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DePaul University  
College of Education

**College Students' Perceptions of Sexual Violence Climate on their Campus**

A Dissertation in Education  
with a Concentration in Educational Leadership – Higher Education

by

Meghan Funk

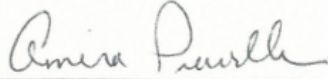
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements  
For the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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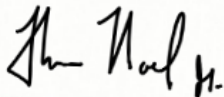
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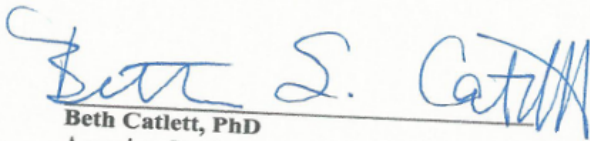
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Certification of Authorship

I certify that I am the sole author of this dissertation. Any assistance received in the preparation of this dissertation has been acknowledged and disclosed within it. Any sources utilized, including the use of data, ideas, and words, those quoted directly or paraphrased, have been cited. I certify that I have prepared this dissertation according to program guidelines, as directed.

Author Signature: Meghan Funk Date 5/19/2022

## Abstract

Sexual violence continues to be an issue that impacts student safety on college campuses. Approximately a quarter of students directly face violence in higher education. In the last several decades, college professionals have implemented a variety of sexual violence prevention programming and policies. However, these efforts have not decreased the number of sexual violence acts on campuses. Although students continue to be subjected to environments where sexual violence occurs, their voices are missing from current sexual violence research. Using a phenomenological approach, this dissertation explores college students' perceptions of sexual violence climate on their campus. In this study, interviews with eight college students uncovered perceptions of the sexual violence climate at a midwestern state institution of higher education. The goal of this study was to uncover participants' lived experiences around the shared phenomenon of sexual violence. Drawing on aspects of phenomenological research, the four themes that arose from the data are naming sexual violence fear, the normalization of sexual violence, the university cover up, and students taking safety into their own hands. These themes indicate that sexual violence continues to be a substantial problem within higher education. The study calls for institutional leaders to take urgent action by reexamining sexual violence prevention strategies and policy. In doing so, college professionals can implement intentional actions that work towards decreasing the number of sexual violence acts within higher education.

*Keywords:* Sexual violence, hookup culture, rape myths, campus safety, Title IX, Clery Act, university, prevention

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## Acknowledgements

First, to the study participants, thank you for sharing your voices on a topic that oftentimes silences many individuals and communities. Your willingness and openness to shed light on sexual violence climate on your campus will help current and future student affairs practitioners to better understand the needs of college students. My hope is that your input will contribute to ending sexual violence for future students. This impact is invaluable. I will forever be thankful to you for giving of your time to this research with the goal of helping others.

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To the entire committee, I could not have asked for a better team. Your wisdom and advice propelled my dissertation to a level I never thought possible. The insights that emerged from this research were elevated because of your ability to challenge me to think more critically and imagine in new ways. I will be forever grateful for the care and passion you poured into mentoring me. It was an honor to collaborate with you all.

Lastly, to all of you, you all remain the constant reminder that although my dissertation journey has come to an end, the work does not end here. Sexual violence remains a horrifying problem in higher education, and the fight to create safe campus environments for all students continues. With your unceasing support, I hope to continue this fight to create change for future generations.

### **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to those who have been silenced by sexual violence. To victims, survivors, and those who have been compelled to alter their behaviors and lives to protect their personal safety. Your stories are valued. Your voices are valued. You are invaluable.

## Chapter I: Introduction

Sexual violence (SV) impacts millions of Americans each year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). SV is any unsolicited sexual touching, attempted penetration, or completed penetration (Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Mellins et al., 2017; Muehlenhard et al., 2016). According to the World Health Organization, SV also includes unwelcome sexual commentaries and advances (Kalra & Bhugra, 2020). In recent years, SV has gained national attention as a result of the #MeToo movement and high-profile SV incidents portrayed in the media. A particular environment that has been a focus of SV incidents are college campuses. This is leading many to question why higher education institutions in particular are problematic atmospheres that perpetuate sexual violence.

With the increase in SV awareness in current years, higher education leaders and policymakers have been encouraged to act by creating and implementing SV preventive measures. Some institutions have applied SV prevention and response strategies. However, research indicates that despite these strategies, there has not been a decrease in the number of SV acts on college campuses within the last 40 years (Hong & Marine, 2018; Labhardt et al., 2017; Landreman & Williamsen, 2018; Orchowski et al., 2008). This research calls into question the effectiveness of these efforts.

If the number of SV acts are not decreasing on college campuses, current and future students could be at risk. Students could then be challenged to choose between jeopardizing their safety and seeking education. SV puts entire communities at risk, yet SV is not widely discussed or addressed (Anderson & Overby, 2021). The lack of conversation and dialogue could make for slow progress when working towards changing campus climate. Therefore, I sought to explore perceptions of SV climate in higher education.

## **Research Problem**

Approximately 22 percent of students directly experience SV during their time in college (Mellins et al., 2017). SV can impact a survivor's relationship with their family, friends, and peers (O'Callaghan et al., 2018). As a result, college students, faculty, staff, and community members can experience second-hand SV trauma. With almost a quarter of collegiate individuals directly facing violence in higher education, and additional persons experiencing the impact of SV on their campus, there is a call to increase measures to ensure student safety. Meanwhile, as research indicates that SV preventative measures have not decreased the number of SV incidents in the last several decades, there is a need to further investigate the issue of SV in higher education (Hong & Marine, 2018; Labhardt et al., 2017; Landreman & Williamsen, 2018; Orchowski et al., 2008). The continuation of SV acts in higher education with minimal impact of prevention policy and strategy calls for urgent action to be taken. Doing so can aid in creating meaningful change to protect future generations of college students.

When examining SV on college campuses, it is important to identify key stakeholders who are experiencing the impact of this violence. Although students experience SV at high rates, their voices are left out of many SV studies and existing literature. Therefore, one may question how SV preventative measures are being created and implemented for students without the input from the population that the preventative strategy is ultimately trying to protect.

## **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to call attention to college students' lived experiences regarding SV climates on their campus. In doing so, policymakers and student affairs professionals can better determine intentional policies and prevention protocol that best meet

student needs, as well as have meaningful impact in decreasing the number of SV acts on college campuses.

This study addressed the primary research question: what are current college students' perceptions of SV on their campus? This study also addressed the following sub-questions: What are students' feelings of SV safety on their campus? What environmental components contribute to feelings of safety? What cultural components contribute to feelings of safety? Lastly, what institutional prevention policy and response, or lack thereof do students find contribute to their feelings of safety?

### **Overview of Methodology**

The study is undertaken as a qualitative phenomenological inquiry. The reasoning for drawing on this methodology is based on the research question of uncovering college students' perceptions of SV climates on a singular campus. The goal of phenomenological research is to uncover participants' lived experiences around a shared phenomenon. In this study, the shared phenomenon is SV climate. Another distinctive characteristic of phenomenological research is pursuing the recognition of the essence of a phenomenon from participants' lived experiences (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Phenomenological research seeks to create meaning of the connections between the individual and their environment. Drawing on aspects of phenomenological research, I am able to discover more about college students' views of gender roles on campus, hookup culture, campus climate, SV policy, as well as SV prevention and reporting protocols. As a result, I am better able to make recommendations for current and future higher education professionals. This approach aligns to phenomenological research since the primary audience in phenomenological research should be practitioners within the field that is being studied (Starkes & Trinidad, 2007).

The research setting is a single midwestern university in the United States. The institution has a population of over 50,000 students, including more than 40,000 undergraduate students. This institution also has a prominent fraternity and sorority life. Approximately ten percent of the student population are members of these organizations. The institution also has a prestigious athletic culture. They participate in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's Division I in all sports.

The setting was chosen based on its low SV crime rates, as well as its highly active athletic and fraternity organization participation, which will further be discussed later in this study. In alignment with phenomenological research, eight participants were chosen to participate in this study. The participants were required to hold full-time undergraduate student status according to the institution's minimum requisite of credit hours. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants with the assistance of the institution's Student Life office. Participants were chosen based on demographic background in an attempt to create a diverse participant pool for the study. The participant pool included students of different genders and sexual orientations for example. The goal of this recruitment approach was to include diverse voices from students with varying backgrounds and experiences.

The method of this study consisted of one in-person interview with each participant. As the researcher, I then identified SV perception themes based on participant interviews. Individual interviews were the best method for this study allowing the interviewer to build rapport with student participants. The interview approach allowed participants to share their experiences individually with the interviewer, which helped the participants feel more comfortable divulging their perspectives on the sensitive topic of SV. Interviews also provided me as the researcher the

opportunity to ask follow-up questions as part of the interview protocol to better understand participants' lived experiences.

### **Rationale and Significance**

The goal of this study was to better understand the SV climate at a singular higher education institution. By uncovering SV climates from college students' perspectives, I was able to learn what SV preventative measures are having a positive influence on students, as well as what aspects of SV climate are having a negative impact. From a qualitative perspective, I, as the researcher, leveraged students' perceptions to interpret what they found to be positive and negative influences towards their attitudes of SV climate on their campus. From this research, I can make recommendations to inform higher education administrators, as well as policymakers as to the needs of college students. As a result, these recommendations can influence positive change on college campuses to decrease SV incidents on campus.

Furthermore, the inclusion of student voices fills a void in existing higher education SV research. The lack of student perspectives can be problematic considering they are the targeting stakeholders for which prevention programming is created. The inclusion of a variety of student voices can open eyes to marginalized communities that are often left out of existing literature. The inclusion of these voices allows for the consideration of intersectionality and ensuring that prevention programming meets the needs of all students and not simply students who hold privileged identities. As a result, prevention strategies that target all student populations can help create campus environments that are safe for all students to pursue their academic ambitions.

### **Research Identity, Positionality, and Assumptions**

As the researcher, my personal identities impact the study. Research indicates that women are more oftentimes the victims of SV instead of acting as the perpetrators (Freitas, 2018;



Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Mouilso et al., 2015). Research also suggests that women are more likely than men to be sympathetic to SV situations (Untied et al., 2015). This is because women tend to better identify with the role of SV victims, even if they themselves are not victims of SV. Therefore, my identity as a woman brought elements of empathy and understanding when speaking to study participants who shared their experiences of toxic SV climates on their campus. This ability to share feelings with others assisted me in building rapport and trust with participants. This rapport may have led to participants feeling a great sense of comfortability when being interviewed. As a result, participants may have been more willing to speak to their perceptions of SV climates on their campus. Women are also less likely compared to men to believe in rape myths (Hackman et al., 2017). Rape myths are attitudes typically stereotypical in nature that are generally inaccurate representations of sexual assault (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). The existence of rape myths tend to justify male sexual dominance over women. My female gender could have helped to suspend bias and diminish assumptions pertaining to false stereotypes within SV climates. As a result, my data analysis can better speak to the true experiences of study participants, instead of being distorted with preconceived assumptions.

It is also important to note that although my identities can enhance this study, they could have also hindered the study. My privileged identities as a white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied individual could have prevented me from recognizing the true experiences of participants who identify with marginalized communities. Inclusivity was vital to this study as a means to incorporate a spectrum of participant voices. This includes voices that differ from my own. Therefore, my own positionality influenced my decision to continuously reflect on my identities as the researcher throughout this study. By identifying how my biases presented themselves

during the study, I then addressed those biases to ensure this study was inclusive of individuals with different identities and who are from different backgrounds.

In addition, as the researcher, I am familiar with college environments from a student perspective and a higher education staff context. These experiences gave me the opportunity to successfully navigate interviews with additional knowledge of the studied environment. Also, having experience as both a student and a college staff member aided me in diminishing bias relative to the study design and data collection and analysis of the findings. I also do not identify as an SV survivor. As a result, I may have lacked a particular perspective on the topic and consequently, was in a better position to develop themes that were based on participant responses and not on personal experiences of trauma.

Another bias to consider is my depth of SV knowledge as the researcher. I have studied SV literature and research for several years. Literature suggests that college students are not always aware or educated on SV topics such as campus SV definitions, law, and policies (Baldwin-White, 2021). My understanding of SV influenced the way I initially interpreted student experiences, especially students who acknowledged that they were not familiar with specific SV terms and laws. For example, my preliminary response to participants asking for SV definitions or further explanations of SV federal law was to internally question the participants' lack of understanding. Therefore, I reflected on my circles of knowledge to better suspend my personal biases. I also focused my attention on students' stories of how they gained SV knowledge, as well as their personal experiences of SV education and training access. As a result, I was better able to understand the student perspective as it related to the SV phenomenon as a larger systemic issue at the institution the participants attended.

## **Organization of Study and Definitions of Key Terminology**

In this research study, I provide literature to demonstrate reasoning that supports the research study. This includes scholarship on gender identity, sex education, hookup and SV culture, SV statistics, as well as prevention policy and programming. I explain the methodological approach by drawing on aspects of phenomenology as a methodological framework. I continue by providing explanations for my data collection and analysis methods as they pertain to the research question in alignment with elements of a phenomenological methodology. I then conclude the proposal by addressing the findings, as well as the limitations and delimitations of the proposed study.

For the purpose of this study, SV is defined as unwanted sexual touching, attempted penetration, or completed penetration (Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Mellins et al., 2017; Muehlenhard et al., 2016). The definition also includes acts outlined by the World Health Organization, which include unwanted sexual comments and advances (Kalra & Bhugra, 2020). College students are defined in alignment to the research population and research site. Therefore, college students are defined as undergraduate degree-seeking individuals currently enrolled at a federally funded, four-year university. For the purpose of this study, the definition of college students is not for making generalizations, but rather to create transferability of the definition. All higher education students do not fall into this definition. It is unlikely a study of this size could include every type and demographic of college student. However, this general definition still allows for the findings from this study to be applied to institutions with varying student populations to assist in decreasing SV on campus.

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

Sexual Violence (SV) has been a prominent issue in higher education for the last forty years (Labhardt et al., 2017; Landerman & Williamsen, 2018; Orchowski et al., 2008). The subject has gained greater attention in recent years due to high-profile collegiate SV scandals, Title IX violations, as well as media coverage and the #MeToo movement. Although SV on college campuses has acquired increased awareness, research indicates there has been no decrease in the number of SV acts within higher education (Hong & Marine, 2018; Labhardt et al., 2017; Landreman & Williamsen, 2018; Orchowski et al., 2008). To work towards a solution, college administrators need to better comprehend how SV climates impact student life.

### **Literature Review Development**

This literature review continues by discussing the approach taken to develop the literature outlined in this review. It then reviews the literature by examining how SV became an issue on college campuses and how SV has shaped college campus climates. In addition, this literature review explores SV policy and illustrate how SV influences student life. The literature review concludes with calls to action for current and future higher education administrators to advance SV research to end SV on college campuses.

This literature review spotlights existing SV literature, which primarily speaks to the gender binary of male and female experiences. In addition, a majority of literature highlights white, heterosexual relationships typically involving cisgender individuals (Coulter & Rankin, 2018; Harris, 2017; Marine, 2017). College student populations consist of people who come from different backgrounds and experiences. SV can impact anyone, but marginalized stories are not always shared. In alignment with existing scholarship, this literature review does not begin to devote the necessary attention that these marginalized communities warrant and need. The

absence of marginalized gender, sexual, racial, religious, ability, and socioeconomic identities and the reasons as to why these voices are not adequately present in the research are addressed in the gaps in research and programming section of this review. However, it is vital that readers are made aware of this injustice in advance to have a better understanding of why these voices are not adequately present in much of this literature review.

The development of this literature review began with the creation of seven SV subtopics. These subtopics were developed using mind-mapping strategies on the topic of SV. The subtopics included higher education SV statistics, college SV climates, SV theory, SV and gender perspectives, SV policy and law, sex education, and SV prevention. Literature was then gathered for each subtopic. Literature was collected using multiple online search engines including Google Scholar, the DePaul University Library system, as well as the Chicago Public Library system. Each subtopic title was inputted in the search engines. In addition, terms such as SV, sexual assault, and sexual misconduct were also investigated.

There were some potential limitations to my literature review development approach. For example, the use of several library search engines from a specific geographic area may have limited the scope of literature included in this literature review. Exploring library collections in a variety of U.S. cities may generate a greater selection of SV resources. In addition, the use of identified subtopics may also have limited the scope of literature included in this review. Adding additional subtopics could create a greater variety of literature. The use of different subtopics could also produce altered types of literature that could speak to how SV impacts student life. Considering the literature review development strategies I employed, the search systems produced numerous books and peer reviewed articles for each SV subtopic. The book and article titles were then compiled into a literary database. Each subtopic contained approximately ten

resources. In addition, some resources mentioned other relevant scholarship that was then added to the literary database to be reviewed. As each resource was examined, relevant information was documented to be utilized in the literature review. The documented information was then compiled and organized to generate an initial literature. At completion of the data analysis process, the literature was filtered further to align with the themes developed from the data. As a result, this existing literature review was created. The literature review examines the influence of gender roles and SV, campus SV culture, SV policy and prevention, as well as gaps in research and programming.

To understand how SV influences student perceptions of SV climates on college campuses, this literature review provides a comprehensive overview of extant research on SV in the higher education context. Further, this review explores the impact SV has on college student life using a theoretical framework. To address SV, it is important to frame paradigms to demonstrate how SV influences student life on college campuses. Applying a guided framework can assist in better exploring SV in different contexts. Feminist theory, specifically radical feminist theory, will be applied to the process of examining SV. This framework will assist readers in connecting SV to themes of male power and dominance.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Feminist theories focus on sexism and how male dominance, along with female passivity, create cultural supports of rape-tolerant attitudes (Fonow et al., 1992). Many presume the primary motive for males to commit sexual assault is simply sexual fulfillment, but for feminists, this is not the case (McCabe, 2018). When investigating how gender influences SV, feminist theorists believe the primary objective for men to commit SV is to employ their male dominance (Brownmiller & Mehrhof, 1992). According to Weiser (2017), a core belief of feminists is that

dominance is pivotal to society. This ideology is grounded in how gender norms are ingrained within society. Some feminist theories identify society's lack of recognition that patriarchal social norms exist (Weiser, 2017). Therefore, male dominance is more easily able to persist, especially in heterosexual relationships.

Feminist theory includes philosophies grounded in objectification theory. Objectification theory explores how individuals, typically women, are regarded as objects instead of human beings (Freitas, 2018; Gervais & Davidson, 2015). This brings attention to how women are viewed as sexual objects. Women are viewed as sex objects without the merit to think critically or make decisions. Sexual objectification occurs on a spectrum from how women are spoken to or viewed, to extreme violent acts such as rape and assault (Davidson & Gervais, 2015).

According to Bartky (1990), sexual objectification occurs when a "women's sexual parts or functions are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her" (p. 35). Feminist theory suggests that sexually objectifying women increases the power men feel they have over women (Davidson & Gervais, 2015). This power provides men access to sex with women without the women's consent. Men view women as objects who do not possess control over their own bodies. This distorted sense of power allows men to control women sexually.

When addressing gender norms and sexual relationships, some feminist theories examine the role of coercion during sexual intercourse. Sexual coercion is the act of engaging another individual in sexual activities without that individual's consent or involving direct refusal from that individual (Benbouriche, 2018). Sexual coercion can include strategies of manipulation and persistence by the perpetrator. Literature indicates that the majority of SV in higher education does not involve force (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). This is in alignment with feminist ideology that

men use coercive tactics to force women into compliance of men's sexual desires (Saez et al., 2019). A prospective study of college women indicated that a majority of participants expressed coercion as the main method men used to commit sexual assault (Orchowski et al., 2015). This is a way that men exert their power without being directly apparent to women. SV is a method that men use to keep women in a state of terror.

Radical feminist theory argues that to end issues such as SV, society needs to recognize the problem as a systemic issue. Therefore, to overcome SV, entire systems must be collapsed to create effective change (Allan, 2011). Radical feminist belief also recognizes SV to be grounded in conditioned gender roles and society's acceptance of gender-based violence (Maxwell & Scott, 2014). From a radical feminist perspective, the SV men demonstrate towards women are not isolated incidents. Instead, they are social constructs where men project their dominance over women (Grosser & Tyler, 2021). A key characteristic of radical feminist theory is that women are viewed as a group or class, instead of as individuals. As a result, radical feminist theory views SV as a systemic issue grounded in gender inequality. To overcome SV, radical feminists do not believe the issue can be addressed on an individual basis. Instead, awareness from entire communities is required to disrupt the existing oppressive narrative. Some believe that one way to begin dismantling SV is by altering society's view of sex.

According to radical feminist theory, sexuality is a key trait that allows men to oppress women (Grosser & Tyler, 2021). Some radical feminists promote sex-positive ideology, which argues that sexuality is not simply a combination of humanistic actions. Rather, sexuality is a human identity that is part of an individual's being. According to radical feminism, sex should be viewed as good and something that should be embraced instead of rejected by society. Feminism



supports the promotion of healthy sexual relationships. These relationships can be formed through sex education and increased openness to sexual discussions.

The use of radical feminist theory will aid readers in navigating this literature review. The framework will act as a lens through which to view higher education SV. The framework will also position the literature review in the context of the main research question exploring college students' perceptions of SV climate on their campus. Radical feminist theory is woven throughout this dissertation to ground the study methodology, discussion, and conclusion to existing literature in the context of the research question.

### **Gender Roles and Sexual Violence**

Gender is a key factor in the sexual culture in higher education. To better understand how sexual relationships on college campuses can become violent, it is important to examine literature pertaining to gender (Wade, 2017). Gender identity is defined as personifying an individual's own perception of masculine and feminine personality characteristics (Bem, 1981). Weber et al. (2019) define gender norms as "the spoken and unspoken rules of societies about the acceptable behaviors of girls and boys, women and men—how they should act, look, and even think or feel" (p. 2). Gender identity and gender norms are social constructs. Therefore, society has come to expect certain gender norms to be connected to specific gender identities. However, this simply is not the case. To further examine how gender identities influence higher education SV cultures, masculine and feminine identities must be explored in more detail.

Masculinities are defined here as gender expressions that encompass personality traits including independence, assertiveness, and competitiveness (Gill et al., 1987). Masculinities are characteristics often tied to the male gender (Shamir & Travis, 2002). Individuals with masculine traits are considered to be competitive beings who feel compelled to surpass others. This

competitive trait leads to males feeling the need to meet high levels of achievement and surpass their peers. Pressure, in this circumstance, can lead to a sense of dominance, which can then lead to aggression (Troche & Herzberg, 2017). The key to this sense of dominance is the way in which it interacts with the other binary gender of femininity, which will be discussed later in this literature review. Masculinities have social benefits because masculinity is considered the dominant gender characteristic, putting masculine features at the top of gender patriarchal structures (Harris & Struve, 2009). One aspect of gender socialization is that males who portray masculine characteristics are expected to pursue women who are considered to have feminine gender identity traits (Duckworth & Trautner, 2019).

Existing literature has associated hegemonic masculinity with acts of SV (Coles, 2009; Smith et al., 2015). Hegemonic masculinity is the socialized philosophy that men are dominant within society and women are inferior to men, which positions men as the gender holding power (Smith et al., 2015). Hegemonic masculinity includes the continuous masculine practices that allow for men to dominate over women (Jewkes et al., 2015). Hegemonic masculinity is perceived on an institutional and systemic level compared to an individual level. This type of masculinity does not necessarily include violence, but it can influence violent crimes such as assault. Hegemonic masculinity is typically associated with the male gender and crimes such as rape and assault are committed primarily by men towards women as expressions of male dominance over women (Smith et al., 2015).

Although hegemonic masculinity can lead to violence, it can also be demonstrated through subordination and complicity. Since hegemonic masculinity condones the devaluation of women to men, men are conditioned to have power in heterosexual relationships. As a result, subordination can occur. When men lose power and find themselves in subordinate positions to

women, they can become stressed and uncomfortable (Coles, 2009). As a way to combat subordination to women, men can begin to exert aggression and restrict their emotions as a way to regain their dominance over women. In hegemonic masculinity, some men will not resort to subordination as a way to exercise their power over women. Instead, they become complicit in their hegemony. Complicit masculinity occurs when men benefit from hegemonic masculinity without demonstrating dominant behaviors (Coles, 2009). For example, if a man observes his male peers sexually harassing a woman, but does not say anything or intervene, he is practicing complicit masculinity. Patriarchal systems where men hold power over women is a key tenet of radical feminist theory (Grosser & Tyler, 2021). In particular, the concept of male dominance is essential to radical feminists' views of masculinities. Not only is it vital that society recognize male dominance, radical feminist theory calls for society to name dominance in acts of power of one individual over another. Naming dominance is preferred instead of mislabeling these acts by using terms such as *locker room talk* and *boys being boys*. By naming the dominance, society can begin to identify how male dominance engrains itself into different facets of everyday life such as human relationships. A goal of radical feminism is to expose male domination as problematic and not let it become acceptable by society (Grosser & Tyler, 2021). To do this, femininity must be examined.

Femininity is a characteristic that concentrates on relational traits including sensitivity, caring, and nurturing. Unlike masculinity, femininity is typically connected to the female gender (Palan et al., 1999). This characteristic typically dictates women's position as caretakers within relationships (Frey et al., 2006). Femininity is considered in opposition to masculinity. Within heterosexual relationships, masculinity dominates over femininity (Kilmartin, 2017). Gender norms dictate that women's femininity equates to physical and mental weakness (Gold & Villar,

2000). When examining SV culture, the connections of masculinity and femininity to dominance and weakness are vital. In sexual relationships, feminine traits are connected to emotional attachment, and masculine traits are connected to detachment (Fahs & Munger, 2015). From a radical feminist perspective, one must view feminism as tied to the female gender and recognize women as a class grouped together by their gender (Grosser & Tyler, 2021). When recognizing women as a class, society can begin to identify how masculinity dominates over femininity. In addition, classes of men and women, and the dominance of men over women are social constructs. These social constructs allow for structural oppression where men can exert their dominance in forms such as violence against women. Radical feminist theoretical scholarship suggests gender roles need to dissolve for individuals to be free to express fluid masculine and feminine traits. As a result, power and oppression within sexual relationships can end (Nicholson & Pasque, 2011).

Since masculinity is considered the dominant gender characteristic and is most often associated with the male gender, society considers men to be more important compared to women who exhibit feminine gender traits (Wade, 2017). The competitiveness around masculinity encourages men to be better than women. Therefore, men find it insulting when associated with female characteristics (Kilmartin, 2017). Men not only feel the need to outcompete women, but they also feel the urge to compete against each other. For example, since the pursuit of females is tied to masculinity, men are expected to pursue women. The pursuit, along with competitiveness, creates a motive for men to make sleeping with women a competition amongst their male peers (Harris & Struve, 2009). This form of sexual competition can be problematic because it creates a sexual culture where men begin to treat women like objects as a means to meet their sexual desires. Feminist theory includes objectification theory,

which demonstrates that women are viewed as sexual objects to which men feel entitled to (Gervais & Davidson, 2015). Sexual objectification applies to both men and women, but women experience objectification at higher rates compared to men, especially in cases where objectification takes the form of SV. The objectification of women can lead to gender-based violence and create toxic SV climates.

Power dynamics between masculinity and femininity in sexual relationships oftentimes create toxic environments. In these environments, men are typically more likely than women to engage in sexual aggression (Hoyt & Yeater, 2011). Men also are more likely to demonstrate violence towards women (Kilmartin, 2017; Voller & Long, 2010). According to a demographic questionnaire of over 300 undergraduate college men, participants who exhibited sexual aggression acceptance and previous sexually aggressive behavior also validated gender role stereotypes (Warkentin & Gidycz, 2007). Research indicates that masculinity has a negative impact on interpersonal relationships, largely focusing on the violent behaviors associated with masculinity (Fabiano et al., 2003).

When examining gender roles, radical feminists challenge that gender inequality cannot be overcome unless society recognizes that gender-based violence stems from male domination over women (Grosser & Tyler, 2021). For society to begin affecting gender-based violence, radical feminists argue that a human rights approach is necessary. Women need to be viewed as humans and not objects over which men can exert their power. Only then can society begin to deconstruct gender-based violence. When employing a human rights approach to combat gender-based violence, radical feminists also argue that gender-based violence is political and not biological. Gender roles are societal constructs. According to radical feminist theory, it is society's responsibility to deconstruct gender roles to end gender-based violence. Gender roles

and relationship skills are socialized during adolescence. The acceptance of healthy or toxic sexual relationships can be further explored in the United States sex education curriculum.

### **Campus Sexual Violence Culture**

The focus of this literature review is primarily on the higher education environment. However, students arrive on college campuses with a spectrum of knowledge and a variance of experiences. Therefore, it is imperative to examine how the K-12 schooling system influences the sexual knowledge of students. It is important to note that Title IX applies to the K-12 system and influences students beginning at a young age, prior to them arriving to college campuses.

The influence sex education has on gender roles demonstrates radical feminist philosophy pertaining to the socialization of gender roles throughout an individual's adolescence. American sex education curriculum still has no national standard. Sex education, nor consent instruction, are included as part of the K-12 common core curriculum (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020). In addition, schools that do offer sex education curriculum typically add the information to existing courses such as physical education classes (Zimmerman, 2015). A cross-sectional study involving a questionnaire revealed that most course information centers on human reproduction, as well as sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy prevention (Woo et al., 2011). The majority of sex education curriculum does not mention sex for pleasure, particularly for females (Valenti, 2010). Instead of providing thorough information on sex, most K-12 sex education curriculum focusses on abstinence.

Abstinence-only education is centered on deliberately choosing not to engage in sexual activity (Blanks-Hindman & Yan, 2015). This includes but is not limited to genital touching or sexual stimulation between individuals. Abstinence-only education instructs students to refrain from sex until marriage and teaches refusal strategies to ensure individuals do not participate in

sex prior to marriage (Santelli et al., 2018). It is currently the most popular form of sex education in the U.S., used by approximately one-third of school districts (Gardner, 2015).

Abstinence-only curriculum is profoundly fear and shame-based (Freitas, 2018). Students are taught that if they have sex outside of marriage, they will have unfulfilling lives after the encounter. A prominent component in abstinence-only education is the virginity movement that is mainly directed towards women abstaining from sex. As a result, at very young ages, girls begin internalizing the idea of objectification and view themselves only as their bodies and appearances (Davidson & Gervais, 2015). Feminist theorists suggest this objectification promotes women as sexual objects instead of sexual beings with the ability to make independent decisions and to think critically (Freitas, 2018; Gervais & Davidson, 2015). Female bodies are valued over a female's sense of self-worth.

Feminists with sex-positive principles reject abstinence-only sex education because it promotes sex-negativity (Fahs, 2014). Sex-negativity is the viewing of sex as bad and shameful. Sex-positivity promotes comprehensive sex education that focuses on additional sex information, along with more vast views on sex. This includes promoting the pleasure that can come from sex. Radical feminists and feminists with more sex-positive beliefs both argue that additional sex education is needed to promote safe and healthy sexual relationships (Edwards, 2016; Fahs, 2014).

Comprehensive sex education curriculum can include pregnancy and disease prevention, as well as coursework that aids students in developing self-efficacy around advocating for one's own sexuality (Kalke et al., 2017). Some comprehensive education establishes definitions around consent and explores unwanted sex, along with intimate partner violence information. The goals of comprehensive sex education tend to promote sex as a healthy part of human life and that this

should not be viewed as wrong. Comprehensive curriculum strives to teach the difference between healthy and unhealthy sexual relationships (Santelli et al., 2018). This form of instruction attempts to alter the sex education narrative by promoting the idea that students can have healthy sex lives (Valenti, 2010).

Altering attitudes towards SV victims such as debunking rape myth acceptance and breaking down gender norms through the education system is an example of systemic change that radical feminist theorists believe is needed to end SV (Allan, 2011). Evidence also indicates that comprehensive sex education compared to abstinence-only programming helps people cultivate healthier relationships (Kuo et al., 2014). Research suggests that students want more sex information (Hubach et al., 2019). This includes access to information on contraception and accurate medical information (Hubach et al., 2019; Valenti, 2010). This demonstrates a shift in attitudes toward the core curriculum of sex education in the U.S. Citizens are moving away from traditional values and recognizing a need for better sex education practices.

According to feminists with sex-positive beliefs, providing women with additional sex education and with options of how they can enter sexual encounters works towards making these situations more inclusive for women (Fahs, 2014). Comprehensive sex education's teachings can help address gender norms within sexual relationships. Diminishing gender norms can allow women to feel empowered by their sexual experiences instead of shamed. They can develop more self-efficacy to enter sexual relationships based on their own desires instead of being forced into sexual encounters by men. The lack of K-12 sex education standardization causes students to transition to college with varying information compared to their peers. Some students' sexual attitudes and behaviors can be unhealthy and even violent. As a result, college campuses become environments where unhealthy and violent sexual behaviors can thrive.



It has become an expectation amongst students in higher education for students to participate in hookup culture, which can be described as the environment that promotes brief sexual intimacy resulting in no romantic affection between the individuals involved (Freitas, 2018). A hookup is typically a one-time occurrence and involves men mistreating women. In college hookup culture, men attempt to persuade women to go further sexually than women initially feel comfortable. During a hookup, men will often become aggressive and will not demonstrate concern for women's sexual pleasure (Wade, 2017). This culture charges men to not respect women during sexual encounters. According to Wade (2017), more than half of women who engage in a hookup express feeling disrespected by their male sex partners. From an objectification lens, women who participate in hookups may focus on their appearance to please their male sex partner, instead of focusing on their own sexual pleasure. According to feminist theory, this is an example of how both men and women can actively objectify women in these types of sexual encounters (Gervais & Eagan, 2017).

Hookup culture promotes the practice of not becoming attached to a one-time sexual partner, which encourages negative views of women (Wade, 2017). Caring for others is considered a feminine characteristic. Therefore, hookup culture condemns this feminine trait by cultivating environments where sexual partners are expected to not show care for each other, which can frequently lead to violence (Aubrey & Smith, 2016). These hookup culture characteristics ignore all forms of consent and provoke gender hierarchy and systems of power, which allow for SV to thrive. Hookup culture depicts male sexual dominance as outlined in radical feminist theory (Nicholson & Pasque, 2011). Hookup culture also normalizes the mistreatment of women on college campuses (Wade, 2017).

According to multivariate regression analysis of over 400 college students, the majority of both male and female participants demonstrated a correlation between rape myth acceptance and the belief that hookup culture escalates one's social status (Reling et al., 2018). In this particular study, the researchers defined rape myth acceptance as the tolerance of false stereotypes and discriminatory beliefs individuals have towards SV perpetrators and victims. Study participants were comprised of students from a single U.S. university located in the south and were surveyed to uncover a potential relationship between hookup culture and rape myth acceptance. The study findings indicate that rape myth acceptance is embedded in hookup culture.

Hookup culture begins to cause tensions between feminist views of casual sexual encounters. Both radical feminists and feminists with more sex-positive views promote healthy sexual relationships that include one-time sexual encounters. However, hookup culture causes pause as to the health and safety in these one-time sexual encounters. Some radical feminists argue that women's desires to participate in hookups are not based on their own decision-making (Fahs, 2014). Instead, hookup culture is designed by society as a way men can coerce women into meeting their sexual needs. Society evolves one-time sexual encounters. Some radical feminists challenge that hookup culture creates opportunities for women to identify the sexual encounter as a way to meet their own sexual needs when in reality the purpose of a hookup is purely for men's sexual needs.

Feminists with sex-positive values believe one-time sexual encounters can be empowering for women as a way to break away from social norms (Fahs, 2014). Critics of feminism aligning to sex-positivity question if women who willingly engage in sexual encounters, in sexual cultures informed by systems in which men project their dominance over

women, are exercising their true sexual freedom. In addition, if women are objectified during a hookup, can they fully project their sexual freedom? Hookup culture promotes the removal of feelings from sexual encounters. When a person is treated as if their feelings do not exist, they are denied subjectivity. As a result, the person begins to be seen less as a person who has thoughts and feelings. This is how hookup culture can begin to objectify participants.

As college communities continue to accept hookup culture, students receive the message that SV is also permitted on campus. This culture invites SV perpetrators by dictating that sexual assault is welcomed (Aubrey & Smith, 2016). Hookup culture allows men to be deceptive during sex. Some men will disguise rape by alluding that penetration was an accident. In hookup culture, women are expected to refuse sex and men, in return, are supposed to overcome this challenge by concluding the encounter with a sexual act (Jozkowski, 2015b). These hookup culture characteristics ignore all forms of consent, which allows SV to thrive.

An issue with consent literature is that it neglects to provide a standard definition for sexual consent. Various scholars refer to consent as voluntarily engaging in a sexual act with another person (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013). During a sexual encounter, men are often the initiators and, in some cases, men do not comprehend the need to obtain consent (Aubrey & Smith, 2016; Jozkowski, 2015b). When examining consent from an objectification lens, men's dismissal of female thoughts and feelings dehumanizes women. As a result, men no longer view women as people. Instead, women are viewed as sexual objects that do not need to provide consent (Gervais & Eagan, 2017).

In today's culture, the responsibility for consent is typically placed on women (Jozkowski, 2015b). Women are habitually conditioned to fulfill men's sexual desires. Therefore, women feel compelled to include an excuse when denying sex (Freitas,

2018). Men's strategy for countering sexual refusals is to simply not ask for consent (Jozkowski, 2015b). The dismissal of consent is so widely accepted that women will minimize a sexual assault encounter (Orchowski et al., 2008). Women will refer to these encounters as misunderstandings instead of rape (Orchowski et al., 2015; Wade, 2017). Women being conditioned to comply with men's sexual desires aligns with radical feminist theory. This framework argues that societal systems coach women into complying with male sexual advances (Allan, 2011). Feminists with sex-positive views argue that all sexual relationships should be safe and healthy (Fahs, 2014). This includes women consenting to these sexual encounters. Critics of feminists with sex-positive views question if women can fully consent to sexual relationships in cultures where men dictate the sexual culture.

Multiple studies demonstrate that approximately 60 percent of rape victims describe their experiences as miscommunications instead of rape even though their description of their experience can be defined as rape using the legal definition of rape (Dardis et al., 2017; Layman et al., 1996). The Federal Bureau of Investigations uses the Uniform Crime Reporting Program's approved legal definition of rape as "penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim" (Criminal Justice Information Services, 2012). Since the definition of consent is not common knowledge and rape has become a standardized practice, some women do not comprehend when they are being raped (Wade, 2017). For example, according to a qualitative analysis of over 100 college women who experienced the legal definition of rape, 42 percent self-identified as victims, 46 percent labeled the assault as a "miscommunication," and 11 percent labeled themselves as "not victims" (Dardis et al., 2017). Therefore, when people experience rape, but do not recognize the act as rape, they may not identify a need to seek

resources at a rape clinic for example, because they do not believe the resource applies to them (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). The lack of consent in SV education allows men to control the sex narrative, which can ultimately lead to sexually violent campus climates.

Literature indicates that the rates of SV in higher education have stayed consistent (Orchowski et al., 2008). A population-representative survey conducted within an ethnographic research study on college campuses indicated that 22 percent of students experience sexual assault during their time on a college campus (Mellins et al., 2017). The findings of this study illustrated that 28 percent of female students experienced SV compared to 12 percent of male students. Literature indicates that SV is thriving on college campuses, which can create unsafe cultures of violence.

To create more inclusive higher education environments, student affairs practitioners must strive to cultivate safe campus climates. The current trends in SV activity do not indicate that campuses are safe for all students. Literature points to themes of fear regarding SV culture, particularly for college women (Pryor & Hughes, 2015). Radical feminism identifies SV as a means for men to dominate women (Grosser & Tyler, 2021). Men can control women by keeping them in constant states of fear. The fear female college students face is imperative to note because college campuses can be considered environments of SV, instead of sanctuaries where students feel protected from these crimes (Fisher et al., 2002). As a result, college women can face social control.

Fear of SV can change female behaviors on campus. Women may react to a SV environment by altering their social activities, living arrangements, dress attire, and daily routines to avoid potential SV situations. SV is a form of objectification (Gervais & Eagan, 2017). When a man sexually violates a woman, the man disconnects the person from her female

body parts. As a result, SV can also cause women to self-objectify in which they monitor their bodies and appearances. This self-objectification typically involves body shaming.

Since college men typically do not experience SV to a greater extent as compared to women, research indicates that their views of SV on college campuses may look different (Pryor & Hughes, 2015). According to a quantitative demographic questionnaire conducted at a Midwestern University, in comparison to women, men implied that they would be less sympathetic to SV victims because they were less likely to identify with a SV victim role (Untied et al., 2015). This rationale can lead to rape myth acceptance, which can traverse into SV acts.

Rape myths are defined as “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 134). The literature demonstrates that men believe rape myths at higher rates compared to women (Hackman et al., 2017). Both genders support rape myths, but research indicates that rape myths create negative attitudes specifically towards women (Hanson-Breitenbecher, 2000; Labhardt et. al, 2017). Radical feminist theory argues that society has created a preference for men over women. Therefore, society has come to accept the action of men raping women, because society accepts men’s dominance over women, and rape is a demonstration of male dominance (Maxwell & Scott, 2014). The acceptance of rape myths demonstrates how gender roles can influence perceptions of SV survivors and perpetrators.

In studies conducted at an assortment of higher education institutions, research indicates that approximately one in four college women will experience SV (Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Mellins et al., 2017; Worthen & Wallace, 2018). Radical feminism views SV as a continuum (Grosser & Tyler, 2021). Radical feminism calls on society to critically examine all incidents of SV as problematic. For example, sexual coercion, stalking, and rape are all SV acts, and it does

not matter if one act seems worse than another. This is important because women's lived experiences illustrate the ongoing SV conducted by men. Radical feminism argues that any form of SV, no matter how small it may seem, perpetuates systems of male dominance over women.

In addition to the number of SV acts women experience, there is also much doubt placed on women's reports of SV in higher education. Systematic doubt of women is grounded in an ideology of women being submissive to men and therefore, expected to be compliant to men's desires. The expectation that women are to be submissive to men leads society to doubt women's claims of forced sexual activity. Instead, it is the expectation that women will engage in sexual activity with men and therefore these sexual encounters cannot be considered SV. However, research indicates that only 2 percent of rape allegations are false (Weiser, 2017). This systematic doubt of women is perpetuated further by rape myth acceptance in higher education that often portrays SV victims being responsible for the SV they experience as outlined by radical feminist theory (Maxwell & Scott, 2014).

Statistically, men are the gender type most likely to commit SV acts compared to other genders (Freitas, 2018; Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Mouilso et al., 2015). Some research indicates this is true in 98 percent of SV incidents (Freitas, 2018). In addition, most sexual assaults are committed by a low number of men, but these men commit multiple assaults (Freitas, 2018). This can lead to toxic sex cultures on campuses where SV can thrive. According to objectification theory from a radical feminist lens, one way to eliminate SV is discontinuing to view women as victims and men as perpetrators. Instead, society must work as a community to intervene and stop SV. For higher education, SV policy such as Title IX and the Clery Act provide institutions with SV prevention and reporting policies, as well as protocol to aid in SV awareness initiatives.

## **Sexual Violence Policy and Prevention**

In 1972, Congress passed Title IX (Freitas, 2018; Hirsch & Khan, 2020). According to Title IX (1972), “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” Wood et al. (2017) further explain Title IX stating, “Title IX prohibits exclusion, denial, and discrimination in schools on the basis of gender” (p. 1252). Title IX has a direct connection to SV on college campuses because of the gender discrimination that occurs within SV situations. One in four female college students will experience SV during their time in higher education (Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Mellins et al., 2017; Worthen & Wallace, 2018). One in three people who identify as transgender, genderqueer, nonconforming, and questioning will be victims of SV (Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Worthen & Wallace, 2018). Both of these statistics drastically differ from the statistic of one in 17 college men who experience SV (Worthen & Wallace, 2018). The discrepancy in these numbers demonstrates how gender discrimination may be connected to SV.

Gender discrimination plays a role in college sexual assaults (Hines et al., 2015). Title IX states that all students regardless of gender should have equal access to education by federally funded institutions. However, if a student’s safety is jeopardized on college campuses based on their gender identity, this could be a direct violation of Title IX. To diminish SV and sexual discrimination in higher education, Title IX requires institutions to offer SV prevention programs for campus community members (Worthen & Wallace, 2018).

Title IX mandates all faculty and staff employed by institutions receiving federal funding undergo SV prevention education and training. However, the current policy requires higher education institutions to only offer education and training opportunities for students. This



curriculum does not have to be mandated according to Title IX. Institutions approach this current policy in a variety of ways. Most schools deliver some form of training for students. However, voluntary training is the most common standard compared to mandated trainings (Amar et al., 2015). Although Title IX mandates that education and training opportunities must be available to students, there is ambiguity regarding the SV curriculum that is offered. According to Title IX, colleges are responsible for explaining the SV prevention protocols and resources available at their specific institutions. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), schools are also responsible for informing students of their rights and obligations under Title IX. A key issue is that there is no standard for the SV prevention programming offered in higher education.

Hansen-Breitenbecher (2000) defines SV prevention programming as any training that is hypothesized by its creators to impact SV attitudes and behaviors. Topics include empathy to victims, increasing knowledge around sexual assault, reporting information, and bystander intervention (Worthen & Wallace, 2018). These programs can range from 45 minutes to two hours and include information around sexual assault, rape myths, sex practices, as well as risk-related dating behaviors (Hansen & Breitenbecher, 2000). Many practitioners believe that college orientations are prime occasions to deliver SV prevention training. This is because the first year of a student's time in college is when they are most likely to become victims of SV during their higher education careers (Amar et al., 2014; Orchowski et al., 2015). This first-year timeframe is known as the *red zone* (Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Pryor & Hughes, 2015). These researchers have found no evidence that prevention programs reduce SV acts on college campuses.

SV prevention programming was first introduced to colleges in the United States in the 1980s but did not become common practice until after the implementation of the Clery Act in

1990 (Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Worthen & Wallace, 2018). The Clery Act mandates that all institutions receiving federal funds report crime statistics on their campuses, including SV crimes (Nobles et al., 2013; Wood et al., 2017). This act plays a prominent role in holding institutions accountable for following the policies articulated in Title IX. Although the Clery Act begins to promote accountability, many scholars believe the lack of specific reporting requirements may have a negative impact on this liability for institutions (Wood et al., 2017). However, accountability became more prominent in 2014 when the Obama administration made public the list of institutions who were under federal investigation for failing to respond to instances of SV according to the standards documented in Title IX (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). The Obama administration grew that list to include 304 investigations at 223 different colleges (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). This list is still public today and has continued to grow. With these policies and procedures in place, institutions rely on SV prevention education to deplete the number of SV acts on campus.

Critics of the Title IX mandate to provide students with SV prevention training argue that the policy does not contain specific prevention training standards. Since programming is not required, not all students will necessarily receive the information and therefore, a lack of consistency in SV education continues to exist (Freitas, 2018). There is a lack of research indicating that existing programming is beneficial in decreasing SV acts (Amar et al., 2015). SV prevention predominantly places responsibility on the survivor (Hong & Marine, 2018). This is problematic since gender discrimination plays a role in dictating that women are typically the victims of SV. Many SV prevention program developers consider gender in program design (Bradley et al., 2009). The three prominent SV prevention program designs include female-only training, male-only training, and coed training.

Approximately 95 percent of U.S. colleges have policies that address sexual assault (DeLong et al., 2018). However, there is a lack of research on how these policies are applied and if they are effective (Holland et al., 2020). In addition, nearly 80 percent of women do not report SV (Freitas, 2018). Feminist theory illustrates that objectification occurs prior to SV occurrences, as well as after (Gervais & Eagan, 2017). SV survivors are often objectified during the reporting process. They are portrayed as deserving the violence due to how they dressed or the way they acted. Suggesting that an individual is deserving of violence based on their appearance or sexual behaviors removes the humanity from the individual. Society has found it easier to blame objects rather than people.

In 2015, 90 percent of colleges reported that no sexual assaults occurred on their campus (Becker, 2017). This statistic drastically differs from the national average of one in four women experiencing sexual assault in higher education (DeLong et al., 2018; Fonow et al., 1992; Hines et al., 2015). Research indicates that 4-8 percent of female SV survivors report victimization to campus authorities and 2 percent report to the police. These statistics indicate that SV is drastically underreported (Fisher et al., 2002). Of the SV crimes that are reported, it is predicted that over 70 percent are not prosecuted (Shaw et al., 2017).

Research indicates that students fear coming forward to report SV acts that they have experienced or witnessed because historically SV survivors have been ridiculed, shamed, or not believed (Moore & Baker, 2016). Radical feminist theory demonstrates how this continuous cycle that perpetuates violence creates environments in which students do not feel comfortable in institutional reporting systems, and therefore do not make the effort to report (James & Lee, 2015). Radical feminism also argues that women's freedom requires freedom from male-controlled oppression (Fahs, 2014). Sexual freedom requires freedom from the societal pressures

of having sex with men, as well as liberation from being treated as sexual objects. The culmination of a lack of standardization in SV perpetration accountability, prevention curriculum, policy, and legislation are contributing factors to the persistence of SV on college campuses.

### ***The Influence of Male Power on Sexual Violence Prevention***

A reason a higher education institution may underreport SV is to protect the image of the institution. Organizations such as fraternities and male athletics can help enhance the image of an institution. These organizations typically reinforce rape myth acceptance due to the promotion of masculine gender norms (Navarro & Tewksbury, 2019; Seabrook & Ward, 2019). These beliefs are rooted in masculine characteristics of power and control.

Fraternity organizations control social spaces on college campuses (Seabrook & Ward, 2019). They do this by hosting large-scale parties that attract the student community. These parties typically provide students with access to large amounts of alcohol. This access to alcohol is enticing, especially for underage students. Even in fraternity and sorority life, where the distribution of alcohol is common, it is not always equitable. For example, sororities are allowed to have parties on campus, but they are usually not permitted to provide alcohol. Fraternities on the other hand, typically can provide alcohol. This access provides fraternities power over the social scene on campus (Seabrook & Ward, 2019).

The power of fraternities increases due to their selective membership process. These organizations consist of male-only memberships. The organizations hold male privilege on campus and exert this power to control different spaces on campus (Seabrook & Ward, 2019). In addition to having higher rape myth and gender norm acceptance, fraternity men are believed to have higher SV involvement. SV scholarship indicates that compared to non-fraternity men,

members of fraternities tend to be more accepting of sexual aggression and are more likely to be SV perpetrators (Seabrook et al., 2018).

Fraternity involvement in SV and the prestige these men have on campus is important to note, because SV literature indicates that fraternity men's control of environments does not end in higher education. According to researchers such as Chang (2014), 2 percent of Americans participate in fraternities. However, 80 percent of Fortune 500 executives, 76 percent of U.S. senators and congressmen, 85 percent of Supreme Court justices, and many U.S. presidents have been in fraternities. These statistics indicate that fraternity men hold some of the highest positions of power in this country and continue to dictate the sexual narrative within society.

In addition, male athletic programs, especially winning athletic teams, are typically high revenue generators for institutions (Wiersma-Mosley et al., 2017). Therefore, successful athletes become highly celebrated and idolized on campus. As a result, campus administrators may be less likely to hold negative opinions toward fraternity men and male athletes compared to female SV victims. By condoning toxic masculinity, as well as environments of rape-myth acceptance, higher education is contributing to the creation of citizens who become leaders and decision-makers post college graduation. Consequently, college environments influence the SV culture in today's society and for future generations.

A study examining the 2014 Clery Act reported rapes indicated that factors such as fraternity life, athletics, and athletic revenue influenced SV reporting (Wiersma-Mosley et al., 2017). Institutions with these factors had significantly higher reports of rapes compared to institutions who did not have fraternity life or athletics on their campuses. The institutions included in this study consisted of over 1,000 public and private four-year institutions. In the report, over 800 rapes were reported from these institutions. However, as previously mentioned,

SV is drastically underreported. SV scholarship also suggests that students are more likely to report SV when they trust the reporting system (Amar et al., 2015). This trust decreases when SV victims and survivors believe they are partially responsible for the incident. This is especially true when alcohol is involved.

For many students, attending college is their first experience of independence. This transition may cause students to struggle to meet new people, make friends, and navigate social environments. As a result, these social pressures typically encourage students to participate in party culture (Lasky et al., 2017). Party culture involves individuals engaging in behaviors they typically would not do normally outside of the party setting. An example is participating in hookup culture. Alcohol is a main motivating factor for these non-characteristic behaviors. In addition, party culture includes the excessive use of alcohol. The idea that all college students drink is a norm in higher education. This norm motivates students to misuse and abuse alcohol in party environments. Research indicates that there is a strong correlation between campus drinking and sexual assault victimization (Boyle & Walker, 2016). In addition, SV literature implies that students with increased alcohol intake at parties have more positive mindsets toward criminal behaviors (Lasky et al., 2017).

Criminal behaviors associated with binge drinking include SV and drugging. Some existing research suggests that one in thirteen students report suspecting or knowing they were drugged by another individual. This act involves a perpetrator putting drugs in victims' drinks without their knowledge (Coker et al., 2016). Undergraduate students who participate in party culture tend to become victims of drugging at higher rates compared to their peers who do not participate (Lasky et al., 2017). Students who drink heavily at parties are seen as easier targets. This is because perpetrators view the victims as having a decreased sense of awareness, which

makes it easier for perpetrators to drug victims without their knowledge. According to a longitudinal study where over 6,000 college students were surveyed, over 600 students indicated that they knew they were drugged, knew a peer that was drugged, or they admitted to being a perpetrator who drugged another individual (Swan et al., 2017). The majority of these participants indicated that the motivation for the drugging was sexual assault. These data indicate that drugging an individual is a more commonplace tactic to commit an act of SV and is more easily committed in party settings where excessive amounts of alcohol are consumed. These dangerous environments indicate that students are not gaining the knowledge necessary to prevent SV from persisting in these campus settings.

### **Gaps in Research and Programming**

As demonstrated in this literature review, there is an abundance of research examining SV in higher education. However, there is a lack of research indicating that SV prevention efforts result in a decrease of SV acts. Instead, existing literature demonstrates how these programs build confidence and self-efficacy in SV defense tactics, as well as decrease rape myth acceptance. However, higher education administrators need to ask themselves if these are the ultimate goals of SV prevention training. Can SV prevention trainings be considered successful if they do not clearly demonstrate a prevention of SV on campuses by decreasing the number of SV incidents? Institutional leaders need to determine the purpose of implementing prevention training if not for the deterrence of SV on campuses.

It is important to note that identifying the precise number of SV acts occurring in higher education is a difficult number to report for several reasons. First, the lack of reporting calls for reporting estimates, instead of exact numbers. In addition, as demonstrated earlier in this literature review, many higher education institutions are under investigation for potentially

violating Title IX SV policies and procedures. Some institutions are concerned about their reputations and will therefore abstain from reporting SV incidents. This decision contributes to inaccurate SV reporting numbers (Spencer et al., 2017). As a result, there is a deficiency in the existing literature, raising questions as to whether SV prevention efforts implemented in the last several decades have truly had a meaningful impact on students. Including student voices in SV scholarship could help uncover which prevention efforts can create change.

The views of numerous higher education stakeholders are included in SV literature. Student voices are included but in a limited capacity. Student perceptions are recorded in response to specific SV incidents, typically SV occurrences that gain mass attention or that are publicized in the media. Student reactions are also documented in the literature for particular SV prevention programs as a means for administrators to improve SV programs for future students. However, since prevention programming is not indicative of decreasing SV incidents on campus, it is important to include student voices regarding SV and overall campus climate. In particular, voices of marginalized communities are oftentimes left out of SV conversations and decision-making processes.

It is vital to address different identities in the SV narrative. Literature demonstrates that when individuals from marginalized communities are ignored, systems of oppression are further stimulated (Wodda & Panfil, 2018). When discussing SV, the inclusion of intersectionality can help transition from viewing sex as a simple action to centering attention around building positive sexual relationships. By centering relationships within sexual acts, sex moves away from a mere act and becomes more about the relationship between individuals. Further understanding how individuals show up in sexual relationships based on their identities can help higher education professionals better promote healthy sexual relationships for all students from various



backgrounds. Society can then consider how SV prevention, consent, and safety impact gender, sexual identity and race in different ways.

Most existing SV research focuses on white, cisgender, and heterosexual identities. However, as previously presented in this literature, no one is exempt from experiencing SV. Therefore, it is vital higher education professionals create safe environments for all students. In order to cultivate safer campus environments, practitioners must better understand the needs of students from marginalized communities.

Systemic racism is apparent in SV campus climates (Scott et al., 2017). However, much of the existing literature does not include study samples specific to students of color. For example, many Historically Black Colleges are left out of SV research (Wooten, 2017). Further research is needed for students of color who are SV survivors, as well as individuals who are accused of SV perpetration. Radical feminism emphasizes an intersectional approach (Grosser & Tyler, 2021). Feminists such as bell hooks speak to the many forms of subordination to which women can be subjected (Glick, 2000). This can be especially true for women of color.

Women of color can face additional scrutiny when reporting SV on college campuses. In addition to gender norms, they also experience racial stereotypes. Society considers white women to be the pure gender. White women are viewed as socialized, rule-followers, and hold high moral standards, which include saving sex for marriage. Since white women are depicted in this image of how society believes the ideal woman should act, they typically receive more sympathy in the reporting process compared to women of color (Harris, 2017). Unlike white women, women of color, specifically Black women, are viewed to be more promiscuous by society (Freitas, 2018; Wooten, 2017). These examples illustrate how objectification not only exists in regard to gender but also with respect to race.

As previously mentioned, there is a notable absence of existing research and literature regarding how SV impacts all genders. The majority of research only includes the gender binary of males and females (Marine, 2017). This is problematic since research indicates that students identifying as transgender and gender non-conforming experience the highest rates of SV victimization compared to males and females (Coulter & Rankin, 2018). A criticism of radical feminism is that some of these ideologists are trans-exclusionary when addressing SV (Glick, 2000). However, feminists with more sex positive views have strived for more inclusivity for individuals identifying as transgender, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming. These individuals recognize that women are not the only gender objectified. Therefore, SV needs to be addressed for all genders.

Similar to marginalized gender communities, SV scholarship speaks little to the experiences of individuals who do not identify with heterosexuality. Students identifying as gay, lesbian, or part of the gender-queer spectrum experience SV at higher volumes compared to heterosexual students (Coulter & Rankin, 2018; Hirsch & Khan, 2020). In addition, some literature has indicated that students who belong to all-gender-loving identities are at even greater risk for experiencing SV compared to their gay and lesbian peers (Garvey et al., 2017). SV prevention literature illustrates that higher education response protocol does not cater to sexual identity inclusivity (Valenti, 2010). As a result, queer students do not trust that their SV reports will be accurately addressed. In addition, queer students often fear that they will experience additional shame when reporting SV. This includes shame of being sexually violated, but also the shame that accompanies discrimination based on their sexual identity (Garvey et al., 2017). Throughout history, much of radical feminism has focused on heterosexuality (Glick, 2000). In more recent years, some feminists have come to adopt more lesbian feminist thoughts

and have fought for gay marriage equality. Feminists continue to work toward better uncovering the fluidity of sexuality and recognizing that objectification can occur within same sex relationships.

By uncovering more about students' SV prevention needs, higher education administrators can have a better understanding as to how students feel regarding their campus safety. Administrators can then identify more accurately the successes and challenges of existing SV policies and procedures. Once this information is consolidated, administrators and policymakers can begin creating more intentional SV programming to better meet student needs. An increase in student inclusion could also build trust between students and college personnel, which may lead to an increase in student confidence in the institution's SV reporting system, judicial processes, and prevention programming. These elements could aid in creating safer sexual relationships between students and may lead to institutional efforts that demonstrate a decrease in SV in higher education contexts.

### **Summary and Call for Additional Research**

In conclusion, existing literature demonstrates how multiple factors contribute to toxic college environments that allow, and often promote, SV. These dynamics include hookup cultures, ambiguous SV policies, procedures, and prevention training, along with the absence of continuous and standardized sex education. These factors cultivate environments that put college students at extreme risk for experiencing SV. Higher education administrators and policymakers have a responsibility to keep their campus communities safe. They have the power to shift the campus culture for their communities. An initial step to improve these SV cultures that have remained stagnant for decades is to address the main community that is being affected. Students are experiencing SV at extraordinary rates. This literature review concludes with an urgent call

for action by future researchers, higher education administrators, and policymakers. These stakeholders need to reexamine SV climates in higher education and implement a drastic change in SV prevention training, as well as employ SV policies and procedures that better meet student needs.

The literature demonstrates that SV is not only problematic in higher education, but is, moreover, a systemic issue grounded in the conditioning of society to accept sexual mistreatment and violence (Freitas, 2018). Scholarship presented in this literature review grounded in radical feminist theory and objectification theory support this argument by demonstrating the treatment of women as sexual objects over which men project their dominance is a systemic issue. Acts of SV must be viewed as systems of male dominance over women, instead of isolated acts of violence conducted by an individual man towards a single woman. SV needs to be addressed on a global level. However, until that can be accomplished, higher education cannot neglect the SV climates that exist within their own communities

This literature review demonstrates how SV is engrained in campus climates. All community members play a role including policymakers, administrators, faculty, staff, and students. Students are experiencing SV at substantial rates, yet their voices are missing from the conversation. The literature suggests that creating SV prevention initiatives based on the assumptions of student needs may not be an effective method in diminishing SV on college campuses. Moving forward, future SV prevention initiatives need to include a collection of student voices. Student inclusivity can help uncover the essential impact SV has on campus climates. Once this is better determined, institutional administrators can work with entire campus communities in unity to begin developing SV preventative strategies that are effective for

everyone. As a result, the U.S. higher education system may finally see the improvement that is so drastically needed in diminishing SV on college campuses.

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

This study drew on aspects of phenomenological inquiry to uncover college students' perceptions of SV climate on their campus. I aligned the study's rationale, setting, sample size, data collection and analysis processes, strategies to enhance trustworthiness, and study limitations and delimitations with the characteristics of a phenomenological approach. I also provided evidence grounded in scholarship to support the rationale for this chosen methodology.

#### **Rationale for Research Design**

The objective of this research study was to examine college students' lived experiences of a SV climate on a singular campus. Drawing on aspects of phenomenology helped me best achieve this goal because the primary focus of phenomenological methodology is on individual experiences regarding a particular phenomenon (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). According to radical feminist theory, SV must be viewed as a systemic problem and not one-time incidents (Allan, 2011). Therefore, the higher education climate must be examined as a system to create effective change. In this study, I attempted to uncover the experiences of college students around the phenomenon of SV climates on a college campus. As a result, I arrived at an essence of the shared experiences of the participants. As indicated in existing literature, SV can create feelings of fear and anxiety amongst people. Therefore, an ideal approach for this study was drawing on aspects of phenomenological methodology because phenomenological studies are best suited for understanding affective emotions (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Drawing on properties of phenomenological research to uncover students' feelings and emotions about SV climate on their campus could aid higher education professionals in better understanding the needs of students. By identifying student needs, college personnel can then create intentional change to meet these specific needs.

Phenomenological studies bring voices to individuals whose stories are not typically told (Johnson & Parry, 2015). There is a lack of SV research involving student voices in the existing literature. A fundamental characteristic of radical feminist theory is that women are viewed as a group or class, instead of as individuals. As a result, radical feminist theory views SV as a systemic issue grounded in gender inequality (Grosser & Tyler, 2021). Therefore, these voices need to be included in the research to help influence higher education SV prevention and policy. Including phenomenological practices best aided in bringing student voices to higher education SV conversations that are needed to help college administrators and policymakers to create change for future students. Drawing on a phenomenological methodology has the potential to provide college personnel with a better understanding of the student experience. This goal aligns with the phenomenological characteristic of the appropriate audience of the study being practitioners in the field. Phenomenological research should be directed towards practitioners in the field that is being studied (Starkes & Trinidad, 2007). Conducting this study with higher educational professionals in mind will provide institutional leadership with additional knowledge to better create intentional and beneficial SV prevention training and policy in the future.

A goal of this study is to help college SV prevention efforts. The individuals creating prevention policy and programming are higher education leaders. Therefore, directing the results of the study to this population helps influence change, which is in alignment with the goals of phenomenological research. The ultimate goal of drawing on aspects of phenomenological research for this particular study was to gain a better understanding of SV climate from student perspectives. In doing so, as the researcher, I uncovered what preventative measures student participants said positively influenced their experience, as well as the challenges they face. As a

result, this research can aid current and future student affairs practitioners and policymakers in creating more intentional SV prevention programming.

### **Research Setting**

The research setting for this study is a public Midwestern university in the United States. This institution has a population of over 50,000 students. This includes more than 40,000 undergraduate students, approximately 10,000 graduate students, and 3,000 professional students. Approximately 32,000 are identified by the institution as women and 30,000 are identified as men. Nearly 14,500 students identify as a racial minority. Approximately 4,600 identify as Asian American, 4,200 identify as African American, 3,200 identify as Hispanic, and 2,400 identify as two or more races.

This institution was selected because it reports drastically lower SV statistics compared to the national average. Speaking to students at this institution uncovered factors that influence SV reporting. In 2020, this institution reported less than 1,000 SV crimes, which drastically differs from the national average of approximately one in four college students experiencing SV. According to the Clery Act, federally funded institutions must report acts of violence on their campuses. These reports are public and can be found on the U.S. Department of Education's Campus Safety and Security website (U.S. Department of Education, 2022a). The institution was one of the numerous higher education institutions listed on the Title IX investigation list as of early 2021 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022b). Specifically, the institution is being investigated for several types of accused discrimination accounts including multiple investigations regarding how the institution handled SV reports on campus. By uncovering student perceptions of SV on this campus, my goal is that the findings from this research study will aid institutional stakeholders in identifying prevention strategies that are both positively and



negatively influencing student life. Institutional personnel can now make the appropriate changes to create a safer campus environment.

This specific institution was also chosen due to its prominent athletics program, as well as its highly active fraternity and sorority life. Over ten percent of the institution's student population participates in university fraternity and sorority life. This is important because there is an abundance of existing literature that speaks to athletics and fraternity life perpetuating SV climates on college campuses (Seabrook & Ward, 2019; Seabrook et al., 2018; Wiersma-Mosley et al., 2017). As noted in the literature review, studies have alluded to fraternity and athletic cultures consisting of higher SV incidents compared to other campus activities and organizations (Wiersma-Mosley, 2017). The goal of this study is to help address the stigmas surrounding SV and its connection to athletic and fraternity cultures by including student stories in the SV narrative. In addition, feminist theory identifies dominance as pivotal within society (Weiser, 2017). Feminist theorists believe gender norms are highly accepted within society and perpetuate systems of male power over women. As outlined in the literature review, cultures of male athletics and fraternities further promote toxic gender norms. Feminist theory was used to assist in the research site selection process. As a result, I as the researcher, may better understand how gender roles and dominance influence SV climates in higher education.

### **Research Sample**

Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling technique. Snowball sampling occurs through convenience sampling when the researcher identifies possible known participants or gatekeepers who may have access to potential participants (Emerson, 2015). Convenience sampling was needed in this study since I as the researcher was neither employed at nor attended the university being studied. Since I did not have a direct connection to the campus, I did not

know the student population as well as current university faculty and staff members who could better identify students who would be willing to participate.

I sought and received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from DePaul University. DePaul is the institution which I was attending for my doctoral degree and where university faculty were overseeing my research. I sought IRB approval from my research site. However, I was informed by the research site that I did not need approval since no personnel from this specific institution would be assisting in the study data collection or analysis processes. Instead, I received the institution's IRB office approval to have institutional staff assist me in the recruitment process for the study. This level of involvement by university staff did not require IRB approval from the research site according to the IRB office.

As the researcher, I partnered with the university's Student Life office to outreach to potentially interested individuals. The Student Life office staff directed me to a public website that provided student organization leader emails. I was provided permission by the institution's Student Life office, IRB office, and DePaul University's IRB office to email organization leaders who were listed on this public website. Some of these organization leaders who I contacted then passed information about my study to their organization members. In alignment with the snowball sampling approach, I also asked participants to recruit their peers to participate in the study. Individuals who expressed interest then filled out a questionnaire (Appendix A). The questionnaire included questions to verify that individuals met the study requirements. The questionnaire also asked for demographic information, as well as campus involvement. Eight participants were then selected with an eye towards including individuals from various demographic backgrounds and identities, as well as individuals with varying student organization

and club affiliations. By creating a diverse participant pool, multiple student voices were examined. As a result, findings shed light on a variety of student experiences

### **Participant Demographics**

Eight current college students from a single institution participated in the study. The participants were required to be enrolled in full-time coursework and be pursuing an undergraduate degree. Transfer students were not asked to participate since some institutions offer different SV prevention training to transfer students compared to students who began at the institution during their first year. This requirement helped create consistency for me as the researcher to better compare data across participants. During the interview process, these students shared their experiences around the shared phenomenon of SV climate on their campus. All participants identified as current full-time, undergraduate students at the time of the study. This was in accordance with the credit hour policy outlined by the university. Participants ranged in year in school from first year to fourth year student standing. One participant identified as a first-year student, three participants identified as second-year students, two participants identified as third-year students, and two participants identified as fourth-year students. None of the students identified as transfer students, and all students indicated that they lived in university-sponsored housing at some point during their college career. Three participants lived on campus at the time of the study.

Participants majored in different fields of study and differed in their involvement in student organizations across campus. Regarding identities, two participants identified as male, five participants identified as female, and one participant identified as gender nonconforming and non-binary. Seven participants identified as white, and one participant identified as Asian/Asian American. Six students identified as heterosexual, one participant identified as

lesbian and queer, and one participant chose not to disclose their sexual identity. To minimize bias, the participants were assigned a pseudonym attached to their bio to better contextualize quotes provided in the findings chapter (see Table I).

Mike is a second-year student majoring in computer science and engineering. He is part of the men's golf team and involved in the sports analytics club.

Brad is a first-year student majoring in environmental engineering. He is currently not involved in any student organizations but was in the process of exploring different student organizations with the intention of joining one in the near future. He was also in the process of finding a job.

Sarah is a second-year student majoring in human resources and minoring in cultural anthropology. She is part of a scholarship program and lives in the scholarship house, which is where she plans to reside during her entire collegiate career. Sarah is also part of a business fraternity on campus.

Katie is a fourth-year student majoring in zoology with a cultural anthropology minor. She is on the veterinary track. She is part of a Greek cultural fraternity and a member of the student alumni council.

Lisa is a second-year student majoring in chemical engineering. She competes on the alpine skiing club sport team and works as a photographer taking photos at varsity sporting events. She is also involved in a Catholic outreach organization.

Jessica is fourth-year student majoring in accounting. She is minoring in environmental economics, development, and sustainability. She participates in the outdoors club, as well as a financial club that provides financial advising to student peers on campus.

Hannah is a third-year student majoring in behavioral neuroscience. She is minoring in criminology and bioethics. She is on a pre-law track. She is part of an ethics team that researches opioid addiction and is also a Resident Assistant (RA) in the Campus Housing department on campus.

Casey is a third-year student majoring in environmental policy. She is the vice president of a club that promotes sexual health awareness.

Table 1. Study Participants' Demographic Information

Name*	Gender	Race	Sexuality	Year in School
Mike	Male	White	Heterosexual	2nd Year
Brad	Male	White	Heterosexual	1st Year
Sarah	Female	White	Heterosexual	2nd Year
Katie	Female	White	Heterosexual	4th Year
Lisa	Female	White	Heterosexual	2nd Year
Jessica	Female	White	Heterosexual	4th Year
Hannah	Female	Asian/ Asian American	Did Not Disclose	3rd Year
Casey	Gender Nonconforming/ Non Binary	White	Lesbian/ Queer	3rd Year

*Notes. \*Participants were each provided a pseudonym to protect their identity.*

The discussion of SV has the potential to trigger emotions for participants (Ellsberg & Heise, 2002). Therefore, it is imperative that researchers reflect on how their questions could have a negative impact on participants such as re-traumatizing them. As such, I reviewed informed consent with study participants. Participants were supplied with a series of reminders and resources prior to the interviews notifying them that they could stop the interview at any time and refuse to answer questions (See Appendix B). The World Health Organization also

advises researchers investigating sensitive topics to provide study participants with resources that can help them regarding their situation (Ellsberg & Heise, 2002). I provided participants with resources from their university counseling center, as well as their university materials for SV support. As indicated in the literature review, students do not always trust institutional reporting and prevention protocols. Therefore, I also offered students state and national SV support materials, along with a SV crisis hotline number as additional support.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Semi-structured interviews were the best form of data collection for this study in alignment with aspects of phenomenological interviewing (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Interviewing was most appropriate to answering the central research question for this study because this method of data collection allows participants to share their stories and experiences with the interviewer (Bevan, 2014; Quinney et al., 2016). Interviews create intimate environments where participants can share insight that may not be possible through surveys or focus groups. Radical feminist theory demonstrates how SV are acts that keep victims in a state of terror (Orchowski et al., 2015). Leveraging interviews to collect data may have provided a more comfortable environment for participants with decreased levels of intimidation or peer pressure. Through interviews, I as the researcher had the opportunity to build rapport with participants, as well as ask strategic follow-up questions to better understand their lived experiences of SV climates on their campus.

One interview, approximately 45 minutes to one hour in length, was conducted with each participant. All interviews were conducted via a Zoom call due to the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the health and safety of both the participants and the researcher. The interviews were conducted during the second semester of the academic year. This timeline provided appropriate

time for participants who identified as first-year students to have experienced a minimum of one full semester at the institution. As a result, they were able to speak to their experience of living on campus and being exposed to a SV climate.

The goal was to conduct these interviews in-person. However, as the researcher, I was prepared to adapt to external factors that prevented in-person interviews from occurring. The world is still experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic. The time came to begin the research study, and the U.S Health Department determined that in-person interviews could jeopardize the health of participants or myself as the researcher. As a result, I minimized risk by conducting the interviews using Zoom, the online video call. I employed the use of a recording system called Otter to record the online video calls to best be able to transcribe and analyze the data from the online video interviews.

During the interviewing process, I acted as the interviewer. I also generated memos and journal entries, as well as collected and analyzed relevant institutional artifacts, such as the university code of conduct and SV prevention programming curriculum documents. In phenomenological research, protocol includes reflective journaling and the creation of memos (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The goal of this method is for me as the interviewer to actively listen to participants and let the words of the participants create meaning of their experiences as outlined in phenomenological research. The collection of artifacts was vital to this research study because they could serve as supplemental data sources to support participants' experiences with current institutional SV protocol.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

As the researcher, I identified themes from participant responses by using data analysis methods in alignment with phenomenological research. I began by precoding interview

transcripts to create a foundation in the coding process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I then used horizontalization, structural description, textural description, and composite description, which are characteristic of data analysis in phenomenological inquiry. Horizontalization involves viewing all perceptions as valuable (Moustakas, 1994). This included perceptions that I, as the researcher, may not have deemed valuable. For the sake of interpreting data, researchers must use horizontalization to uncover perceptions of which they may not be aware. Researchers must also identify conditions that influence an experience, which can be done through a process known as structural description (Moustakas, 1994). By identifying the conditions of a participant's experience, researchers can better connect with the experience. Textural descriptions provide the *what* of an experience (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Textural descriptions are words from the participants verbatim describing the core of their experience around a particular phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). As best practice to uncover textual descriptions, researchers can use participant's own words to speak to the perceptions they are articulating. For example, using terms like the participant *felt* or *believed* to maintain the integrity of the participant's experience. Researchers then pull themes together from the core experiences. They also reflect on their own lived experiences in an attempt to best alleviate their own experiences and judgements. This helps maintain the truth of the study participants' descriptions. Researchers can then use composite description, which combines the structural and textural descriptions together to create the world of the participant around their lived experience (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). As a result, the researcher comes to have a better understanding of the participant's perceptions that they may not have previously had prior to utilizing this tactic. These strategies are essential in uncovering the essence of participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994).



The unique characteristic of phenomenological research is that it seeks to understand the essence of a phenomenon from a participant's lived experience (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Unlike other research approaches that may focus on the participants themselves or the environments they inhabit, phenomenological research seeks to make meaning of the relationships between the individual and their environment. In this particular study, I, as the researcher, was not looking to better understand college students or sexually violent college environments. Instead, I sought to understand how college students perceive SV environments on their campus to better inform higher education personnel of how SV may be persisting for students on their campuses. In alignment with a radical feminist framework, this approach helped me as the researcher to examine higher education as a larger system by exploring the experiences of multiple study participants to help decrease SV acts on college campuses (Allan, 2011). As a best practice, phenomenological research includes the use of imagination and detailed descriptions of a participant's phenomenon. The aforementioned methods of data analysis can assist researchers in better understanding an experience they may not have previously been able to comprehend (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015).

Throughout the data analysis process, I attempted to exclude my own bias by using phenomenological techniques of bridling and bracketing (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Bridling refers to the loosening of assumptions we as researchers may have to create more room for phenomenon discovery (Vagle et al., 2006). Bridling helps guard against researchers from jumping to conclusions or bringing their assumptions into the study. After the researcher listens and reflects upon a participant's experience, the practice of bridling involves the researcher beginning the process of tightening up their understanding of the experience. However, this tightening up process is based on the participant's views and not the preconceived views of the

researcher. Bracketing involves the process of the researcher setting aside their own beliefs and preconceived notions about an experience (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). As a result, researchers are better able to actively listen to study participants and be more open to the participants' perspectives.

I then continued to analyze data by applying a coding strategy to better align with my research question (Bailey, 2018). This process included ensuring themes connected to college students' perceptions of SV climates on their campus. I did so by using an open coding strategy to organize data around commonalities. This process included further examination of interview transcripts, researcher memos, journal entries, field notes, and research artifacts (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I began the process by precoding these data sources, which involved rereading and analyzing the data. Analyzing the data included identifying repeated words and phrases that stood out from the materials. I then conducted a more thorough examination process, in which I went line-by-line and assigned specific codes that further captured what was occurring within the data. The documentation of patterns from the interview transcripts, memos, journal entries, notes, and artifacts aided me as the researcher in establishing themes. The coding process continued with the use of axial coding to segment out the themes into categories (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Once themes were appointed to different categories, I then assigned code definitions to better differentiate the codes.

I concluded the data analysis process by developing themes emergent from the established codes. I used critical reflection to determine key takeaway concepts from the themes, as well as identified missing conceptions from the themes in need of future research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The themes helped me as a researcher develop recommendations about students' perceptions of SV climate that can be shared with administrators to speak to the student

experience. Although aspects of phenomenology provide several ways to best uncover participants' experiences of a phenomenon during the data collection and analysis processes, I implemented strategies to increase rigor and validity of the study.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research has unique validity criteria standards including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Credibility is a form of internal validity referring to the research design and the researcher's data. One way to achieve credibility is to include the practice of methodological triangulation. This involves examining multiple experiences, as well as multiple data sources. In this study, I journaled, kept detailed memos and field notes in addition to semi-structured interviews as a tactic of methodological triangulation to increase credibility. Transferability refers to external validity in that the goal of phenomenological research is not to make generalizations, but rather the information from these studies is to be transferrable or applicable to inform other contexts (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Best practices for increasing transferability are including detailed descriptions of participants' experiences. As the researcher, my structured reflexivity processes of journaling and keeping memos and field notes aided in conveying the detailed experiences of the participants. I used these tactics to bring more sincerity to the study by identifying my assumptions in part, shaped by working in higher education, throughout the research process to increase transferability (Tracy, 2010).

Dependability occurs when researchers supply evidence for their arguments and the data is coherent with the arguments (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Strategies for achieving dependability include the sequencing of methods and aligning the methods to the research question. Therefore, for this study I was intentional and strategic in my choice of methodology by aligning all study

design components to meet the needs of the research question. Confirmability is the acknowledgement of the researcher's biases (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Best practices for applying confirmability to practice are reflecting on one's own biases as a researcher and determining how biases present themselves within the study. It was important that I, as the researcher, remained transparent and honest when analyzing the study data, because the study contained questions regarding the sensitive topic of SV. This strategy allowed me to keep the integrity of the participants' comments to more accurately portray their experiences. In addition, conducting external audits can aid in achieving confirmability. For the sake of this study, I used dialogic engagement by having my notes, memos, and data analysis processes reviewed by a certified SV advocate (Bailey, 2018). By combining my efforts as the researcher who is versed in SV literature, along with a SV advocate who is immersed in the field, I better ensured the validity of the study (Creswell, 2013).

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Being a sensitive topic, SV may have hindered participants from being honest and open during interviews, especially since the participants had not met me prior to being asked about their experiences with SV climates. A limitation of this study is that the timeframe allowed for less opportunity for me as the researcher to build rapport with the participants. In standard phenomenological methodology, it is best practice to conduct three interviews with each participant to build rapport, as well as further explore a participant's experience over time (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Although I am drawing on aspects of phenomenological practice by conducting an interview with each participant, I am doing so within a shorter timeframe. To best address this limitation, I was strategic in the development of the interview protocol to create a comfortable experience for participants so they could best answer questions reflective of their

true experiences. I did so by not consciously excluding any questions about direct experiences as SV victims, survivors, or perpetrators. I also began the interviews by informing participants that there were no right or wrong answers. I also informed them that I, as the researcher, was conducting the interviews to learn from them. I also left time for participants to ask me, the researcher, questions about the study

A goal of this study was to fill a missing gap within SV research. This gap includes the lack of student voices within existing SV research. This study also aimed to include insight from a variety of individuals who hold different identities and share stories from various backgrounds. However, the study did not include participants from marginalized communities, especially in terms of racial identity. This is a limitation of the study because existing research indicates that individuals of color can experience SV differently compared to their white peers. For example, women of color who are victims of SV are found to be less believed during the reporting process compared to white women (Freitas, 2018; Wooten, 2017). In addition, men of color are more likely to be accused and convicted of sexual assault compared to white men (Zounlome et al., 2019).

Although the intention of the study was to include participants identifying as Black or Latino/a, there were no current students at the selected institution who volunteered for the study. Participant recruitment strategy included contacting student organizations, and this tactic included reaching out to racial affinity organizations to offer students from different racial backgrounds the opportunity to participate in the study. It is vital to include perspectives from marginalized communities within research studies. However, from an ethical lens, research should never endanger human subjects. Therefore, researchers should not force or pressure anyone to participate in a study. Doing so could cause individuals trauma and harm. This does

not mean future research should not actively recruit individuals from marginalized communities to participate in future studies.

Moving forward, additional tactics could be taken to make members from marginalized racial communities more comfortable to participate. Examples of strategies include better communicating the study benefits to these communities. Future research studies could also include researchers from these communities. This tactic could help participants feel more comfortable participating if there is a researcher who looks like them. The lack of inclusion of voices from marginalized racial communities calls attention to the need for additional research.

I used a delimitation of selecting only one institution as the research setting. This parameter aided me as the researcher in better understanding the phenomenon of SV culture at a singular institution. It also ensured a realistic setting for a one-month study. Some critics may identify a limitation to this approach in that the study is not generalizable because it was conducted at a single institution. However, in accordance with phenomenological research, the goal of the study is not to make generalizations (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Instead, the goal is to call attention to lived experiences around a particular phenomenon and inform professionals in the particular field (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Examining the lived experiences of current students can better assist student affairs practitioners, as well as policymakers. Therefore, these field experts can tailor current programming and future SV prevention initiatives to best meet student needs to eliminate SV in higher education.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I stated the methodology, research site, as well as the participant recruitment process and participant demographics. I outlined the data collection and analysis methods and procedures. I also described issues of trustworthiness and listed limitations and

delimitations. In the next chapter, I will articulate the findings from the study. I will also identify the themes developed from the interviews.

## Chapter IV: Findings

This chapter presents the data results collected during this study. The goal of this study was to uncover college students' perceptions of the SV climate on their campus. In doing so, the interviews provided students the opportunity to include their voices in SV research. Student input is currently missing from SV research and literature. The inclusion of these voices can help higher education professionals in creating positive change on campuses to decrease acts of SV. The principal research question for this study is: What are college student's perceptions of SV climate on their campus? Sub-questions include: (1) What are students' feelings of SV safety on their campus?, (2) What environmental components contribute to feelings of safety?, (3) What cultural components contribute to feelings of safety?, (4) What institutional prevention policy and response, or lack thereof, do students find contribute to their feelings of safety? Participants' responses led to the identification of four primary themes which include: *naming SV fear*, *the normalization of SV*, *the university cover up*, and *students taking safety into their own hands*. These themes converge to uncover the phenomenon of SV climate from the observations of students.

### **Naming Sexual Violence Fear**

This theme discusses students' fear of SV on their college campus, the cause of SV fear, the environments that evoke SV fear, and the fear for specific community members. This identification of fear demonstrates reactions to the SV climate in higher education. Understanding student fear of SV lays the foundation that a SV climate exists in higher education.

When first asked about their sense of sexual violence safety on campus, many participants indicated that they feel safe. Participants made comments such as, "On campus I feel



very safe. I see police constantly, all the time – twenty-four seven” and “I think I don't feel unsafe if I think about like myself being a victim of sexual violence.” However, as the topic was discussed, students began to reveal this is not the truth. Students’ true sense of safety became apparent as participants spoke to their feelings of fear, as well as the causes and environments provoking the fear. Students spoke to generally feeling safe from SV on campus, but most participants went on to express that certain behaviors and campus environments are unsafe.

Some participants who described feeling general safety from SV on campus went on to include that their feelings of safety stem from their ability to be aware of their surroundings.

Lisa, the second-year student majoring in chemical engineering, said:

I would say I feel pretty, I would say I feel pretty safe. Um, I think it's mostly because like I'm surrounded by a really great group of people as well. And like, I'm not, you know, I'm not like walking around, like, in the middle of nowhere in [the surrounding campus community] at like, one in the morning, you know? So like, I, I'm just like, always very aware of my surroundings. That's something that I've worked on for like a really long time. And my parents were always really strict about that. Like, when I first came to college, so just like, not walking around, like on my phone, and just like always, um looking. I'm just, I'm always very aware of what's going on around me. And so that has pretty much helped, um, I'm still like, like, if I were to be out, like at those hours of the night, I would still be like, really cautious.

Students also avoid certain behaviors such as attending campus parties or bars by themselves. They also refrain from walking at night by themselves. Participants described these actions are necessary especially when engaging with alcohol in social settings. If these actions are not taken, students will be unsafe. According to all participants, settings involving the use of alcohol

typically increase one's risk of experiencing SV on campus or in the surrounding campus community. Brad, the first-year environmental engineering major, stated:

Around sexual violence I feel like you know, if you're like careful and being smart and you know, actually being aware of what can happen, and I feel like that's a big part too. Where you actually know it does happen that, you know, it's something to be aware of, and you be careful about that too. Like, you can be pretty safe. But then again, like if you're going to a party and not in the best state of mind, but then like, it can be kind of dangerous.

### ***Student Bodies Under Assault***

Participants indicated that if they are not staying alert, they are not safe because SV is a risk in some environments. When asked if SV is an issue on their campus, all but one participant indicated it is a problem. They indicated this is especially true when alcohol is involved. All participants said that drinking and partying contribute to an increased risk of SV. Some participants stated they believe these are the biggest contributing factors to experiencing SV on campus. Sarah, the second-year student majoring in human resources, stated, "I feel like it definitely... drinking does make [SV] happen more."

Students' SV fear stems from knowing individuals who have been sexually assaulted, hearing about situations that involve their peers, or personally being involved in situations that have made students feel uncomfortable or feel unsafe. One participant went on to explain their fear in more depth. They explained that they fear people may be looking to take advantage of others sexually. Other participants indicated the fear individuals may be too intoxicated to make decisions and can more easily be coerced into actions they typically would not engage in if they

were sober. Mike, the second-year computer science major and member of the men's club golf team, said:

I think sexual violence is an issue mostly in regards to like when it's combined with alcohol and other... like... other effects not related to like... yeah just mostly related to alcohol and drugs and stuff like that. When people go under the influence, a lot of issues happen. That's where a lot of the issues start.

He went on later to explain how this impacts his own personal romantic relationship when he said:

Let's say me and my girlfriend are drinking together, and I get more drunk than her or she gets more drunk than me - either way. And then somebody wants to do something that the other party isn't really willing to. It kind of all stems from just like the drinking part.

Environments heavily influence participants' feelings of SV safety. Participants indicated they typically feel less safe at bars and at campus parties. Hannah, the RA majoring in behavioral neuroscience, stated:

I think that just like with the additional factor of like being intoxicated, like maybe being an environment that you're not familiar with, like, and then like being off campus, like all three of those factors might create like a new, like an added risk of harm or like risk of being a victim of sexual violence just because like all three of them, kind of uncontrollable factors.

Students also feel unsafe walking in the dark at night. Walking alone was a fear for students when walking on campus, as well as off campus. When speaking of fear walking alone on campus, Casey, the third-year environmental policy major and Vice President of the safe sex student organization, said:

But also just like walking around campus, um, especially like through central campus where all the frats are.. like I walk home a lot alone in the dark because I'm dumb, but I love to walk, but... and it's just like always like in the back of my mind. So it's like not... it's not great.

Here Casey indicates the decision of walking home alone is not her smartest decision because the decision can directly impact her safety. Sarah said, "I'm kind of on edge when I'm walking off campus here at night at least." Furthermore, participants said off campus crime in general has spiked in recent months. Participants said they fear walking in the dark because they fear someone could more easily attack them at night while they are walking home. Attacks such as armed robberies occur off campus. These instances of violence provoke fear for students because they recognize they can be harmed in a variety of ways including sexual harm. Sarah stated:

Just like the history of the violence happening like off our... off campus I'd say makes me feel unsafe. Like there were a few robberies like last week like...there were three days like... like it was like during the day. Like people got robbed... like on the street like... during the day. I don't... I don't think this is every college campus, at least I hope it's not, but [this institution] definitely struggled with safety this past year.

Participants indicated both on-campus and off-campus environments can be unsafe because you do not know everyone in these environments and therefore, do not know their intentions. Students said, unfortunately, some intentions could be dangerous. Participants said it could be easier for someone to not have good intentions and to try to take advantage of you and sexually harm you. Jessica, the fourth-year accounting major, said:

In terms of safety, like between students, not just like the area, um... I don't know, I think you have to be careful because it's like such a big university. Like, if you go out,

you're interacting with a lot of people that like you don't know at all. You don't know... um like, there's a diverse group of people like in a good way and a bad way in terms of like, you don't.... you can't really like trust people's intentions, and it's so big, but it's not like, oh you're gonna know a friend of everyone you meet. So I think that definitely, like, you need to tread lightly in most situations here.

When taking these comments into account, although students indicated they feel safe from SV on campus, it became clear that there are environments where SV is causing a safety concern because known acts of violence are occurring. Numerous SV acts are causing students to identify environments that are less safe. Students are also prompted to question their behavior. They feel the need to pause to assess environments and behavior to ensure they stay safe when in certain social settings.

Most of the concerns about behavior and environments are in connection to female students. In the study, male participants indicated that they are concerned for the safety of their female friends, because they consider SV a threat more so for women. For example, these men fear that other men could follow female students as they walk home on campus and in the surrounding community. When discussing his concern for his female friends when he is not around, Mike shared:

I feel afraid if I'm not there. Something... something bad would happen... I know a lot of women here, like they wear pepper spray or like other deterrents I guess, because they fear people are going to follow them or... specifically guys who are either related or unrelated to the university are going to follow them and either kidnap them or rape... especially off campus. Yeah, it is widely known. I see a lot of girls who end up bringing pepper spray with them or whatnot.

Male participants also indicated they fear their female peers could be endangered at parties and bars. Male participants say this is because it is known that men in these environments will put drugs (also known as roofies or the date rape drug) into women's drinks to get women intoxicated. As a result, men can assault the women once they are under the influence of the drugs. Brad observed:

Women going to like... let's say it's just a frat party, for example. I know, like, one of my friends her... one of her friends got what they call, you know, roofied, where they put something in the drink and then, you know, they basically drug them. So, like, that happens. I wouldn't say a lot, but it's like a common thing for that to happen at frat parties, and you know, women get drunk, and then they don't... they wake up the next morning, they don't know what happened.

Participants spoke to the stereotype of male campus community members typically being the perpetrators of SV and females being the victims. For example, according to participants, at both house parties and campus bars, women are typically the individuals approached and touched without their consent. Casey said, "I don't think anyone who is born a female is very safe."

Investigating further, participants were asked why they thought SV was an issue on this specific campus and why students may feel unsafe. According to participants, the main reason is due to the size of the campus. Participants indicated that compared to other schools, this institution has a particularly large student population. As a result, compared to smaller schools where most students may know each other, at this institution, most students are unfamiliar to each other. Therefore, some participants said there is a lack of trust in people you do not know. These strangers possibly want to take advantage of students sexually. This causes fear and

anxiety for students when walking home, especially at night. When asked about their sense of safety at this institution compared to what they know about other institutions, Casey shared:

I know my friends at like small artsy schools in [the state] don't really worry about [SV] as much um cause there's just like fewer people. I feel like... cause this is like a real big school. I think we're one of, like one of the biggest schools ever, and um, there's like a big aspect of like strangers, and like, you're never gonna see that person ever again. So like, I don't know, like stats or like if there's more like stranger on stranger violence, um, here, but I feel like the opportunity for that is a lot higher, just because it's anonymous.

In addition, it was mentioned that a larger size institution makes it more difficult to be taken seriously if a student needs to report a SV incident. This is due to the abundance of students increasing the number of reports filed on campus. Participants discussed that many reports are filed about numerous issues, not just pertaining to SV. Students feel that the quality of attention may not be provided for individual reports due to the quantity of reports filed. As a result, an individual's SV report may not be adequately addressed or taken seriously. This is the result of individual students feeling that they are seen only as a number within the large overall student population. They feel that university personnel do not see individual students as important compared to the larger student body. Katie, the fourth-year Zoology student, said, "unfortunately, I think it does create the possibility of you just like becoming a number at the end of the day."

When beginning conversations about SV safety on campus, most participants indicated they feel safe. However, it became clear that students do not feel entirely safe regarding SV. Many expressed that the risk of SV on campus or in the surrounding campus community provokes feelings of fear, anxiety, and concern. Jessica said:

I've learned more and more like to be really careful around like who you spend time with alone, because I just like... I don't know. I feel like in high school or whatever, like, I would hang out with anyone and never like worry about it. But now I think you need to be cautious, especially in like a one on one or like small group setting... who you hang out with because yeah, like I said, you never... I don't think you ever really like trust people's intentions and especially with like, the culture here. I think that you need to be more careful, like especially compared to anything else I've experienced before I came here.

These feelings are not only for the individuals themselves, but many expressed concerns for their peers and friends on campus. When discussing participants' feelings in environments that heighten unsafe feelings, one participant spoke to her anxiety when it comes to the safety of her friends. Casey stated, "these boys are talking to my girlfriends and like... trying to dance on them, and I'm just like... get so like, stressed out that they're going to do something to like my friends." Lisa shared similar concerns about her friend when she noted:

I worry a lot about like the fraternities and sororities. I don't like... I knew a couple people and then, but I'm not really like close friends with them anymore. So I don't really know a lot about what's going on there. One of my roommates goes... goes to those occasionally, and we are just like concerned about her. There's certain like fraternities that have really bad reputations here for like sexual violence.

This fear for peers' safety increases an individual's anxiety to consider more than their own behavior. This fear and stress increases to encompass concern for others. Therefore, SV is having a larger impact in cultivating fear amongst the student body. However, students are not initially recognizing the fact that they experience fear in response to SV on their campus.



The shift in students' views about their safety throughout the interview laid the foundation to uncover what one participant referred to as the most "hidden" crime on campus. As the interviews evolved, students began to speak to the SV climate that is part of everyday campus life. This normalization of SV allows students to function in what they have come to believe is a safe campus environment.

### **The Normalization of Sexual Violence**

This theme explores how SV has become normalized within higher education, which influences the SV campus climate, and then leads to student fear. This theme examines pre-college conditioning, as well as SV within different campus cultures including campus hookup culture, fraternity life, and athletics. This theme concludes by illustrating how SV victims are often silenced. All these components combine to create a campus community where SV can thrive.

It is important to understand that students arrive on campus with a spectrum of SV knowledge. Many participants indicated that they did not receive an abundance of SV or general sex education prior to attending the institution. The sex education provided to these students in the K-12 system covered general topics such as anatomy and reproductive health with an emphasis on what happens to a female body once pregnant, but not the act of getting pregnant. Curriculum also covered sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). One participant said in the curriculum she received, STDs were presented in a format to scare students away from engaging in sex. One participant spoke to how their formal sex education did not speak to SV. Instead, the curriculum promoted rape culture. Jessica said:

I wouldn't say I had like education on sexual violence, I would say almost like, more the opposite way, like I always felt at least... felt like [my high school] or like, when

Catholic... like highly influenced by Catholicism... like I almost in a way to me like, promoted rape culture, cause we always learned like, you know, like, dress modestly like men, can't you know um, they can't like control what they do, and it wasn't like explicitly like, oh, rape is okay, because obviously they don't believe that, but it was always like, you have to like accommodate to what men think so I feel like yeah, I almost heard like it in the opposite direction.

Lisa described how sex education was cancelled for her class in grade school due to controversial teaching when she said:

The teacher was trying to teach like... had started trying to teach [sex education] and some comment was made um that kind of went against Catholic teaching about sex, and a parent found out about it and just like, it was, it was very, like controversial and so they just stopped... they stopped all together.

Participants spoke to how the lack of sex education cultivates environments where students do not have the same understanding about consent and SV when entering college. Hannah shared:

If you're not properly educated on what is like consensual and like non-consensual, like what's ok, what's not, so it can definitely go the other way around too. I think that just like from my experience has been a large majority that like um people who are male, kind of are not educated on what could be like, like consensual, non-consensual, like, what's abusive, what's not. Versus like people who identify as female who might be... have been in those situations or know like on their own or like know people who have gone through those situations.

As a result, there can be more confusion between students when it comes to sexual interactions. Student may also be left to learn from experience rather than formalized education as Hannah

indicated she finds is the case for her female peers. Most participants indicated they developed their definition of SV through life experiences and hearing about the experiences of their peers. As a result, some students come to college not being able to recognize or identify SV. For example, Mike and Katie both described developing their personal definitions of SV from experiences in relationships. Katie, Jessica, and Hannah shared that they learned about SV from experiences compared to formalized education. Hannah explained:

This is something that me and my friends have discussed a lot is that like our sex ed in like elementary, middle, and high school is very much lacking. And they leave out a lot of like important information, kind of. It feels very stigmatized, that information that we do get, and I think that there should be more like information given just like during sex ed like... extending to sexual violence at any kind of like, abuse you could face in relationships.

Some participants such as Sarah and Jessica indicated that they have come to learn during their time on campus that SV does not have to result in extreme physical violence as depicted in much of today's media, for example, rape needing to involve a woman who is kidnapped by a stranger and violently raped. SV can occur by someone a victim knows and could include coercion, as well as mental and emotional violence. However, these concepts are something student participants explained that they learned when they were introduced to the college environment.

### ***Sexual Violence Thriving in Campus Cultures***

Student participants spoke to the existence of hookup culture on their campus. Some participants explicitly named hookup culture, while others described hookup culture characteristics that applied to campus life. There were discussions about how college is where

students are surrounded by a lot of new people and get to try new things for the first time.

Students spoke to how the hookup culture on campus puts an emphasis on the number of people one has sex with and how this challenge is connected to one's image and status on campus.

Jessica stated:

I see like a culture of people think that it's like, if you go out all the time, if you drink all the time, like you're cool and that almost coincides with like, if you like hook up with a lot of people and um go out a lot, you're like, could feel like of high status.

Participants indicated this was especially true for men who are seeking to obtain higher status on campus. It matters how many female students these men sleep with, as well as who the person is. If a male student has sex with a female student who is popular or part of a well-respected student organization on campus, that female student is considered a bigger sexual conquest. Some participants indicated that the desire to sleep with the most people to increase one's status applies to women as well, but female students tend to desire more long-term intimate connections compared to their male peers. However, the hookup culture and the consumption of alcohol makes entering social relationships easier. Participants discussed their desires for intimacy. Katie stated:

For me, and for a lot of my friends um, a lot of the time it's, you know, I'm craving emotional intimacy, and I'm craving physical connection, but I don't know how to cultivate it. So, yeah, so rather than like, actually... or I'm hurt, and I'm afraid of commitment, but I'm, you know, like, I really want it. It's so much easier to get a few drinks in you and go to a bar and you know, find someone who you kind of vibe with and then just go home for one night. But then most of the time, at least for me and for like many of my friends like you just feel worse in the morning.

Comments like these suggest a hookup culture does not lend itself to creating long lasting relationships as literature indicates. Instead, hookup culture indicates ideology of using sex as a conquest for the quantity of sexual partners. The quality of sexual partners within hookup culture is placed on the sex partner's status on campus as well. This status is rooted in which student organizations hold power on campus. Student organizations that hold a lot of power and status on campus include fraternities.

Many participants spoke to the dangers of SV within university fraternities. According to study participants, hookup culture plays a significant role within fraternities as fraternity men leverage hookup culture to pursue higher statuses on campus. A participant spoke to how a specific fraternity was kicked off campus because as part of a hazing initiative, the fraternity's new members (also known as pledges) were instructed to drug women and then have sex with them. This act of sleeping with a woman under the influence of alcohol and without their consent is seen as a challenge that the fraternity men must overcome. If they can do so successfully, they are then considered worthy to be part of this exclusive organization.

Participants such as Jessica and Lisa indicated that the most noted environment where SV thrives is within fraternities. These are environments where SV is common. Three participants indicated that it is widely known amongst the campus community that certain fraternities have reputations for drugging women by putting drugs known as roofies in alcoholic drinks at parties. According to study participants, some fraternities are known on campus as being "rapey." A participant identified one fraternity whose tagline is "sexual assault expected." Instead of feeling ashamed of being known for SV, it appears some fraternities embrace this reputation or do not attempt to shy away from it. The conquest of sleeping with numerous women even if that means

without their consent has become so highly valued on campus that men completely disregard the harm they are inflicting on their victims.

Many study participants voiced that one must be careful when attending fraternity parties. They also say that they would never attend a party alone. Participants described how they worry about their friends who go to parties alone or friends who wander off at parties by themselves. Students indicated this is because the fraternity members control the party narrative on campus. This environmental control allows for fraternity members to commit SV more easily.

The scope of fraternity control was communicated in detail by participants. First, fraternities' control who is permitted at their parties. Participants such as Casey explained in detail how female students receive easier access to the parties compared to their non-fraternity male peers. Fraternity members will monitor party entrances and will allow groups of women to enter. However, if non-fraternity male students want to enter the party, they will have better chances if they are accompanied by female students. Male groups without female accompaniment are typically turned away at the party entrance. According to study participants, this is because the fraternity men want more women at the party to increase their chances of engaging in sex with the women at the end of the night.

Fraternity life is also the environment in which study participants mentioned the issue of race and SV. Some participants indicated that SV offenders on campus tend to be white men. Casey indicated this is the result of most institutional fraternity members being white. There is an uneven balance in fraternity racial membership because the recruitment process is selective, and typically, white men are selected. Study participants also indicated that the victims of SV on campus tend to be white women since fraternity members allow white women into the parties. Casey referred to fraternity parties as a "giant sea of white people."

Sexual identity was also addressed regarding fraternity cultures. Several participants indicated that SV with the fraternity community tend to be committed by heterosexual men. Similar to the racial component, fraternities are comprised of individuals seeking power and status on campus. Therefore, the general identity makeup of fraternities consists of privileged identities. As a result, most fraternity men on this particular campus seek heterosexual encounters. However, heterosexual individuals are not always found to be the victims of SV committed by fraternity men. One participant who identifies as lesbian and queer said that when they attend fraternity parties, fraternity men make sexual advances towards them even knowing that this individual identifies as queer and a lesbian. The fraternity men will also say they wish this student was not a lesbian. That is because within the SV narrative, no care is provided to victims. Their desires are completely disregarded. It is the wants of the perpetrator that are considered and acted upon.

In addition, with regard to the demographic makeup of parties, fraternity men also control the alcohol that is served at their parties. Unlike other parties held on or near campus where students can bring their own alcohol, most fraternities do not allow outside alcohol to be brought into their parties. Student participants indicated that outside alcohol is not permitted. The fraternity men provide the alcohol, and many fraternities have their own members making and serving the drinks to guests. This has resulted in fraternity members drugging party participants with the goal of making it easier to assault women who cannot make decisions as easily while they are under the influence of drugs. Casey stated,

And I just like, I know they're drugging people there like, it's just like, so bad because it's like all open container, and they usually have like bars where they make the guys who are rushing run them, so like they have control over the cups. Yeah, it's like it's not good.

Although fraternity atmospheres are unsafe environments that promote SV according to study participants, bars were also discussed as having higher levels of risk for SV. This is because bars are places where there is increased alcohol consumption. In addition, university bars have a reputation for putting drugs in drinks with the goal of assaulting women. A study participant mentioned that one bar in particular was highly discussed recently because several bartenders were fired from the establishment because they were drugging women during their shifts. Another participant spoke to their experience of personally being drugged at a bar. The participant explained that having their friends with them kept them safe, but it was still a scary experience for them. Students explained that although these environments are unsafe, people still frequent them. Lisa said:

There's certain like fraternities that have really bad reputations here for like sexual violence. Yeah. And so everyone kind of is aware and, you know, some people choose to still like go hang out with them, and some people don't.

The topic of drugging drinks was not part of the interview protocol, but all participants except for one, brought up that drugging drinks is a problem on campus. Fraternities and campus bars drugging women and sexually assaulting them is widely known on campus, but students will still enter these environments, because it is part of the campus experience. Most participants indicated that although SV is widely known to occur in these environments, discussion around SV is not commonly discussed.

Although participants indicated they know SV instances occurred on campus, they explained that it is not widely talked about. Most conversations about SV occur amongst peers. In addition, these conversations are typically in response to a specific SV incident that occurs.



However, even amongst friends, SV discussions are not common. When asked if conversations about SV occur on campus, Sarah said:

Not really in a casual setting. I think I would only talk about it with like, my two really close friends. But other than that, it's not like a conversation that people bring up and is just like... like, it kind of like takes away the mood of a conversation so people don't bring it up because they don't wanna like ruin people's attitude.

Discussing this taboo topic with peers is something that participants described that they do not feel safe doing. However, discussing the topic with university faculty or staff is even more off putting for students. Regarding speaking to faculty about SV, Lisa stated:

As far as faculty I would say probably not. Just because like, I don't know, I have like some personal connections with my faculty, but I would never like, talk to them about [SV]. I feel like... like if I had to report something or like something that pertained to maybe something that happened in their class... I would feel comfortable doing that, but just like a neutral conversation about the topic, I would probably not do... unless I have to.

When it came to students' comfort level of reporting instances of SV to the administration, four participants said they would not report. Many participants said they would feel too embarrassed or too much shame to report an incident. This indicates that students experience a lack of safety when reporting SV.

Sarah lives in a scholarship house community and explained how she previously reported an incident of sexual harassment that involved housemates. Sarah said she felt comfortable reporting that particular incident because the harassment was directed towards a peer. The same student said before the incident they would not have felt comfortable reporting the harassment if

they were the victim in the situation. Even after going through that reporting process, she said, they would not file a report if they were victim. This is because she felt the report was not handled well. The student was also not satisfied with the outcome of the report. Sarah also said, “I feel like I'd be very embarrassed... like, I just feel like I wouldn't want to talk about it.”

In combination with students' lack of SV education entering college and functioning within a campus environment prone to SV acts, many study participants indicated that rape myths are an issue on campus. Lisa and Casey said most rape myths that exist on campus pertain to victim blaming, specifically towards females being the victims of SV. Participants indicated that women were not taken seriously or believed when reporting SV. When women experience SV, campus community members assume the women are partially responsible for the incident. This can be the result of what the women are wearing, their actions of not saying no, or consuming too much alcohol during the time of the incident.

Since it is believed that women are characteristically SV victims instead of men, male students do not appear to be as concerned with SV. This may be because they cannot as easily relate to the role of the victim. When recalling a sexual harassment incident that occurred in campus housing, one participant described how most men in the residence neither believed the allegations at first nor seemed to be interested in hearing about the incident. However, the participant noticed that the male residents who had sisters or strong female figures in their lives were the ones who were interested in listening to the female students who raised the harassment complaint. This lack of community buy-in to trust victims of SV and sexual harassment appears to be one of the many factors that contribute to how SV is normalized on campus.

The normalization of SV prone environments, along with rape myth acceptance, contributes to the SV climate on campus. Through the data collection process, it became evident

that students' fear of discussing SV and pursuing SV protocol is rooted in the institution's lack of SV education, the quality of education, SV response, and student access to SV resources.

### **The University Cover Up**

This theme explores how the institution's lack of SV prevention and response allows for SV to continue to be normalized on campus. This theme investigates existing university sponsored SV prevention programming, accessibility of SV resources, and SV reporting protocol. The culmination of the university's SV prevention and response strategies provides clarity as to how SV continues to be a normal part of the campus climate. This theme emerged from participants' statements pertaining to the institution's care for students' SV safety.

All participants spoke about a mandatory SV training that is offered prior to students' first year at the university. For first- and second-year student participants, this course was offered to them in an online format. Participants identifying as third- and fourth-year students experienced the training in-person. Both formats were approximately thirty to sixty minutes in length. However, participants indicated the online module could take as quick as fifteen minutes to complete if you click through the information and do not take the time to read the material.

Much of the training content offered in these courses is scenario based. According to study participants, SV scenarios are acted out in a short scene. Training participants are then asked if they believe the scene represents a situation that involves SV. Students must then complete a quiz that includes multiple choice questions about the different scenarios. The quiz is not graded, and participants are not penalized for getting a wrong answer. Katie shared that many of her peers have told her they just click through the questions. Brad said if a question is answered incorrectly, the module shows participants the correct answer. As a result, if the training participants finish the quiz, they complete the training.

Many study participants indicated that the quality of the training content is poor. Five participants could not remember if the training covered the institution's SV policy, reporting protocol, or resources. Some participants seemed to recall one slide that may be presented as part of the training that includes all the information listed. However, the study participants said the presentation slide contains so much text and is presented very quickly. As a result, they were not able to retain the information. When asked if campus SV policy or resources were discussed in the training, Lisa said:

I don't... I couldn't remember if it said like, anything about the resources. I think it might have like thrown them in at the very end but considering that I don't remember if they were mentioned, it obviously wasn't like, presented well enough to make me remember. Jessica said, "Yeah, I assume it did. I think I remember talking about like title nine and um stuff like that. I don't remember the specifics of it, but I would say like eighty percent sure - yes."

Several student participants indicated they had difficulty remembering the content. Some participants also mentioned that they could not recall if this training was only provided prior to their first year on campus or if the training was also presented semesterly or yearly. Sarah believed that students were randomly selected to take the training for a second time throughout their time at the university. She said that she personally had been selected to retake the training and that some of her friends were selected as well. However, she knew of peers who had not been selected to take additional training. She was unsure why some students were selected for additional training and others were not. Her guess was that it was a random selection process. According to Sarah, when she participated in the second training, the training curriculum was the exact same material that was presented during the mandated training which occurred prior to her first year at the university. She also said the timing of being selected for the second round of

training was not ideal because she was studying for exams. As a result, she clicked through the material and did not read it.

Casey said they were selected to take the training again but were able to get out of it by sending an email explaining they were part of a student organization that does SV training for campus communities. The confusion around the frequency of these trainings, who is required to complete them, and the lack of accountability for training completion makes students question if the trainings are effective in preventing SV acts on campus.

Study participants said they did not find the information presented in these trainings helpful. Some participants said they felt that the university provided the information to be able to say they make SV materials available to students. Some students said they believed the institution did this so that if a SV incident occurs, the training could help the institution be less liable. Data from the study indicated that several participants were not clear on campus SV policy or resources. Students then began to express their beliefs that institutional SV resources are available, but it is unclear to students what those resources are and how to access them.

Study participants said that, besides the first-year training, the institution did not provide additional SV information. All but two participants indicated that an additional place a student would hear about SV is in their course syllabi. Participants shared that they believed it is a campus policy that all faculty include brief language about Title IX and identify themselves as mandated reporters in curriculum syllabi. However, participants indicated that the language did not go into detail about Title IX or mandated reporting.

In addition, students said that it is easy for students to miss this information even though all students receive a syllabus for each of their classes. This is because a syllabus is typically eight to ten pages, and the language can get lost in the document. Also, participants said students

do not necessarily read the syllabus. Hannah shared that most professors do not go over that section of the syllabus specifically and admitted that she is guilty of signing the syllabus indicating that she read it all, when in reality she did not. Other participants referred to this SV information as being “buried” within the syllabus. Katie stated:

But I feel like the majority of what's discussed in the syllabus or what's discussed to us is in relation to I think... it sounds so bad to say but like [the institution's] a business they're trying to cover their asses and realistically, what they're most concerned about is if there's anything that has to do with employees or power dynamics or student/teacher relationships or anything like that is like... that's the biggest focus because that's what they'd probably get in the most trouble for.

Some students indicated they received some additional SV information, but it was minimal. For example, Hannah, the Resident Assistant (RA) said she received training about being a mandated reporter. This information is crucial for RAs since they are in contact with students living in university housing. Students living in these environments may need to make reports to RAs, and one type of report could be about SV. As a result, this study participant said that as a mandated reporter, she is required in her role as a RA to report any SV incident that is communicated to her. This training is not offered to the general student body. However, the RA said even this more in-depth training could be improved. She indicated that minimal content is provided, and additional information is needed. She said that if a SV incident was reported to her, she would need to ask her supervisor what to do, because she is not positive about the appropriate protocol. This minimal training for campus RAs and the marginal information provided to the general student body leaves students unclear about the institution's reporting protocol, as well as their rights as victims of SV.

All but one participant said they were not confident in the institution's SV reporting process. Many said they did not know the exact process. However, they felt confident they could figure out the reporting process if they needed to. Brad and Lisa both said they will typically navigate the institution's website or simply conduct a Google search. Some participants indicated there was university personnel they will contact such as an advisor or RA. One participant in particular said if they needed to report a SV act, they would go to their RA because RAs are university mandated reporters and would have the knowledge to know what to do. However, when asked about her confidence level in her reporting protocol knowledge, Hannah, the RA, stated:

Regarding policies and steps, like I think that I'm still hazy on what to do, specifically if I were to have a situation. I think a lot of that might just differ from situation to situation. And I think I would... have to like, again, like get my... get the hall director and be like, 'what am I supposed to do again,' because I like, can't remember, or like, I'm not sure if this is like specific in the case.

Hannah went on to explain that she does not have a lot of confidence because, in her experience as an RA, she must file many different types of reports, not just SV reports. From her experience, she does not see much action taken from most of her filed reports. This seems to be common for most participants.

Most participants who said they were not confident in the university's reporting process also said they do not think any action will be taken if a report was made. Participants provided several examples where SV and sexual harassment incidents were reported to university personnel and the students were not satisfied with the outcomes. Previously, I mentioned a sexual harassment case filed by a participant after a party. In that case, Sarah who filed the report

said she was very disappointed in how the university staff members responded. She explained that the administration reprimanded her and her peers for attending a party during the COVID-19 pandemic, instead of placing their attention on the harassment that was done. The study participant believed the harassment was not taken seriously. This institutional response lowered the participant's confidence in the reporting process.

In another case, Casey shared that several members of the institution's football team were benched because of sexually assaulting a female student. The study participant explained how the players were neither kicked off the team, nor expelled from the university. This case involved a rape kit and evidence. The participant explained how this is an example of a victim who did everything right and still did not receive justice.

Some participants spoke to several fraternities being kicked off campus because of SV, but participants explained that it takes many SV reports to get the attention of the administration. Fraternities attract prospective students to campus, which means an increase in tuition dollars. This attraction gives fraternities power. The administration knows SV is an issue within these organizations, but they do not do anything about it. A participant spoke to campus administration stopping parties during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, once COVID-19 cases in the area decreased, the administration allowed for parties to continue. The administration cares about not spreading COVID-19 but does not seem to have the same sense of care when it comes to SV prevention. When asked about when fraternities are kicked off campus because of SV acts, Lisa explained:

So basically like if they get caught, the university just like stops recognizing them. But that's kind of it, so like they don't have funding by the university, but there's nothing forcing them to disband, I guess. They're just no longer recognized as a [university] like



fraternity or sorority. So... but like they still... they still have a house, they just have to pay for it now, and you know, stuff like that. So there's nothing really like forcing them apart. Um, which is kind of the problem or if they do end up disbanding, then all the people that were part of that are still students, and you know, um, just kind of flowing back out into the university.

Some participants explained that the university sometimes addresses individual SV incidents but does not appear to be concerned with solving the larger issue of SV persisting on campus. Brad said, "I think they do a good job of responding to problems, but they don't do the best of actually fixing them." Brad went on to say that he believes the institution solves issues incident by incident, but not the overall greater issue. As a result, students believe this ideology of not taking preventative measures contributes to why SV continues to exist at the institution.

Identities were also identified as a concern when it comes to SV reporting on campus. Katie said, "I think when it comes to like sexual violence and sexual safety, I think the most protected person... in terms of like, feeling that they have this space to voice their opinions, is probably the white, straight female." According to Katie, this is because society has coined the typical SV victim. She believes that the university is more accepting of hearing reports made by women who are white and heterosexual. This group of women hold many privileged identities compared to their women of color identifying and LGBTQ+ identifying peers. Therefore, white heterosexual women are more likely to be believed when reporting SV. Katie went on to say:

But I think being gay definitely complicates things. Um being transgender certainly complicates things cause there's so many hate crimes, but then also just being like a, you know, like being a BIPOC or being you know, someone who you know, is not... does not have that white privilege. I definitely think that complicates things as well because you

have a racial component um.. the community brought into it, and then also yeah, just for men. You know, if a guy comes out and expresses any kind of weakness, like, I feel like we're getting better at being more accepting with open arms, but unfortunately, there's still like toxic masculinity that persists.

The lack of consideration for different identities within the university reporting protocol provides additional challenges for these communities to report SV. Although study participants indicated that white heterosexual women are stereotypically the victims of SV on campus, SV victims holding different identities are not getting the appropriate response. As a result, these populations may refrain from reporting SV to campus personnel. Since university SV prevention education, as well as policy and protocol, are not having a significant impact on improving student safety, students feel the need to change their own behaviors to ensure their safety from SV acts.

### **Students Taking Safety into Their Own Hands**

This theme illustrates how students are taking steps to ensure their own SV safety. This is in reaction to the normalization of SV on campus and the lack of institutional support. This theme examines how students are taking ownership of their safety by changing their behaviors and seeking change at the university, as well as at state and federal levels.

To provide oneself with a sense of SV safety, study participants said they change their own behaviors. One example of how students adapt their behavior as a safety mechanism is by avoiding fraternity parties and campus bars all together. Fraternities and bars are said to be a large part of the university's campus experience. They are supposed to be fun and a time for students to socialize with peers. However, SV is so prevalent in these environments that students opt not to participate because they believe not attending is the only way to avoid putting oneself at risk. When speaking to their sense of safety, Katie said:

I would say overall pretty safe just because I have definitely kind of built up a backbone, um, of knowing a) how to say no, but also b) unfortunately, like, you know, being preventative and not putting myself in those situations to begin with. Um because realistically, I think a lot of it is like, you know, ideally, in a perfect world, we would be like, oh, you know, women can put themselves in these situations and say no at any time and whatever, but I... I feel like it's not super realistic. So just understanding that like, if I don't want something to happen, if I don't want even like a guy to kiss me, or some kind of advance then like, I'm not even going to make it possible. Or I'm... I'm just gonna like try my hardest to not make it possible. But if I know for a fact I don't want to have sex with a guy, I'm just not gonna to go in his room.

This sense of fear appears to be connected to students' feelings of being responsible for stopping SV acts from happening to themselves instead of putting ownership on the perpetrators. Campus victim blaming and lack of institutional support in the SV reporting process contribute to students feeling accountable if they fall victim to SV. Students feel responsible for their own actions. Therefore, if something bad happens to them, they believe it is their fault in some capacity.

In addition, students feel an obligation for the safety of their friends. This sense of accountability extends past keeping oneself safe, but students also feel responsible for the safety of their peers. Casey said, "But I also... like we travel in packs, like for real like, we don't let anyone, um, like wander off on their own really, or with like... with a random guy." This is an example of how students continue to change their behaviors to keep themselves and their peers safe against SV. In this example, students lose the option to attend a party or bar on their own. Therefore, if a student wants to attend a party, but their friends decide not to go, the student must

change their plans because it is unsafe to enter party and bar environments unaccompanied. This differs from students' attitudes as they pertain to safe environments on campus. For example, multiple students mentioned walking home late at night, or attending a bar or fraternity party as unsafe environments. No participant mentioned they experienced unease attending a class, student organization meeting, or eating in a dining hall by themselves on campus. This could indicate that they only feel the need to travel in groups to environments that put their safety at risk.

Additional examples of students changing their behavior include not walking on- or off-campus at night, monitoring alcoholic drinks in social settings, and increasing awareness of one's surroundings. Students indicated that especially at campus parties and bars, they could not fully relax and have fun. A part of them continuously had to watch out for potential predators that could harm them or their friends. Students said that instead of relaxing and enjoying party atmospheres, they instead must be on high alert to ensure no one is trying to take advantage of them or their friends. Casey said this takes away from her ability to have fun and enjoy herself in these environments. If a student were to let their guard down, they could risk becoming a SV victim. Again, these actions put SV accountability on the prospective victims instead of the perpetrators. Students are recognizing that the institutional stance on SV is becoming clearer. The campus environment is set up so that students themselves must mitigate risk of experiencing SV. Perpetrators are not being told to change their violent behaviors.

Students indicated that if they want to bring awareness of SV on campus, it is up to them, because they do not have confidence that institutional leadership will. Students said they raise awareness by first being open to communicating with peers and having conversations about SV. Casey, who is the Vice President of a safe sex student organization on campus, said that their

organization has been reached out to more than by other groups on campus. These groups include other student organizations who want to have SV training for their members, as well as RAs who want the organization to host SV programming for students living in the residence halls. The Vice President of the safe sex organization said the reason for this is that students trust the organization with SV training more than they trust the university. This trust stems from their belief that the SV training information will be of better quality. Another reason students reach out to this organization is because members of this organization are not mandated reporters and therefore, do not need to report information that program participants disclose. Since students do not always trust the institution's SV reporting policy, students are more comfortable reaching out to this organization's members since they are not forced to report the incidents to the university. Hannah described that all RAs are required to host a minimum number of programs for students who live in residence halls. However, there is no requirement as to what the programming must be. Hannah has observed some RAs bringing in organizations like Casey's safe sex organization to discuss SV, but not all RAs select this topic. Therefore, not all students living in residence halls receive this information.

Many study participants identify a need for additional SV prevention and protocol both at the institutional level, as well as at the state and federal levels. Students say that the lack of accessible SV resources for victims is problematic. Participants express that although they believe they could figure out how to find SV resources, doing so in reaction to a traumatic event such as experiencing SV is not ideal. Many students said they need very clear and prominent messaging. Speaking to the need for resources, Lisa said:

I just think that like having... having it right in front of you, rather than having to search for it when you are like experiencing that type of tragedy. Because like in the moment, you're

not thinking about that, you know? And sometimes you're not even thinking like that... that you've been assaulted. And that's a problem.

Participants said it would be helpful to have flyers with the information posted around campus. The information should also be posted in all residence halls to make it as accessible as possible for students.

Participants also voiced their desire for more thorough programming. Some students said they would like to see training that directs more attention to the actions of perpetrators. Jessica said, "I wish like there was more of a culture of like teaching men to... that like, how to respect other people on that... like, there are consequences... there are real consequences for like crossing that line." Participants said an increase in the frequency of SV programming would also be helpful. Instead of training taking place just prior to first-year orientation, students think training every year could be helpful, especially if new information was presented in an engaging manner. Mike said:

I think there should be like more of a mandate like I know I don't have to do anything like yearly for sexual violence. So I would definitely promote that they put something in place where... just reiterate to college students, sexual violence is not okay. Put like an a half hour, hour training... doesn't have to be as long as the first one, but just to reiterate.

These continuous education strategies could be beneficial especially since students attend for several years. Participants indicated they could use additional reminders about SV instead of trying to refer to information they received in training prior to their first year as college students.

Participants also think that both the institution and the country need to be more definite in what justifies as SV so that perpetrators can be better held accountable. To hold perpetrators

responsible, students would also like minimum sanctions to be defined on campus and would like minimum jail time to be outlined by the court system. For example, Casey stated:

There should be policies on like, minimum jail time for like the things you do and like... be explicit and like, in acts if you want it to be that way, because then there can't be any room for, like justification of the courts, because the courts are all old white men who are gonna side with the rich white boys who are in the court with them.

The hope is these sanctions will deter individuals from committing SV acts. They will also keep universities, as well as state and federal courts, accountable for providing SV offenders with appropriate sentences. As a result, these tactics could decrease SV acts in higher education and society.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore college students' perceptions of SV climate on their campus. In this section, I described eight college students who attended a large public school in the Midwest at the time of the study who shared their lived experiences around the shared phenomenon of SV. My interpretation of these experiences resulted in four themes that connect back to the primary research question and sub-questions. The themes that surfaced include *naming SV fear*, *the normalization of SV*, *the university cover up*, and *students taking safety into their own hands*. In the next chapter, I will further discuss how these themes pertain to existing literature and research. I will also speak to how the themes can be applied to current and future settings. In doing so, higher education leaders can learn from student input to create future SV prevention and response strategies to decrease SV acts on college campuses and work toward creating safer environments for students.

## **Chapter V: Discussion**

This section further discusses the findings in connection to existing SV research and literature within the theoretical framework. In this study, I examined college students' perceptions of the SV climate on their campus. The goal of this study is to provide higher education professionals with better insight into student needs pertaining to SV. As a result, college personnel can create and implement more effective SV prevention and response strategies to directly meet these needs as outlined by students. In doing so, higher education leaders can work towards decreasing the number of SV acts on campus.

To uncover college students' perceptions of SV climate on their campus, I interviewed eight college students at a single institution. From their stories emerged the four themes of naming SV fear, the normalization of SV, the university cover up, and students taking safety into their own hands. These four themes connect to existing SV literature by supporting the ideology that higher education is complacent in the SV that occurs on college campuses. The findings suggest that students have opinions about the SV climate on campus. In addition, higher education leaders claim they take action to decrease SV acts on campus, but literature and data from this study indicate that is not the case. The findings from this study call for higher education institutions to reevaluate SV prevention strategies and policy in reaction to the student voices shared in this study. In doing so, college campuses can begin to break the cycle of violence on campus.

### **Student Voices Matter**

College students' perceptions of SV on campus were communicated by the participants of this study. Students have thoughts and opinions about SV climate on their campus, which they shared through interviews. These students indicated that they do not feel safe from SV on their



campus. According to existing literature, the number of SV acts on college campuses have not decreased in the past four decades (Hong & Marine, 2018; Labhardt et al., 2017; Landreman & Williamsen, 2018; Orchowski et al., 2008). Study participants naming SV fear demonstrates how the continuation of SV impacts their student experience. Students especially do not feel safe because they recognize this problem exists and could result in harm of themselves and their peers. Participants described that much of the SV on campus is directed towards women and perpetrated by men. This can be seen especially in environments that are male dominated such as fraternities and bars, particularly when alcohol is involved. Participants indicated that men in these environments portray their status by attempting to sleep with women, reflecting radical feminist perspectives on male-controlled environments wherein men seek to dominate over women (Brownmiller & Mehrhof, 1992). Study participants indicated that the campus community is aware that these environments are not safe, especially for women. Regardless of the known problematic nature of these environments, fraternities and bars continue to exist and thrive on campus.

The drugging of women also demonstrates objectification, in which radical feminists believe men dominate their power over women by treating them like sexual objects (Freitas, 2018; Gervais & Davidson, 2015). Men drug women to make them less likely to resist sexual advances. This makes it easier for men to have sex with women without their consent. These actions demonstrate how men feel entitled to take away women's ability to consent to sexual intercourse. According to radical feminist theory, environments like fraternities and bars are part of a larger system where men hold power over women. Data shows that these environments create greater risk for SV to occur. Ultimately, university administrations have the power to sanction fraternities and determine if they remain on college campuses. However, higher

education leadership is dominated by men (Gomez, 2020). When most institutional leadership positions are held by men, this creates a larger systemic issue where men are in positions of power to make decisions for campus communities. These campus communities consist of varying gender demographics, yet all genders are not part of the decision-making process. To better make decisions to end SV, higher education leadership needs to be more representative of the campus community. This disbandment of male power could give more authority to female community members and ultimately help decrease acts of SV on campus.

The data from this study further demonstrates how students uncover the systemic issues of power that exist in SV climates. This is illustrated by students voicing their experience in these unsafe environments. Students also disclose their dissatisfaction for how institutional leadership prevents and addresses SV on campus. Although students recognize SV as a greater issue, they should not be the individuals responsible for distinguishing it. According to radical feminist theory, for issues of power to be dissolved, they need to be named and addressed at a systemic level (Grosser & Tyler, 2021). As study participants mentioned, they feel like they do not hold a lot of authority or decision-making power at the institution. Therefore, they look to leadership who holds the institutional power to implement action that will cultivate change. Study participants identified that there is a larger issue on campus pertaining to SV. Participants described how in some instances, but not all, individual SV incidents have been addressed on campus. However, SV as a campus-wide issue is not being addressed by the campus leadership. Consequently, students feel the burden is left to them to confront the issue either individually or through student groups and organizations to cultivate change. This is because students do not feel the institutional leadership will act on their behalf to end SV on campus.

## **The Reality of Higher Education Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Efforts**

Many higher education institutions claim they are acting to better prevent SV and provide safer environments for college students. According to the literature, they are claiming they do this by following Title IX policies, providing SV prevention training, and properly responding and reporting SV incidents in accordance with the Clery Act (Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Worthen & Wallace, 2018). Data from this study exhibited how students believe institutions are implementing some action and policy, but these efforts are insufficient. Participants spoke to how they felt the administration is simply checking a box to ensure they are covered from any possible liability. However, these actions leave students feeling that their safety is not taken seriously. The data from this study draws attention to the reality of higher education personnel's role in the campus SV climate.

The reality is that students are afraid because the existence of SV continues to persist on campus. Data demonstrates that institutions are responding more on an individual SV case basis and not viewing SV as a larger systemic problem. Radical feminist theory requires a systemic view to create influential change (Grosser & Tyler, 2021). By not addressing SV as a larger issue on campus, administrators allow this cycle of violence to persist. Therefore, students continue to experience SV on campus and lose trust in the higher education system to keep them safe. Some may question if the responsibility of student safety falls to college personnel.

SV exists in many communities outside of higher education. SV can occur in the K-12 system and post-college. Although SV can transpire at any stage in an individual's life, as well as in any environment, that does not excuse higher education from taking action to prevent SV on college campuses. While students are in the K-12 system, they do not receive a standard sex education curriculum (Zimmerman, 2015). Study participants confirmed they receive

unstandardized sex education prior to their arrival to college. When students do receive some form of sex education in the K-12 system, it is typically perpetuating rape myths and teaching abstinence through scare tactics. Therefore, students are attending higher education institutions with varying knowledge of healthy relationships and safe sex.

At this time, there is no standardized sex education or SV prevention in higher education. Campus communities are unique since they provide students time together not simply in the classroom, but also time together living and engaging in social interactions both on and around campus. Colleges and universities can streamline sex education by providing modernized training that promotes healthy relationships and teaches students about the dangers of SV. Research indicates that students want more thorough sex information (Hubach et al., 2019). Data from this study supports this notion. Sex-positivity supported by radical feminist theory also promotes the need for healthy sexual relationships to decrease SV (Grosser & Tyler, 2021). An increase in standardized sex education at the college level could aid students in better decision-making while engaging in sexual relationships. Increased healthy sexual relationships can then help in diminishing the number of SV acts on campus. However, study participants indicated that education is not enough, if the institution cannot implement action to keep them safe. For example, participants expressed the need for better access to SV resources, as well as more informed SV reporting protocol.

Data from this study showcased the existence of victim blaming that encourages students to change their behavior to remain safe on campus. This culture suggests that college campuses have their own unspoken rules that students must follow to avoid SV victimization. For example, students are to evade environments where SV could be a threat such as campus parties and bars. Or they heighten their awareness in these social situations. They are also instructed not to drink

too much or walk home alone at night. These findings align with existing SV literature of fear leading to individuals changing their behaviors to avoid SV (Gervais & Eagan, 2017). If students violate these underlying directives prescribed by society, it is suggested that victims may have deserved to experience SV. Colleges and universities are supposed to teach students to develop personal agency. However, these unofficial rules to avoid SV communicate to students that they do not get to be agents in their own lives. Instead, they must conform to societal systems that perpetuate violence. This demonstrates how higher education continues to put SV accountability on victims and not the perpetrators. Radical feminist theorists believe these types of environments are grounded in power where individuals control the actions of others as a means to demonstrate their power over others (Maxwell & Scott, 2014).

Although higher education institutions continuously implement SV prevention and response strategies, it is not enough to just make students feel safe. Institutions may not intend to participate in the creation of unsafe campus climates, but perceptions and impact matter. Participants indicated that it is not enough for colleges to educate students, but they also need to keep students safe. Institutional administrators must create and implement meaningful SV prevention and response strategies to communicate and demonstrate their care for the campus community. This study calls for colleges to reevaluate SV policy and prevention strategies in light of the experiences shared by students.

### **Changing the Culture and Rebuilding Trust**

Higher education leaders can disrupt the narrative of violent campus climates by listening to the needs of students. Data from this study illustrates the existing SV climate on campus. Study participants spoke to the existence of hookup culture. Hookup culture promotes brief sexual relationships that typically involve the mistreatment of a sexual partner (Freitas, 2018).

The promotion of healthy relationships can help students recognize that these cultures of violence are not favorable and should not be standardized. This is demonstrated in the emergent theme of the normalization of SV.

While working towards cultural change as outlined by radical feminist theory, institutional leaders can better support SV victims and survivors. Higher education leaders can better provide support for SV victims by holding SV perpetrators accountable. This is one way they can build student trust. Current literature suggests that SV is drastically underreported (Fisher et al., 2002). In the study, data showed how students do not feel comfortable or confident in filing SV reports on campus. SV literature indicates that students are more likely to report SV when they trust the reporting system (Amar et al., 2015). Students in the study said they do not trust the university reporting protocol because they have seen little action taken in response to reports that have been filed in the past. Also, the action that has been taken in response to SV reports have not been desirable. This indicates that higher education professionals need to build better relationships with students and increase trust. In doing so, students may feel more comfortable to report SV.

College personnel cannot expect to immediately repair the trust that is broken around experiences of trauma. Radical feminist theorists believe this would need to be rebuilt at a systemic level (Allan, 2011). Higher education professionals must first begin repairing trust by naming and taking ownership in how their previous SV response led to the breaking of trust. College personnel can then create a plan to rebuild that trust and communicate the disposition to the campus community. Study participants indicated they are more likely to discuss SV with their peers. Institutional practitioners need to meet students where they are and implement community healing to build trust. Addressing SV at the community level can help have a bigger

impact in ending SV at a more systemic level grounded in radical feminist ideology. Instead of pressuring students to report SV to campus personnel, campus leaders can begin to cultivate trust by first creating environments where students can discuss SV and dialogue with each other. Once students feel comfortable opening up to their peers in a safe space provided by the institution, they may feel more inclined to express their experiences and feelings to campus administration.

As students begin to feel more comfortable approaching higher education leaders about incidents of SV, they need to be able to trust in the reporting process and outcomes to commit to protocol. Existing SV literature also indicates that individuals are more likely to report SV when they trust the reporting process (Amar et al., 2015). Study participants indicated they feel that the large student population at the institution affects their ability to be taken seriously if they were to file a SV report. This is due to numerous students attending the institution. As a result, students feel they will be seen as a number and not be a priority by the institution. Instead, they believe their report would get lost amongst all the processes that occur internally within the institution. Even participants who said they may feel comfortable disclosing a SV incident to a trusted advisor or faculty member believed that if they filed a report, it would not get very far in the university chain of command.

Participants believe a staff or faculty member who cares about them would act by reporting the incident to the head of their department, for example. However, since the department leader may not know the student personally, they may not have the same level of care for the student as the staff or faculty member does. This decreased level of care may not be adequate motivation for the head of the department to take the SV incident as seriously as the faculty or staff member initially did. Study participants believe that the farther a SV incident progresses through the institutional leadership, the less cared for they will be. As a result,

students think their SV complaint will not be taken seriously. This imbalance of power and control is represented in feminist ideology. This framework outlines how the lack of power correlates to the lack of control (Weiser, 2017). Students need to feel a shared sense of control and power in tandem with higher education leadership to be able to work as a community to end SV on campus.

Study data also demonstrates that the need for additional care towards victims is vital for institutional SV response. After experiencing SV trauma, victims are at a moment where they have had all their power taken away (Brownmiller & Mehrhof, 1992). They need to be listened to by the administration and validated. These actions by the administration during the reporting process can help to build trust with SV victims and survivors. In alignment with radical feminist theory, this redistribution of power can also begin to tear down the existing dominance that allows for SV to persist at a systemic level (Grosser & Tyler, 2021).

Participants also indicated they were not entirely clear on the reporting process. Higher education administrators can help build student confidence in the reporting process by explaining the process in detail, clarifying their role as a university representative, providing options for victims, and sharing additional SV resources. Literature indicates that not all SV victims are comfortable filling a complaint (Moore & Baker, 2018). Some begin their healing process by simply talking about the SV they experienced with no expectation that action will be taken.

Study participants indicated that students do not always report SV because they do not want to pursue action against the perpetrator. However, if they disclose SV to a mandated reporter on campus, there is a fear that action must be taken. To gain trust, college administration can better communicate resources and outlets where students can discuss SV but can choose not to file a formal report. In doing so, students are better aware of options that may be better suited



for how they wish to pursue their healing process. Providing students with control over their response to SV instead of forcing them into specific conduct procedures could make students more comfortable in the overall reporting process. Giving power to the victims also begins to redistribute the placement of power as outlined in radical feminist theory to end cycles of violence.

For students who wish to pursue sanctions for their perpetrators, trust could be better developed if expectations for university SV conduct proceedings were better communicated. If the number of SV reports were to increase, campus administrators could then better hold perpetrators accountable. Existing SV scholarship suggests that most reported SV crimes are not prosecuted (Shaw, et al., 2017). Higher education leaders can hold perpetrators better accountable by listening to student needs. In the study, participants indicated that campus administrators could better define sanctions for specific SV acts. In doing so, college professionals can be more consistent in the sanctions assigned to SV perpetrators. As a result, individuals may reconsider committing SV acts to avoid facing university sanctions. These steps hold perpetrators accountable instead of expecting students to change their behaviors to ensure their own safety against SV. Holding SV perpetrators accountable also impacts the power dynamics within higher education. By taking power away from perpetrators, college practitioners begin to eliminate the systemic power that exists on campus. According to radical feminist theory, this action can begin to have a tangible impact on ending SV because the power is being addressed at the systemic level (Allan, 2011).

### **Breaking the Sexual Violence Cycle**

Much of the study data pointed to the theme of SV being normalized on college campuses. SV was called the most “hidden crime” on campus. Many participants indicated they

do not feel comfortable talking about SV, even with their peers. This is because it is not considered normal to address SV. SV is a sensitive and uncomfortable topic. This thought has been socialized to keep SV about power and control at a systemic level (Allan, 2011). However, theoretical frameworks like sex positivity from a radical feminist perspective distinguish sex as something that should be embraced instead of rejected by society (Grosser & Tyler, 2021). There are more ways colleges and universities can build trust than holding SV perpetrators accountable. College personnel can educate students on SV to create positive change in the campus climate. According to radical feminist theory, college environments need to normalize healthy relationships instead of violent ones to create safer atmospheres for students (Grosser & Tyler, 2021).

Study data indicated that students do not talk about or learn much about healthy sexual relationships while growing up in the K-12 system. Existing literature confirms that K-12 sex education is not standardized (Zimmerman, 2015). Students then attend colleges where SV climates exist. These students do not remain on campus forever. Eventually, they graduate and flow out into society. College administrators need to acknowledge that they are shaping the future leaders of the world. If students learn that SV is acceptable behavior during their time on campus, this behavior will continue after graduation. As a result, SV will continue outside higher education. If campus environments do not normalize healthy conversations about sexual relationships, the topic will continue to be considered taboo. College graduates will go on to have families of their own and think it is not appropriate to teach their children about healthy sexual relationships. Those children will then enter the K-12 schooling system where they will not receive a streamlined sex education. This SV cycle will continue for future generations of students if higher education leaders do not act now. This is because those K-12 students will then

enter the college system where SV continues to be an issue in the campus climate. This continuous cycle further demonstrates radical feminist thought of SV being a systemic issue (Allan, 2011). Higher education must play a role in ending SV since the college experience is part of the SV problem.

Higher education professionals are responsible for the safety of students. If students do not feel safe on campus, they cannot be expected to achieve academic success. College and university leaders have a responsibility to students to provide safe environments where students can thrive. Data from this study indicates that current higher education SV prevention and response efforts are not having a significant impact in decreasing student fear. Instead, this level of fear exhibited by students causes them to change their behavior to stay safe on campus.

Higher education practitioners need to disrupt the SV narrative to keep students safe. Existing literature describes how feminist theory speaks to the need to take away power from perpetrators to ultimately stop systems of violence (Weiser, 2017). By changing SV behaviors on campus, college personnel can work towards decreasing SV acts in the community. Teaching students that SV is not acceptable and will not be tolerated could deter students from committing SV acts on campus and in their future communities post-graduation. This change can ultimately have a greater impact that leads to a decrease in SV throughout the world.

One way campus administrators can create effective change is by listening to student needs and meeting students where they are. The lack of student voices in current SV literature and research indicates that existing SV prevention and protocol may be designed by campus administrators who are making assumptions as to the needs of students. This could be the reason why the number of SV acts have not decreased in the last forty years.

In this study, student participants expressed their dissatisfaction with current SV prevention programming, as well as campus SV resources and reporting protocol. They provided feedback and identified examples of changes they would like to see. Examples include having more accessible information about SV resources posted around campus and more defined action that comes from filing a SV report. Listening to these suggestions can help higher education personnel create intentional SV prevention and response strategies that can be more effective because they are directed towards meeting the needs of students.

### **Summary**

SV is a complex topic that contains many challenging layers that need to be addressed. The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the findings and existing SV scholarship in the context of a radical feminist framework. This study explored college students' perceptions of SV climate on their campus with the goal of providing campus administrators a better understanding of student needs. Utilizing the study findings, higher education practitioners can create more effective SV prevention and response tactics to meet student needs at a systemic level.

The data from this study supported by existing SV scholarship calls for campus professionals to leverage student voices to address SV on college campuses. The four study themes of naming SV fear, the normalization of SV, the university cover up, and students taking safety into their own hands can assist higher educational professionals in better understanding SV climates on their campuses from a student perspective. Actively listening to the needs of students as they pertain to SV can lead to meaningful action. This action has the potential to end SV in higher education.

## **Chapter VI: Conclusion**

The inclusion of student voices was vital to this study to shed light on the SV climate in higher education. Existing SV research indicates that there has not been a decrease in SV acts on college campuses in the last 40 years (Hong & Marine, 2018; Labhardt et al., 2017; Landreman & Williamsen, 2018; Orchowski et al., 2008). Some SV policy and prevention strategies in accordance with Title IX and the Clery Act for example have been implemented on college campuses. However, these actions do not appear to be decreasing SV acts in higher education. This study shows that SV still impacts the campus climate and the student experience. There is an urgency to end SV in higher education to ensure student safety.

### **Summary of Research Findings**

The purpose of this study was to examine college students' perceptions of SV climate on their campus. Through interviews with eight participants, it is evident that SV is an issue in higher education. Data indicates that SV provokes fear for students and causes them to be concerned for their safety. Students identify specific actions and environments that increase risk for experiencing SV. These include attending fraternity parties and bars, as well as walking home alone, leaving drinks unattended, and not being aware of one's surroundings. Data also indicated that women, in particular, are at higher risk for being victims of SV compared to men. Men are also more often the perpetrators of SV, which aligns with existing SV literature (Freitas, 2018; Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Mouilso et al., 2015). Feminist philosophy suggests the SV is grounded in the dominance that men exert over women (Brownmiller & Mehrhof, 1992). The risk of SV on campus not only forces students to fear for themselves but causes them to also worry for the safety of their peers. Students recognize this fear even though SV has been normalized on their campus.

Study data identified SV as larger systemic issue in higher education that aligns with the framework of radical feminist ideology. Study data showed that SV has been engrained in campus culture. Students arrive to college with a spectrum of sexual relationship knowledge (Zimmerman, 2015). This creates confusion for students about appropriate sexual behaviors and cultivates environments for hookup culture to thrive. Hookup culture involves one-time sexual encounters that promote the lack of care for sexual partners (Freitas, 2018). Data from this study indicates hookup culture is persisting on college campuses where men increase their social status by sleeping with women. According to the study data, this conquest is made easier in environments that promote SV such as bars and fraternity parties where men control the environment. Men then project their dominance over women by avoiding consent through tactics such as roofing women's drinks or using coercion. This projection of male dominance over women to keep women in a constant state of fear is outlined in radical feminist theory (Grosser & Tyler, 2021). Study data demonstrates that campus communities are aware of these toxic environments. Data also shows that the actions of campus administrators aid in allowing these environments of SV to thrive.

Data validates that the university administration actively contributes to the SV climate on campus by providing minimal SV prevention strategies. Some study participants believe these marginal attempts are made to ensure the institution is protected from legal liability. Existing literature further supports that higher education is not streamlined or consistent in SV reporting and prevention training (Freitas, 2018). The control that university leadership holds in SV policy and prevention decision-making demonstrates radical feminist thought that SV involves the leverage of power at a systemic level (Allan, 2011). To end SV, higher education professionals need to actively participate in efforts to end SV. Radical feminist theory suggests that college

leadership must confront SV at the institutional level. They cannot leave students to fend for themselves and risk experiencing SV.

Study data indicates that students are fearful of SV, yet they are living and learning on campuses where acts of SV are flourishing. Since students do not have adequate support from higher education administration to keep them safe from SV, they take their safety into their own hands. Data from this study indicates students are doing this by altering their behaviors to avoid the risk of SV. Students do this by avoiding environments and increasing their awareness of their surroundings. Data shows that students do not trust that the university leadership will protect them from SV, so they must protect themselves. As a result, systems of power and cycles of SV continue to exist in higher education. Radical feminist theory highlights that for SV to end, these issues of power and dominance must be addressed at a systemic level (Allan, 2011). For this to occur, college leaders need to play an active role in ending SV on campus. The student voices shared in this study call for higher education professionals to reevaluate their current SV policy and prevention strategies. The data also provides college practitioners insight into how they can better meet student needs to help decrease SV in higher education.

### **Implications of Research Findings**

SV remains a large issue on college campuses. Numerous college students experience SV, and no student is prone to falling victim to SV (Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Mellins et al., 2017; Worthen & Wallace, 2018). In addition, no advancement has been made to decrease SV acts in higher education in the last four decades (Hong & Marine, 2018; Labhardt et al., 2017; Landreman & Williamsen, 2018; Orchowski et al., 2008). This lack of progress calls for urgent prevention action to be taken.

The findings of this study suggest that student needs must be considered by higher education leaders to better end SV on campus. By leveraging the needs of students, college personnel can recognize the necessity for additional SV prevention and response. Without the inclusion of student input, institutional leadership bases their decision-making on their own assumptions that may not have the best impact on the student experience. Existing laws and policies such as Title IX and the Clery Act have laid a foundation for SV prevention (Freitas, 2018; Hirsch & Khan, 2020). However, college practitioners can further build upon these regulations to design SV prevention and response strategies that best meet student needs to keep them safe from SV.

In addition, higher education institutions can target SV at a systemic level outlined by radical feminist theory, which could lead to safer college environments by addressing larger systemic issues of power. Data from this study indicated that SV has been normalized on college campuses. In alignment with radical feminist theory, to end SV, college practitioners must first recognize that a culture of male dominance exists on campus (Nicholson & Pasque, 2011). The findings in this study demonstrate that male dominance persists on campus. This is seen particularly in fraternity culture and other environments such as campus bars, where men exert their dominance over women through unhealthy and violent sexual interactions. The current narrative is that unhealthy sexual cultures such as hookup culture have been normalized in higher education as a way for men to escalate their social status (Reling et al., 2018). By eradicating these environments of toxic dominance, higher education professionals begin to disrupt the SV narrative. Targeting SV's core issue of male dominance could help decrease the number of SV acts committed on college campuses. These safer campus communities could provide all college students better opportunities to thrive.



After recognizing and addressing male dominance within college culture, higher education leadership can begin cultivating environments of healthy relationships. Sex education has not been standardized in the K-12 system (Zimmerman, 2015). College personnel have the opportunity to streamline education for students by creating and facilitating standardized sex education curriculum on campus. Data from this study indicate that students want additional, as well as, more thorough sex education and SV prevention training. Existing literature also supports this notion (Hubach et al., 2019). From a radical feminist perspective, sex should not be considered bad, but an act that is a normal part of human nature (Grosser & Tyler, 2021). Providing students with accurate sex information may also make them more comfortable in talking about sex and SV. Data from this study also indicate that students are not comfortable talking about SV. This is one of the many reasons that makes reporting SV difficult for them. Victims of SV often feel embarrassed or shame (Moore & Baker, 2016). Teaching students about consent and characteristics of healthy sexual relationship could make SV easier to discuss amongst campus community members. Normalizing these conversations keeps individuals from being silenced and begins to better distribute power amongst the campus community. According to radical feminist theory, this balancing of power can help end SV (Maxwell & Scott, 2014).

Furthermore, when promoting the inclusion of student voices in the SV narrative, it is imperative to acknowledge that this study did not include the voices of all student demographics. In particular, this study lacked representation from students of color. As previously noted, students of color were invited to participate in this study. I, as the researcher, sought to include these voices by contacting student organizations whose membership predominately consisted of students of color. The missing voices of these students further emphasizes their marginality in society and in higher education. Racial experiences must be included in SV research. As noted in

the literature review, communities of color face further discrimination within SV climates (Scott et al., 2017). This continuous harm and trauma could continue to discourage students of color from participating in studies where they feel their experiences will not be valued to the degree of white participants.

Racial stereotypes play a large role in the SV narrative, yet they are often not discussed. For example, women of color are oftentimes not perceived as SV victims in the same capacity as white women. According to existing literature, society expects women of color to sexually tempt men and have sex outside of marriage. As a result, women of color may not report SV because they may assume they will be blamed for their assault instead of treated like victims of the SV crime. Historically, white women are believed at higher rates by law enforcement compared to women of color, who face the additional challenge of how police and campus officials will respond to their race in addition to their gender (Wooten, 2017). This intersectionality of race and gender leads women of color to have a lack of faith in the reporting system and ultimately to not report SV.

Racial identities also impact how men are viewed as SV perpetrators. For example, Black men are over three times more likely to be convicted of sexual assault compared to white men (Zounlome et al., 2019). This research also indicates that white women can perceive Black men as sexually aggressive based on racial stereotypes. These examples demonstrate that racial injustices influence SV. Higher education leadership needs to ensure the safety of all students, and this includes the safety of students of color. Future research must place a larger emphasis on race and SV. To combat SV for students of color, racial injustices within SV need to be examined and addressed.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

As stated in the limitations section of this research study, future research that includes the perspectives of individuals from marginalized communities could greatly benefit the current library of SV scholarship. Different demographics to explore could include race, religion, ability status, socioeconomic status, as well as expanding on gender and sexual identities. When including these populations in future studies, it will be crucial to incorporate intentional and strategic research designs and methodology to ensure the safety and inclusion of these oftentimes marginalized communities. Future researchers must consider how their own identities may influence the recruitment process. Privileged identities held by researchers can possibly deter potential individuals from these marginalized communities from participating in future studies. It is recommended that future researchers include members from these marginalized communities on the research team, as well as in the research development process, to make participants feel more comfortable when participating in future SV studies. The inclusion of these voices in future research is imperative for higher education professionals to ensure the safety of all college students. To make college campuses safe for all students to thrive, SV prevention and response strategy needs to be effective for all students regardless of their identities and backgrounds. Therefore, student input from different communities is essential so the needs of all students are being heard and addressed.

Since campus communities are continuously evolving as students graduate and new students arrive on campus, continuous research needs to be conducted to align with the evolution of the study body. Research needs to include the voices of current students. In doing so, existing, and future higher education professionals can better pivot SV prevention and response strategy to meet the needs of students. Future studies can further explore students' feelings of SV safety.

Studies can examine topics such as what campus strategy makes students feel safer or more unsafe.

In the current study, students identified major issues with the institutional SV reporting process. Future research can investigate additional university SV reporting processes to better standardize these processes across higher education. Future research could ask college students what aspects of their current SV reporting process builds trust and what facets break trust.

Lastly, future research is needed to better understand students' SV knowledge when entering higher education as a means for college personnel to create streamlined SV education. In the current study, student participants expressed how they entered the campus environment with varying knowledge of sex education, healthy relationships, and SV. Better understanding this spectrum of knowledge could lead higher education practitioners to design standardized curriculum for college students. In doing so, college students could become more united in their understanding of SV. As a result, this better understanding as a community may lead to healthy sexual relationships and a decrease in SV acts in higher education.

## **Summary**

My hope is that higher education leaders recognize the urgent need to address SV on college campuses and will act appropriately. This study brought the much-needed element of student voices to the SV conversation. Students are still fearful of experiencing SV on campus. SV is affecting the way they behave. SV continues to influence millions of Americans every year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). The #MeToo movement and high-profile SV cases have begun to bring more attention to the problem of SV. However, much more work needs to be done to stop SV from hurting students.

College campuses need to stop being complacent in the harm that is being inflicted upon students. Higher education leadership needs to provide all students the opportunity to learn and develop in safe campus communities. This study demonstrates that college practitioners cannot assume that students are safe. It is imperative these leaders continuously evaluate the campus climate for SV. In addition, student voices must be considered. Higher education administrations can no longer rely on their assumptions of SV climate to determine if students are safe.

By actively participating in ending SV at the institutional level, higher education leaders can begin to impact SV on campus. Examining SV on a larger scale may finally decrease SV acts on campus. As a result, students may begin to gain a sense of safety on their campus. This increase of student safety may better cultivate campus communities where all students have the opportunity to exist and prosper without fear. My hope is that higher education leaders will demonstrate greater care for student safety on campus. By centering the needs of students as a priority, campus administrations may finally end SV in higher education.

## Appendix A: Research Study Participant Selection Survey

**Principal Investigator (PI):** Meghan Funk, Ph.D. Student at DePaul University

**Phone:** 419-206-2517

**Project Title:** College Students' Perceptions of Sexual Violence Climate on their Campus

Thank you for your interest in potentially participating in a research study aimed to explore college students' perceptions of sexual violence climate on their campus. Please complete the following survey to be considered for this study. Completion of this survey does not guarantee your participation in the study. If selected, you have the opportunity to stop participating in the study at any time.

If you complete this survey, your information will be kept confidential during the study and this information will be deleted at the completion of the study. If you are selected to participate in this study, you will be contacted by email in 2-5 weeks.

If you have any questions regarding this survey or the study, please contact the PI, Meghan Funk, at the above phone number or by email at [mfunk2@depaul.edu](mailto:mfunk2@depaul.edu).

### Research Study Participant Selection Survey

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Does the researcher have your permission to contact you if additional information is needed?

YES NO

1) Are you over the age of 18 (circle one):

YES NO

2) Are you enrolled in full time coursework as defined by your institution (circle one):

YES NO

3) Are you enrolled as an undergraduate student?

YES NO

4) How many full academic years have you completed at this institution (circle one):

<1    1    2    3    4    5    >5

5) Are you a transfer student?

YES NO

- 6) Have you lived on campus for a minimum of one academic year during your collegiate career at this institution?

YES NO

- 7) Do you currently live on-campus?

YES NO

- 8) Are you currently a member of a social fraternity or sorority?

YES NO

- 9) Are you currently a member of an athletic team as part of the institution's athletic department?

YES NO

- 10) If yes, which sport(s)? \_\_\_\_\_

- 11) Are you a member of a student organization?

YES NO

- 12) If yes, please list: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Demographic Information:

- 1) Please indicate your broad racial group membership. Mark all that apply.

- White/Caucasian
- Middle Eastern/Northern African
- African American/Black
- American Indian/Alaskan Native
- Asian/Asian American
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- Hispanic/Latinx
- Multiracial
- Racial identification not listed (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to disclose

- 2) How do you identify in terms of gender? Mark all that apply.

- Male

- Female
- Transgender
- Gender queer
- Gender non-conforming
- Intersex
- Gender identity not listed (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to disclose

3) How would you identify your sexual orientation? Mark all that apply.

- Heterosexual
- Bisexual
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Queer
- Questioning or unsure
- Asexual
- Pansexual
- Same-gender loving
- Sexual identity not listed (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to disclose

4) How would you identify your religious affiliation? Mark all that apply.

- Christian
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Muslim
- Jewish
- Sikh
- Agnostic
- Atheist
- Religious affiliation not listed (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to disclose



## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

### *Instructions:*

This interview aims to gather your perceptions of sexual violence climate on your campus. There are no correct or wrong answers. Please feel free to share your thoughts and opinions openly. I am here to learn from you. Keep in mind that you can stop this interview at any time. You may also refuse to answer any of the questions asked. Here is a packet of resources for you. Feel free to look over them as needed. I also want to name that sexual violence is a sensitive topic which is why I'm sending you sexual violence resources at this time. I want to highlight that 2 sexual violence advocate hotlines are available for you to call to during this call and after.

### *Consent Form Instructions:*

I have received your signed consent form. Do you have any questions about the consent form?

### *Recorder Instructions:*

If you are comfortable, I will be recording our conversation. The purpose of the recording is to take notes that I can refer back to. As a result, I can provide my attention to you during the interview. The recording will remain confidential. I will be the only individual who will access the recording. At the completion of the study, the recordings will be deleted. This interview is being audio recorded for research purposes. Please let me know if you would like the recording to stop at any time. Recording starts now.

- 1) Tell me a little bit about yourself.
- 2) How do you define sexual violence?
- 3) How do you think you came to define sexual violence?
- 4) Do you think sexual violence is an issue on your campus? Why or why not?
- 5) What is your understanding of rape myths?
- 6) Do you think rape myths are an issue on your campus? Why or why not?
- 7) Does your school have a sexual violence policy? If so, how did you hear about it? Can you speak to it?
- 8) Can you speak to whether or not your institution offers any type of prevention programming? Did you experience this programming? If so, when?
- 9) Can you speak to whether or not your institution has sexual violence reporting protocol?
- 10) Can you speak to any conversations you have had with campus community members about sexual violence climate on campus?
- 11) Can you speak to any state or federal policy regarding sexual violence in higher education?
- 12) What is your confidence in your institutions reporting policies and procedures?
- 13) What are your feelings of safety on campus?
- 14) Can you speak to how different identities play a role in the sexual violence climate on this campus?
  - a. Race
  - b. Gender
  - c. Sexual Identity
  - d. Religion
  - e. Ability Status

f. Socioeconomic Status

- 15) Can you speak to your sense of safety on campus in regard to any of your identities?
- 16) Can you speak to your sense of safety for your peers on campus in regard to identities?
- 17) Can you speak to your safety or the safety of your peers on campus compared to other environments you have inhabited?
- 18) Can you speak to the drinking and partying life on campus? Do these environments have issues pertaining to sexual violence?
- 19) What is your institution doing that you think is positive in regard to sexual violence prevention and response?
- 20) What is your institution doing that you think is negative in regard to sexual violence prevention and response?
- 21) How do you think the sexual violence climate on this campus compares to other campuses? Why do you think other campuses are better or worse?
- 22) Would you change anything about how your institution address sexual violence on campus? If yes, what would you change?
- 23) What are state and federal leaders doing that you think is positive in regard to sexual violence prevention and response?
- 24) What are state and federal leaders doing that you think is negative in regard to sexual violence prevention and response?
- 25) Would you change anything about how political leaders address sexual violence on campus? If yes, what would you change?
- 26) Is there anything else you would like to share?

Before we end, do you have any questions for me? If you have any questions that come up please do not hesitate to contact me. Lastly, I am looking to include a few more participants, do you by chance have any friends, roommates, or peers who may want to participate?

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