate these concerns by collaborating with campus and/or local LGBTQ+ organizations to enhance my credibility from potential participants' perspectives.

Second, even though I reached saturation in this project, I believe that the sample size of 13 participants was a limitation given that all identities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella did not receive representation. Related to the first limitation mentioned, I suppose that my recruitment did not yield a more diverse sample because of the perceived risks of this project along with the project's potential to cause a traumatic response.

Future Directions

This dissertation project has much potential for future research and praxis. I will first discuss my next steps for this specific project followed by my ideas for how future work can respond to the prevalent issue of LGBTQ+ violence during one's time in the institution of higher education.

Next Steps for this Project

Given the timeliness of this research and its implications for LGBTQ+ students as well as higher education institutions, I have started conceptualizing next steps that will extend the work started in the current project. My proposed future project serves to translate the list of best practices developed into praxis. In the third stage of this project, I plan to conduct focus groups with LGBTQ+ students who have experienced sexual violence, LGBTQ+-identified counselors, and LGBTQ+-identified practitioners. The focus groups will provide a space for participants to create the content for a series of resources based on the best practices previously mentioned. These resources will include pamphlets, posters, and postcards which will have a QR code to a Google Drive folder where people can access digitized formats of the resources—both for

convenience and accessibility. The finalized resources would then be distributed across college campuses in the United States.

In addition, I plan to submit a book proposal stemming from my dissertation in summer 2023. Most of the existing books about campus sexual violence either center heteronormative experiences or mention LGBTQ+ sexual violence as another facet of this pervasive problem. Given the prevalence of LGBTQ+ sexual violence, this book—which will be open-access— will provide higher education administrators with the historical and cultural review of this problem as well as tangible ways that they can better support LGBTQ+ students and create an inclusive campus.

Future Research to Inclusively Represent and Respond to LGBTQ+ Violence

Media Responses. While traditional media continues to (re)produce hegemonic conceptualizations of sexual violence and stigmatized and stereotyped representations of the LGBTQ+ community, interactive media holds much potential for combatting these marginalized perspectives due to its user-generated nature. Thus, there are many opportunities for future research in this area. For instance, research can focus on the use of interactive media as a tool to combat misrepresentations of LGBTQ+ sexual violence as well as its function as social support. Further, in order to improve campus resources in accordance with the best practices developed in this project, future research can explore how often gender, sexuality, and non-traditional relationships are mentioned as well as represented in campus resources.

Institutional Responses. Given that the majority of violence resources address heteronormative experiences, institutions can use this research as a guide to create comprehensive resources and programs for a diversity of violent experiences. For example, institutions can create resources that address same-sex violence and/or resources tailored to

different sexual orientations. Institutions can also partner with local advocacy organizations to develop seminars that will educate people about campus violence, including its root causes, forms of violence that are excluded from dominant representations, and ways to create a campus culture of support to combat the isolation that may result from a violent experience.

Conclusion

As existing research indicates, the pervasive problem of LGBTQ+ sexual violence in higher education remains understudied. This project helped me to (1) gain a deeper understanding of student experiences, and (2) the role of media resources in how students make sense of these experiences and (3) translate the experiences of LGBTQ+ students into tangible support resources that campus entities can implement. Based on my research design, I do not believe that this study captured the extent of the violence that LGBTQ+ students experience during their time in higher education. I was only made aware of the experiences of individuals that chose to participate in the project. Some students may not have felt comfortable or safe disclosing their experiences, and as such, their experiences were not included. Despite these limitations, I believe that this study made a meaningful contribution to communication and feminist research, as well as in the lives of LGBTQ+ students.

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APPENDIX A. DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

The following questions ask for general information. Please circle the appropriate number or fill in the blank. You may skip any items you do not wish to answer.

1. How old are you? _____

2. How would you describe yourself?

__Single person

__Dating person

__Married person

__Separated person

__Divorced person

__Widowed person

__Prefer not to answer

3. I identify my race as:

__ Asian

__ Black/African American

__ White

__ Hispanic/Latinx

__ Native American

__ Pacific Islander

__ multi-racial please specify _____

__ an identity not listed: please specify _____

__ prefer not to disclose

4. What is your student status?

___freshman year

___sophomore year

___junior year

___senior year

___master's student

___doctoral student

___other _____

5. Are you an international student?

___Yes

___No

__ prefer not to disclose

6. Sexual Orientation (choose all that apply):

__ asexual

__ bisexual

__ gay

__ straight (heterosexual)

__ lesbian

__ pansexual

__ queer

__ questioning or unsure

__ same-gender loving

__ an identity not listed: please specify _____

__ prefer not to disclose

7. Gender Identity

__ man

__ woman

__ trans man

__ trans woman

__ non-binary

___other _____

Thank you for your participation.

APPENDIX B. SURVEY ABOUT MEDIA RESOURCES AND INTERPERSONAL INTERACTIONS

1. Did the content of media resources (i.e., videos, statistics, blogs, forums) shape how you interacted with people following your sexually violent experience? (i.e., friends, family, classmates, professors etc.).
    a. If yes, who was the interaction with? Please explain how the media resources shaped the interaction(s). For example, did the media resources influence what you talked about? Did they influence how you talked? Did you reference the resources in your conversation? Please describe as many interactions as you remember.

APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Building Rapport

1. How are you doing today?
2. Do you have any questions for me before we get started?

Interactive Media Resources

3. Why did you seek out interactive media resources following your experience?
4. What interactive media resources did you use (or refrain from using) following your experience?
    a. What were the strengths of the media resources?
    b. What were the weaknesses of the media resources?
5. Were there any marginalized identities present in the interactive media resources?
    a. If yes, what were these marginalized identities?
    b. How were these marginalized identities represented or misrepresented?
    c. Did the media resources represent the intersection of any marginalized identities?
6. Were there any marginalized identities absent from the interactive media resources?
    a. If yes, did the absence of these marginalized identities have any impact on how you understood your experience?

Best Practices for Media Resources

7. What practices would you recommend for the entities that develop interactive and/or mainstream media resources?
    a. What characteristics should these media resources include or not include? For instance, should certain content be included/excluded from the resources? Should the content be portrayed a certain way?

b. How can media resources meet the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and asexual students affected by sexual violence?

Closing

8. Is there anything else you would like to add?
9. Is there any question that I didn't ask that I should have?

APPENDIX D. SAFETY PLAN

A safety plan is designed to guide you through a crisis. As you continue through the steps, you can get help and feel safer. Keep your plan easily accessible in case you have thoughts of hurting yourself.

1. **Recognize your personal warning signs:** What thoughts, images, moods, situations, and behaviors indicate to you that a crisis may be developing? Write these down in your own words.
2. **Use your own coping strategies:** List things that you can do on your own to help you not act on urges to harm yourself.
3. **Socialize with others who may offer support as well as distraction from the crisis**: List people and social settings that may help take your mind off of difficult thoughts or feelings.
4. **Contact family members or friends who may help to resolve a crisis:** Make a list of people who are supportive and who you feel you can talk to when under stress.
5. **Contact mental health professionals or agencies:** Make a list of names, numbers and/or locations of clinicians, local emergency rooms, and crisis hotlines. Put the Lifeline number, 1-800-273-8255, into your phone.
6. **Ensure your environment is safe:** Have you thought of ways in which you might harm yourself? Work with a counselor to develop a plan to limit your access to these means.

APPENDIX E. INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent for Solo Interview

Project Title: Sexual violence in higher education: The role of media resources in how LGBTQ+ students understand their experiences

Primary Researcher: Madison Pollino is a doctoral student in the School of Media & Communication at Bowling Green State University (BGSU).

Purpose: The purpose of this project is three-fold. First, I seek to understand the role that media resources play in how LGBTQ+ understand their sexually violent experiences. Second, I want to understand how the media resources that LGBTQ+ students use following their sexually violent experiences shape their interactions with other people. Third, I want to develop best practices for sexual violence media resources in order to center the unique needs, experiences, and perspectives of LGBTQ+ students.

Benefit: The data from this study will be used to develop best practices for media resources for LGBTQ+ students who experience violence on campus. These best practices will then be shared with campus entities.

Procedure: Participation in this study consists of indicating your consent to participate and completing a brief demographic questionnaire via a secure Qualtrics link, a solo interview session via Zoom, and an open-ended survey that will also be provided through a secure Qualtrics link. If interested in participation in this study, you will complete the interest survey via a secure Qualtrics link where you will choose your preferred day and time for a solo interview. I anticipate that the solo interview will take 60-75 minutes, and the time based on the open-ended survey will vary among participants. Prior to the scheduled interviews, participants will receive a link and a password to enter the Zoom room. In the solo interview, I will ask

questions about the use of media resources following experiences with sexual violence on campus and best practices for media resources. In the open-ended survey, I will ask you to answer questions about if/how media resources shaped your interpersonal interactions following a sexually violent experience. You will also be asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire before the solo interview takes place. Since the solo interview will take place online via Zoom, participants should clear their browser and page history after the interview. Additionally, since the solo interview will take place online, you may want to participate in the interview alone in a quiet place and use a personal device in order to avoid privacy issues. At the end of the interview session, you will receive a debriefing sheet. All participants who have indicated their consent, completed the study's brief pre-interview demographic questionnaire via Qualtrics, completed an interview, and completed open-ended survey via Qualtrics will receive a $20 Starbucks Gift Card via email.

Voluntary nature: Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may decide to skip answering questions or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Deciding to participate or not will not impact any relationship you may have with your university.

Risks: Participation in this study involves the risk of triggering an emotional response. This study will include sensitive matters about media resource use following a sexual violent experience. If at any time you feel uncomfortable with a question you may decline to answer. As stated in a previous paragraph, your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may leave the study at any time. If you do experience any distress from your participation, I recommend contacting The Cocoon at (419) 373-1730 or https://thecocoon.org if you are local to Bowling Green, Ohio. If you reside outside of Ohio, the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network's

National Sexual Assault Telephone Hotline (800-656-4673) offers free services including confidential support from trained staff members. These trained professionals can help deescalate the participants' emotions and help participants talk through what happened.

Confidentiality Protection: I will use a pseudonym when referring to you in the research write-up. Solo interviews will be saved digitally. The interviews are strictly for this research purpose and will not be shared. All interview documents including transcripts will be stored in a password-protected file on my personal computer. Interviews will be kept for three years after which time they will be deleted. Signed consent documents will be kept for three years after the project has been closed.

Contact information: You may contact Madison Pollino with questions about the research or your participation in the research by phone at (267) 334-0100 or by email at: mpollin@bgsu.edu You may also contact my advisor Dr. Sandra Faulkner with questions by phone at 419-372-1998 or email at sandraf@bgsu.edu.

You may also contact the Institutional Review Board at 419-372-7716 or irb@bgsu.edu.

Thank you for your time.

Statement of consent: I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research and am over the age of 18. All participants must indicate their consent to participate by reviewing the consent information via the secure link through Qualtrics. When you are accessing this link, please remember that some

employers may use tracking software, so you may want to complete the consent form on a personal computer. Also, you should not leave the link open if using a public computer that others may have access to, and you should clear your page history and close your internet browser after completing the survey. By clicking ">>", you are indicating your consent to participate in this study.