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# “Just Young Dudes Having Fun”?: Social Media Reactions to the ODU Banner Incident

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“JUST YOUNG DUDES HAVING FUN”? SOCIAL MEDIA REACTIONS TO THE ODU

BANNER INCIDENT

by

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B.S. May 2013, Longwood University

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## ABSTRACT

### “JUST YOUNG DUDES HAVING FUN”? : SOCIAL MEDIA REACTIONS TO THE ODU BANNER INCIDENT

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“Rowdy and fun. Hope your baby girl is ready for a good time...” This statement was on the first of three banners hung from a fraternity home’s balcony on freshman move-in day. The second banner stated, “Freshman drop off here” with an arrow pointing to the front door of the home. The final banner suggested, “Go ahead and drop off mom too...” These banners demonstrated the explicit implementation of rape culture in the university setting. Rape culture includes humor that normalizes violence against women, such as the alleged joke that constituted the ODU banner incident. This research explored societal responses to the banner incident and sought out to expose ideologies that perpetuate rape culture at higher-learning institutions through grounded theory and a feminist framework. A content analysis of community comments on a digital media platform, i.e. a local news stations’ Facebook page, demonstrated that overall, most commenters tolerated and accepted rape culture while in joke format, and that sexist actions taken by men in college are justified by their age, college location, and alleged sexuality through the “boys will be boys” and hegemonic masculinity ideologies. This research is crucially important in demonstrating that first, institutions must do a better job at expelling rape culture from college life, and second, that although society has made significant strides toward gender equality, there is still much room to improve.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“Rowdy and fun. Hope your baby girl is ready for a good time...” was just one of the direct quotes written on the banners that hung from an off-campus fraternity home at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. Two other banners that included the quotes, “Freshman daughter drop off” with an arrow pointing down to the front door, and “Go ahead and drop off mom too...” were hung from the same second-story balcony on August 21, 2015. Making it even more central to the university, the O in rowdy, D in and, and the U in fun were all in light blue, one of the university’s logo colors. Soon after the banners were hung, they were photographed and immediately posted to various social media sites, including Facebook. The Sigma Nu fraternity was found responsible for hanging these offensive banners in what they claimed was meant to be a joke, directed at freshmen moving into university housing on Freshman Move-In Day. What originally started as an alleged joke to welcome incoming freshmen, ended with the fraternity’s suspension and a campus outcry against rape culture. The immediate response from campus leaders and student ambassadors discussed explicitly that these banners were not acceptable; however, the surrounding community had other ideas about the behavior of the fraternity. When a local news channel, WAVY TV 10, made a post on their Facebook page about the incident and included photos of the banners, a plethora of comments sparked a controversial conversation surrounding the university atmosphere. The comments demonstrated attitudes toward the banner incident, including beliefs about acceptability and permissiveness of this type of behavior. This thesis analyzes comments to the WAVY TV 10 post in the fall of 2015 to capture societal attitudes towards rape culture on university campuses.

American women between the ages of 16–24 are considered to be at the greatest danger for sexual assault (Lombardi and Jones 2009). According to the Campus Sexual Assault Study, nearly 1 in 5 women –19%--reported experiencing attempted or completed sexual assault since entering college (Krebs et al. 2007:66). Compared to victimization among women in the general population, the sexual victimization rates among college women are about 3 times greater (White and Smith 2004). It is telling, then, that the college atmosphere provides a potentially dangerous atmosphere conducive to rape and rape culture.

Women, particularly college women, in Western and American society are exposed to rape culture on a regular basis. As Forni (2014:6) states, “A woman’s persistent exposure to [rape culture] starts the moment that she is able to identify herself within society.” This exposure can be seen throughout various different aspects of society, including popular ideologies, most forms of media, and clearly in the academic/university setting. The frequency of sexual assaults on campuses makes universities particularly insightful settings to understand the manifestation and perpetuation of rape culture in America. All across the country, students at universities have been found engaging in and maintaining rape culture. Yale University was a prime example, when one of their fraternities was caught chanting, “no means yes, yes means anal” in 2010 (Gasso and Greenberg 2010). The University of Montana at Missoula was recently labeled the rape capital of America after logging over 80 reported rapes each year for three consecutive years (Gray 2014). Rape culture does not just afflict the United States; multiple Canadian universities, for instance the University of Ottawa and University of Guelph, are home to misogynistic behaviors that maintain rape culture, including singing songs about rape (Bretz 2014).



Sigma Nu, a fraternity that alleges it is based on the principles of love and honor, hung sexist and passively threatening banners at Old Dominion University, exemplifying rape culture that exists on college campuses everywhere. The fraternity website (2015) states, “Sigma Nu is the first general college fraternity to offer risk reduction policies and a comprehensive membership education program, remaining committed to both our mission [of honor] and vision for over 140 years.” However, their actions made clear that the members did not receive such education, or did not take it seriously. The language used and the mindset necessary to post such banners does not convey honor or love, the purported foundational tenets of the fraternity. In fact, the banners demonstrate the exact opposite—contentiousness and sexual aggression. The type of language painted on the banners demonstrates the normalization of misogyny and implied violence against women, and provides for an atmosphere conducive to sexism which instills continued fear of sexual assault on the university campus. Societal responses reinforce the normalization of sexist behaviors on the university campus by condoning and justifying them. Creating a climate of safety and comfort in the college setting is becoming increasingly imperative as statistics continue to demonstrate how frequently sexual assault occurs. If nothing changes on university campuses, rape culture, including normalized sexual aggression from fraternity members, athletes, and professors alike, will continue to threaten the overall safety of university settings.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to expose the deep-seatedness of rape culture within societal attitudes through a qualitative content analysis of online comments to inform future university policies that preserve the safety and dignity of all students. This study aimed to investigate the

following research questions: How do society's reactions to the ODU banner incident demonstrate pervasive attitudes that may perpetuate rape culture on college campuses? What type of language does society use to illustrate the deep-seatedness of rape culture within society? Finally, does gender affect the type of reaction and language used in response to the banners? Grounded Theory, an inductive process that works in the reverse manner from typical deductive studies, provided the framework that structured this qualitative research. As is typical within Grounded Theory work, the initial research questions have the potential to change through the process of data collection as more data are collected. Additionally, Grounded Theory does not allow for the formulation of hypotheses prior to the collection and analysis of data due to the potential for interpretational bias. Ultimately, this research utilizes Grounded Theory and a feminist framework to unmask the hidden and normalized nature of rape culture prevalent in societal ideologies in order to begin challenging the dominant patriarchal structure in which we reside.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Previous literature has outlined the problem of rape on college and university campuses quite extensively; however, it has not specifically addressed the local communities' responses to sexist incidents on campuses of higher education and how those responses may or may not display explicit signs of rape culture. Researching society's attitudes toward incidents of rape culture gives insight to how engrained sexism is within our culture as a whole and pinpoints which specific ideologies are pivotal in maintaining rape culture. By identifying specifically the origins of ideologies that are consistent with rape culture and how frequently these ideas are expressed, researchers are able to gain a better understanding of how to undermine and

eventually prevent them from spreading even further. In specific regard to institutions of higher-learning, understanding how the local community responds to instances of rape culture sheds light on how engrained sexism is in the surrounding area, which could provide the knowledge and proper platform to combat it in that context. Knowledge about the reinforcement of misogyny between communities and university campuses can open dialog to undermine sexist notions that perpetuate rape culture within fraternity life. This can prove to be particularly helpful, especially in regard to ODU, which is currently attempting to expand Greek life on campus. Expansion of Greek life on campus has the potential to increase the existence of rape culture and thus worsen the harm done by it, therefore proving the urgency and importance of this study. Unpacking the university and community responses to sexist incidents contributes both to a scholarly understanding of the pervasiveness of rape culture, as well as advances the fight against sexism in our culture more broadly.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

Rape culture is one that “normalizes, trivializes, and quietly condones male sexual assault against women, blaming female victims while subtly celebrating male predators” (Wilhelm 2015). The normalization of rape is a significant problem within society because it degrades and subjugates an entire population of rape victims and potential rape victims, who are predominantly women. As of 2013, rape is defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) 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.” People unfamiliar with the term ‘rape culture’ may automatically assume that someone is being raped or that the message implies a direct rape; however, that is not the case, though the harm caused by

rape culture is equally as perilous. The normalization of sexual violence conveys the message that women are inferior beings and that men's sexual dominance is acceptable. Thus, the continuance of rape culture poses a serious threat to women's freedom and social position in society.

#### SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter has given an overview of the frequency and problematic nature of incidents displaying rape culture within college and university life. Additionally, the importance of studying the local community's attitudes regarding rape culture, including their potential aid in its maintenance, has been explained. The following chapter will provide a review of the literature examining rape culture within various aspects of American society, including common ideologies, media texts, and fraternity life.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter discusses the nature of rape culture throughout various aspects of society and how it has become such a pervasive issue today. The chapter begins with popular American ideologies that contribute to rape culture, including “boys will be boys,” “true hegemonic masculinity,” humor, and the collective responsibility of men. The chapter then discusses the prolific outlets of media that rape culture is viewed within, including newspapers, books, films, pornography, and photography, immediately followed by the importance of social media. Finally, this chapter discusses rape culture within the fraternity subculture, which includes respect for women and the double standard of sexual engagement, degradation in the party scene, and a discussion about date rape. This review exposes the gap in existing literature in which all three themes, i.e. ideologies, media, and fraternity subculture, have not been studied together. These themes inform the current research by giving a deeper insight into online societal responses to rape culture on a university campus. This chapter concludes with a brief summary and description of the direction of this research.

#### IDEOLOGIES CONTRIBUTING TO RAPE CULTURE

Men are socialized into the belief that achieving hegemonic masculinity is the best and only way to prove their manhood (Allison and Risman 2013). The need to prove masculinity starts at a very early age in men’s lives due to societal pressures to be ‘manly.’ Achieving hegemonic masculinity entails sexual dominance over women, sexual freedom, and innate aggressive tendencies, means that men must engage in gendered stereotypes (Quackenbush

1989). Some of these stereotypes, which include describing women as emotional and sensitive contrasted with men as rational and stoic, limit men's ability to empathize with others, especially sexual assault victims. Quackenbush (1989:338) argued, "Sex role socialization often inhibits the assimilation of vital human expressive competencies in males, thus limiting their capacity for empathy, sensitivity, and complete emotion." Crapo (1991:327) agreed, stating that rape and sexual assault are "closely linked to the socialization of males in a way that connects masculinity with aggressive striving for dominance over others." If men are raised believing that they cannot display empathy and must remain insensitive to others to embody masculinity, it is no wonder that they commit more sexual assaults than women (Crapo 1991). Ultimately, men's belief in gendered stereotypes and hegemonic masculinity allows for the justification of malevolent behaviors in which they engage, as well as the entitlement to feel that their behaviors are morally right. The banner incident at Old Dominion University is a perfect example of this, in which both an acceptance of hegemonic masculinity within the fraternity and a manifestation of harmful, sexist ideologies was evident. Men enact these ideologies through violence and the dehumanization of women; however, it is not men alone that propagate rape culture. Society more broadly contributes to the perpetuation of sexist ideologies through everyday interactions. The acceptance of culturally dominant ideologies about hegemonic masculinity and rape culture fosters an environment that dismisses sexually aggressive behavior and permits a societal belief that "boys will be boys."

### *"Boys will be Boys"*

Klein (2005) identified harmful ideologies within American culture by investigating how every media outlet completely ignored the fact that 11 different school shootings across the

nation were prompted by boys' negative reactions to either rejection of or jealousy over a girl. She argued that leaving these details out reinforces the "boys will be boys" attitude common in our society by making it seem that aggression in boys' behavior is natural and acceptable, as opposed to identifying these shootings as explicit gender-based violence. Society's acceptance of the "boys will be boys" ideology provides for the cultural acceptance that males are inherently more aggressive than females, perpetuating the dismissal of the gravity of gender violence due to normalized masculinity expectations (Klein 2005). Adhering to the "boys will be boys" ideology gives the notion that even the slightest form of misogyny is tolerable by rationalizing acts of gender violence as singular, deviant, and justified through both masculinity and the gender stereotypes within it. The "boys will be boys" ideology embodies gender stereotypes and hegemonic masculinity, problematically writing off the oppression of women as expected and defensible.

Reinforcing hegemonic masculinity often means reinforcing the gender binary, in which genders fall into two neat categories (i.e. man and woman) with 'natural' roles and social characteristics assigned to each. Discrete categorization of the human experience in this way has resulted in women's marginalization, attributed to assumed inferior characteristics that typically describe the "softer" sex, such as passive, meek, and nurturing. Chesney-Lind and Eliason (2006:34) support this idea, stating that women "exist in a world that basically ignores and marginalizes them, all the while empowering [men]." Societal expectations of traditional femininity are in direct contrast to aggressive behavior in women. Those who do not conform to expected feminine passivity are often labeled anomalies (Chesney-Lind and Eliason 2006). Thus, if a woman challenges customary femininity and displays even a fraction of stereotypically masculine characteristics, she is cast off as an exception and societal outlier. Gender stereotypes

empower men by foregrounding hegemonic masculine characteristics and establish societal conventions to regulate anything outside of the norm, such as labeling non-conformists as weak or homosexual. Ellis, Sloan, and Wykes (2013) support this notion of hegemonic masculinity, finding that these norms have been institutionalized in both the public and private spheres. Because they are so engrained in American culture, society, in general, does not challenge the existing boundaries for traditional masculinity and femininity; instead, it accepts and governs others by heteronormative values, endorsing sexual aggression in men and excusing misogyny. Together, these scholars speak to the deep-seatedness of heteronormativity and ideals of masculinity manifesting more broadly in society as a “boys will be boys” dismissal of aggressive and oppressive behaviors. The phrase itself contains the casualness with which society both embraces and reinforces this form of masculinity, normalizing and endorsing it through relatively strict adherence to traditional gender norms.

Nurka (2013) expanded on this “boys will be boys” ideology as well; however, she looked through the lens of shame and disgrace on those involved. Nurka investigated victim’s shame versus perpetrator’s disgrace in regards to professional football teams in Australia. She found that football was closely tied to masculinity due to its representation of “athleticism, strength, endurance, toughness, aggression, and tolerance to pain” (Nurka 2013:43). Because professional football is such a popularized sport within Australia, when women alleged rape against football players, typically society spoke out by heavily shaming the victim and casting minimal disgrace on the perpetrator. The treatment difference for victim versus perpetrator was that the football-playing perpetrator was able to come back easily from the minimal disgrace without much backlash, while the victim remained shameful of her body and continued to be recognized as an “extortionist slut” (Nurka 2013:45). The victim was continually punished for



her deviance from heteronormative expectations of female purity and sexual restraint; however, the perpetrator's disgrace was temporary because the deep connection between football and masculinity allows easy dismissal of the players' behavior as "boys being boys."

Within the ideology that "boys will be boys" lies the notion that men's sexuality is both natural and normal, whereas expectations for women's sexuality demand that she be discreet and limited within her sexual desires. Masculinity norms, which include dominance, aggression, and an 'uncontrollable' sex drive, create and reinforce the overt sexual aggression that men use most often against women, but even against other men. The "boys the boys" ideology utilizes the commonly held notion that men's sexuality is more natural, acceptable, and uncontrollable than women's to exempt men from culpability of acquaintance rape and other sexually aggressive behaviors (Miller and Marshall 1987). The use of the "boys will be boys" ideology justifies the issue in a manner in which men are simply not capable of controlling their sexual urges and thus are excused for their sexually aggressive actions. Rationalizing that some men to engage in sexual assault simply as a means to satisfy their alleged sexual hunger does not support women's rights or grant women their own human dignity. Sexually assaulted women continue to bear the burden of blame and tend to be reluctant to report offenses for fear of society's backlash and devaluing of their experiences (Burnett et al. 2009). Thus, the "boys will be boys" ideology perpetuates rape culture by privileging men's sexuality and dominance over women's.

Additionally, the "boys will be boys" ideology contributes to misplacement of blame for sexual assault and adherence to rape myths. Rape myths, which are typically false yet widely accepted and serve to condone male's sexual aggression over women, contribute to the disregard and invisibility of women's worth (McMahon 2010). Some rape myths include statements such as, 'he didn't mean to rape her' or 'she asked for it,' generally placing blame on the victim either

through the victim's attire or the influence of alcohol. In McMahon's 2010 study sampling 2,338 undergraduate students, "Over 53% of students strongly agreed or agreed that, 'If a girl acts like a slut, she is eventually going to get into trouble'" (McMahon 2010:9). Acting "like a slut" is described as dressing scantily, engaging in flirtatious behavior, and becoming intoxicated—all of which are seen as justification for being sexually assaulted. Beliefs such as these reinforce the idea that women, when not adhering to the very strict heteronormative ideal of 'true' femininity, are to blame for any sexual assault taken against them and not worthy of respect. As stated in McMahon (2010), even college students, who presumably have received at least an introductory version of gender equality education, and thus have at least a minimal understanding of gender violence, still consider women responsible for the sexual violence acted out against them. If college-educated students still have an overwhelming belief in rape myths such as this, it is easy to understand how so many scholars have found that the majority of society believes in them as well (Boyle 2015; Burnett et al. 2009; Fraser 2015; McMahon 2010; Nurka 2013; Tieger 1981). By utilizing these rape myths in group settings, they tend to become "normal belief patterns, further engraining the myths" (Burnett et al. 2009:466). The ideologies continue to spread and manifest themselves within society in negative ways. Condoning such rape myths permit 1) many men to escape guilt and fault for their actions, which convince them and others that their actions are tolerable, and 2) general society to excuse actions such as sexual assault by writing them off as expected and inevitable, according to the "boys will be boys" mentality.

Fraternity members follow and integrate the "boys will be boys" and hegemonic masculinity ideologies in their everyday interactions. Boyle (2015) argued that there are factors leading to their sexist actions other than just socialization. She found that fraternity members, particularly those belonging to "high-risk" fraternities, receive motivation for sexist actions

through psycho-social processes; those motives being “to attain identity verification and avoid deflection” (Boyle 2015:394). High-risk fraternities are those that are “notorious on campus as places that are dangerous for women” (Boyle 2015:389). Essentially, a fraternity member may act in sexist ways due to the culturally inscribed values that fraternities have evolved to understand as important. Fraternity brothers gain credibility and social capital within the group by participating in and upholding certain sexist ideals. By conforming—and often turning a blind eye—to misogynist actions, such as the sexual assault or degradation of women, fraternity members gain peer support and the sense that they are living up to masculine norms according to the “boys will be boys” ideology. Willingness to degrade women and act misogynistically to uphold a social status clearly demonstrates the ease with which these actions and ideals are upheld as normal and natural. Rape culture, specifically the normalization of sexual and gender violence, is evident within these ideologies and behaviors and fraternity members at higher-learning institutions continue to maintain them.

This discussion has focused on the problematic nature of the “boys will be boys” ideology serving to condone men’s sexual aggression and continued dominance over women. Men’s internalization of the notion that “boys will be boys” suggests that men’s behavior be aggressive, dominant, and assertive, thus driving men to further behave in ways that attempt to achieve true hegemonic masculinity. Society’s more broad acceptance of the notion that “boys will be boys” further engrains masculine expectations and writes off gender violence as expected and justified, creating an environment in which women’s experiences continue to be subjugated by men’s, particularly in the university setting. This becomes dangerous because it creates a campus environment ripe for sexual assault, similar to the one I am analyzing in this research. The banners at ODU serve as an instance of this sexual aggression on campus that goes largely

overlooked by men and the broader community due to the normalized notions of “boys will be boys.”

### *Hegemonic Masculinity*

Quackenbush (1989) and Tieger (1981) investigated hegemonic masculinity and its relation to males' self-rated likelihood of rape. Both studies revealed problematic aspects within the hegemonic masculinity ideology that sets the standard for today's men. Quackenbush (1989) utilized the Bem Sex-Role Inventory scale which places men on a masculinity continuum from 1 to 7 after asking a series of personality characteristic questions, and received 30 androgynous-identified men and 30 masculine-identified men to use as his sample. He established that males who identified as masculine were more likely to find rape and sexual assault tolerable than males who identified as androgynous. The explanation for this difference in beliefs was attributed to androgynous males having a more visible feminine side, thus not facing the same pressure to conform to societal norms of hegemonic masculinity and being able to empathize more with rape victims. Tieger (1981) found that men in his study felt more prone to blaming the victim for not resisting enough, thus reinforcing a hegemonic masculine belief set which reifies sexual aggression, dominance, and a lackadaisical attitude toward sexual assault. He also found that males attributed more blame to victims who were deemed “unattractive” versus the “attractive” victims, reinforcing the idea that victims are to blame for the actions taken against them, even more so for unattractive and/or marginalized women. From the findings of both of these articles, we can conclude that the ideals associated with achieving hegemonic masculinity are problematic. Idealized masculinity emerges as an assertive, aggressive force in society, which

naturalizes men's sexuality and thus misplaces the blame of perpetrators' malicious actions onto their victims.

Gadd et al. (2014) found similar misplacement of blame while testing the effectiveness of social marketing to reach domestic abuse perpetrators. Upon initially watching the social marketing video on sexual assault, participants were disgusted with the perpetrator in the video; however, towards the end of the video when the perpetrator was attempting to avoid legal action against him, the participants began to empathize with the perpetrator and rationalize his behavior. The participants ultimately related to the perpetrator, creating the opposite reaction intended by the video: "The young man they had only minutes earlier construed as a calculating villain deserving of a lethal lesson in how not to treat women was thus reimagined as the innocent party in an everyday bedroom encounter that was neither serious nor especially abusive" (Gadd et al. 2014:13). Later in the study, the participants who identified as previous perpetrators placed the role of being the *real* evildoer on other types of men, specifically men from foreign countries and men of color (Gadd et al. 2014). Thus, the participants were immune to their own internal justice mechanism and justified their actions by placing blame on others. Overall, this study demonstrates a mental block that allows men to be dismissive towards sexual aggression and disassociate from fault in a sexual assault.

As shown by Gadd and colleagues (2014), male perpetrators of sexual violence readily place blame outside of themselves. Societal ideologies, such as "boys will be boys" and hegemonic masculinity, blinded participants and gave them the necessary justifications to be able to see themselves as good and/or not responsible for any serious crime. The beliefs supporting the perpetrators' behaviors must be radically changed to ensure that they hold themselves accountable for their actions (Fraser 2015). Until perpetrators no longer have the means and

societal approval through the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity and the “boys will be boys” ideology, sexual violence at higher-learning institutions will persist.

### *Humor*

Humor is another method by which rape culture and hegemonic masculinity is maintained. Within society, humor has been used as a relief in particularly awkward situations and/or in reference to situations which may be difficult to discuss – for example, sexism. Sexist humor, directed towards both men and women, has the “potential to cause harm because it reflects underlying sexist attitudes that would otherwise be suppressed” (Strain et al. 2015:122). In many situations in which sexist humor is employed, it likely comes from a person who believes in the reality of the joke. Humor, when used in this context, can “ridicule a marginalized group” in a playful, implicit way while subversively exploiting said group (Strain et al. 2015:122). Jokes often play on gender stereotypes, exhibiting sexist ideologies through language and context that makes them more palatable for broad audiences (Strain et al. 2015). To demonstrate how engrained sexism is within society, Strain and colleagues (2015) found that some participants did not register sexist jokes as sexist in nature. They were blinded by the content and manner of the joke and did not see the implicit sexism that it portrayed. Humor and jokes often mask derogatory comments, naturalizing them in the public consciousness and thus perpetuating rape culture in society. For example, fraternity brothers at Old Dominion University hung banners instructing parents to drop off their daughters and wives at the fraternity house as a joke—clearly not expecting anyone to deliver women to them. The blatant disregard for other students’ dignity and even feelings of safety reveal a normalized sense of mutual understanding between the frat brothers and society at large that this was an acceptable behavior. In that

moment, they truly embodied the “boys will be boys” exemption that society frequently grants men. In reality, the banners, like other sexist humor, were not taken lightly and offended students. This alleged joke is just one single instance of a much larger phenomenon in which the acceptability of privileging men over women and ongoing sexism perpetuates rape culture on university campuses. The acceptability of this ‘joke’ clearly demonstrates a serious engraining of gender binary norms, hegemonic masculinity, and the need to challenge the current stereotypes that engrain misogyny in our culture.

### *Collective Responsibility*

May and Strikwerda (1994) originated a theoretical position to challenge gender norms and stereotypes. Contrary to most findings in which men individually are blamed for their actions in rape and sexual assault, May and Strikwerda (1994) argue that men, collectively, are responsible for rape. The authors contend that every male in Western culture is at least in part to blame for any rapes that occur. “By direct contribution, or by negligence or by similarity of disposition, or by benefitting, most if not all men do share in each rape in a particular society” (May and Strikwerda 1994:149). This partial responsibility is shared through the creation of an environment conducive to rape, which entails sharing similar sexually aggressive frames of mind and reaping the benefits of rape through domination in a patriarchal hierarchy within society. With this mindset, even men who have not committed rape and never anticipate being involved in a rape must feel some type of responsibility due to their connectedness with other men. For instance, in this study, even though rape was not committed, all men at the university must feel partially responsible for the potential rape that could happen as a result of the banners due to condoning its presence or laughing it off, according to May and Strikwerda. If every man felt at

least minimally responsible for sexually aggressive actions, even if they themselves are not committing sexual assault, they could begin to challenge rape culture more explicitly through their own actions and intervening in their peers' actions. It is through believing in this collective mindset that men and women alike can begin challenging the socialization and ideologies that lie behind society and nearly all forms of media.

## RAPE CULTURE IN THE MEDIA

Rape culture can be seen in nearly every type of media outlet, from newspapers, to books, films, television, pornography, advertising, and photography. With the recent growth in usage, social media has also become a tool of dissemination for rape culture. The pervasiveness of rape culture—both overt and subtle—in society's media outlets normalizes sexist tendencies and deepens our beliefs in the ideologies that allow rape culture to persist, such as “boys will be boys.” The creation of most mainstream media reinforces cultural norms, constructs false notions about women's sexuality (Denes 2011), and depicts men's need to achieve ideal, hegemonic masculinity (Ellis et al. 2012).

Denes (2011) examined the occurrence of rape culture in books. In particular, she performed a case study on one book, *The Mystery Method: How to Get Beautiful Women into Bed*, written by a man named Mystery within the pick-up artist community. The book uses alleged science to make the argument that “no can mean yes” (Denes 2011). Mystery dictates that women, even if they say no to sexual engagement, will become aroused if men continue to touch and excite them, making the argument that women are susceptible to persuasion in these situations (Denes 2011). Overall, the book claims that women actually always want to have sex, but they do not want to seem promiscuous so they say no. The author advises men to respond by



persuading her in bodily, “scientific” ways until she concedes. Denes (2011:415) argues that Mystery’s book “privileges and attempts to normalize female passivity and man's role as ‘controller’ of the female sexual experience.” This, she argues, constitutes the use and abuse of female bodies and “provides a problematic means of interpreting consent” (Denes 2011:418). This depiction of sexuality allows for sexually suggestive and aggressive behaviors, such as the hanging of the banners at ODU in which fraternity men asserted their sexual dominance over freshmen, broadcasting and reinforcing a rape culture on the university campus.

Media reports and news articles also contribute to the spread and perpetuation of rape culture. Ellis et al. (2012) and Foreman (2015) found this troublesome occurrence in their studies on news articles, specifically through the language reporters used to describe men. Foreman (2015) discovered through a content analysis of news articles that discourses related to bullying reaffirm heteronormativity. The news articles she analyzed framed two teens who committed suicide due to their sexuality as victims of bullying, in which suicide is an expected or predictable response (Foreman 2015). Her argument is that framing suicide as predictable due to sexist bullying “actually uphold[s] discriminatory systems of patriarchy and heteronormativity” which in turn, reifies rape culture by privileging men’s heterosexual experience over any other experience (Foreman 2015:171). Ellis et al. (2012) found similarities in their news analysis. They analyzed the discourse of news articles related to the story of a man who was not able to meet the societal expectations of masculinity on any level (i.e. domestic, institutional, or elemental) and ultimately injured his ex-partner, murdered her new boyfriend and then himself. They found that the journalists and news reports only “reach out for already current explanatory frameworks, which reproduce conservative and traditional models of masculinity” by writing off his actions as expected due to his failure in life (Ellis et al. 2012:18). The media’s depiction of men’s

violence as acceptable and justified reifies the “boys will be boys” argument that supplements hegemonic masculinity. These types of discourses offer audiences limited models of masculinity that ultimately “maintain and systematically reproduce gendered roles and relations” (Ellis et al. 2012:18). Media depictions of masculinity reproduce behaviors that reinforce hegemonic masculinity, which can reaffirm sexually aggressive behaviors as appropriate and thus, continue the reproduction of a rape culture.

Smith (2014) investigated the appearance of rape culture in various media outlets, including magazines, music, and films. Films were found to have a particularly strong correlation to rape culture. Regardless of genre, which included pornography, adventure, crime, culture, and even documentaries, respondents felt that sexual content and violence against women was evident in nearly all film types included in the study. Forni (2014:1) found similar results as she argued that sexual violence is “a problematic trope” in the film industry. The majority of films portray women as sexual objects who lack the necessary agency to turn away from sex (Forni 2014). The inherent problem here is that the mainstream film industry only profits when people pay to watch mainstream films, which speaks to how inoffensive these interactions are to viewers who continue to support films that limit female characters’ agency. The mainstream film industry is not solely responsible for portraying women in this light. Even when attempting to subvert mainstream ideologies of sexual violence that plague movies, educational documentaries succumb to similar issues. As Forni (2014:22) stated, “...educational dramas and documentaries that depict rape are sometimes insincere in their representations of how serious sexual violence really is.” This can lead to the internalization that rape is not a serious or pervasive issue and contribute to rape myth acceptance (Forni 2014; Malamuth and Check 1981). All types of films have been viewed as underwriting these problems, especially pornographic films.

Pornography has been found to reinforce gender stereotypes (Floyd 2011; Paul 2005). Within these stereotypes, as mentioned previously, lie culturally defined notions of what sexuality should look like for both men and women. Floyd (2011:117) argued that pornography, through the notion that men are “always ready,” reinforces the idea that sexuality and penetration constitute masculinity. This standardization of sexual necessity “infects the overall male experience of sex” (Floyd 2011) and allows for women to be seen as objects to fulfill that aspect of their masculinity. Paul (2005) reported that average male pornography users become more likely to describe all women in objective sexual standards, due to the highly sexualized and gender stereotypical manners in which women are portrayed. “Given the requirement of sexual passivity, women are expected to offer sexual pleasure to men whenever it is wanted, without a thought of reciprocation. However, this demand cannot be met without the woman coming to be viewed as a ‘slut’ due to her behavior” (Floyd 2011:129). This portrayal of sexual engagement suggests men’s experience is always privileged above women’s, and that consent is not a question but instead assumed as a given. Floyd (2011:115) stated, “gender and sexuality become inseparable” while viewing, and thus internalizing, these norms. In this light, pornography contributes to the ideologies that reinforce a patriarchal view of sexuality, which informs and allows for the maintenance of rape culture’s presence within society’s beliefs.

Even photography can be an instrument to perpetuate rape culture when used to engage with social media. Dodge (2015) conducted a study on the dissemination of rape culture through digital photography on social media. In particular, she studied the cases of three teenage girls who were sexually assaulted while incoherently intoxicated. In each of the three cases, a bystander captured a photo of the assault and later posted it to social media sites where other people, from both inside and outside of their communities, could witness the assault. Within this

study, however, the majority of responses to the teenage girls on the social media site were that they deserved it for their actions (i.e. getting drunk and putting themselves in that situation) (Dodge 2015). There were inexhaustible amounts of victim-blaming and slut-shaming, i.e. the degradation and stigmatization of women who engage in sexual behavior, in comments on various social media sites as a result of these photos, placing the blame on the victim rather than the perpetrator or even the bystander who was watching without intervening. As Dodge (2015) stated,

No one did anything because this behavior was normalized and legitimized by a context of rape culture. It is this normalization that allowed many people, as well as some media outlets, to openly sympathize with the rapists ... These sympathizers believed that the young men who raped and abused Doe did not deserve punishment because they were just *normal* boys, they were not *evil* people. (original emphasis, Dodge 2015:9).

Dodge's analysis shows how pervasive and normalized rape culture has become in society's thoughts and beliefs. These photographs could easily have been turned around and used as examples of what should never happen to teenage girls; but instead, they were used as tools to shame the victims, which ultimately led to the victims' suicides (Dodge 2015). "Therefore, in the context of photographs of sexual assault, this would mean that rape culture, and the myths that enforce it such as stereotypes about masculinity and female sexuality, influences the way that these photographs are perceived" (Dodge 2015:7). Dodge's analysis of the use of photography and social media in the dissemination of rape culture is particularly relevant to the current research, being the sole study to analyze online societal responses to sexual assaults. This use of social media, specifically posting comments in regards to 'hot topics' such as sexual assault or rape culture, has become popular in the online realm.

This research is not meant to overgeneralize or make the claim that *all* media texts reinforce and normalize gender and sexuality stereotypes. There are instances of the media

rejecting social norms and challenging rape culture notions. For instance, Forni (2014) examined her production of a film which explicitly rejected rape culture and worked to demonstrate ideal sexual interactions. Other instances of media challenging stereotypical tropes include the recent film, “Big Hero 6,” in which one female character is depicted as strong, assertive, and capable, and she does not engage in any romance. An additional example of a film that resists rape culture is “Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 2,” in which one of the main male characters makes the statement that kissing when the female character does not know what she wants is like “kissing a drunk girl. It doesn’t count.” Statements such as this have become more prominent in society as mainstream film recognizes the need for resistance against normalized rape culture. Though, even with the recent occurrences of statements challenging rape culture and depictions of genders that counter stereotypes, such as gender queer characters, the overwhelming majority of media texts still suggest society’s permissiveness and acceptance of rape culture values. This permissiveness can often be found in the online social media domain.

### *Social Media*

Social media has arguably become a staple in American and global culture. Since the origination of social media sites, society has continued to use them at higher and higher rates each year. Strain (2015:123) found,

As a function of the growth in social media usage, individuals’ online and real-life interactions are becoming less separated. In 2012, social media use in the United States increased by 37% from the previous year, with users spending a total of 121 billion minutes on social media sites over a one-year span.

This can be attributed to the countless uses social media has taken on. Some use it as a form of public justice through media trials (Chagnon and Chesney-Lind 2015; Machado and Santos 2009), as a method to gain public visibility (Yar 2012), or for informational reasons, social

support, or friendship (Ridings and Gefen 2004). Universities have switched from traditional Learning Management Systems to Facebook communities designed to help students in their programs (Garavaglia and Petti 2015). Businesses have even begun using it as a marketing tool to increase customer satisfaction and intent to buy (Aluri, Slevitch, and Larzelere 2015; Hajli 2014). Social media has quickly become embedded in a number of traditional social institutions including education, banking and finance, and especially friendships. The reaches of social media touch nearly every aspect of our lives, which makes it an extremely powerful and potentially influential tool in the dissemination of information, particularly regarding rape culture.

As previously argued here, traditional forms of media have the potential for audiences to internalize the information they are viewing in ways that affect societal norms beyond the consumption of the media itself. Mutz (1987:19-20) agreed, stating that, “Communication need not directly affect opinions in order to exert influence on the public opinion process.” Taking Mutz’s statement as a starting point, this research argues that media does influence perceptions, whether or not society realizes it. This logic applies to social media as well, but is exacerbated due to its speed and accessibility. Moreno et al. (2015), made a similar argument through their findings that high usage of social media led to a higher influence of social media on participant perceptions. In other words, the more often one uses social media, the more likely the content from these sources will affect one’s behavior. This research arguably supports the idea that even comments on Facebook can influence people, and in turn can alter their beliefs and behaviors. Those in greatest danger for this are the ones who tend to use social media most frequently—those in their late teens and early twenties (Moreno et al. 2015). Colleges and universities provide a prime location to look at this phenomenon, given the concentration of those in the

prime social media usage age range. More specifically, research on the use of social media on the ODU campus is pertinent. If not for the photographs of the banners at ODU circulating rapidly through social media, the incident may not have become as widely recognized or made national news. Social media turned the banner incident into an uncontrollable wildfire that spread across the national and global stage. An analysis, then, of how social media has expedited the dissemination of rape culture incidences, specifically the banner hanging by a fraternity at ODU, is both relevant and important; however, investigating how fraternities engage in sexist behavior and/or rationalize their behaviors through normalized masculinity expectations is first necessary.

#### RAPE CULTURE IN FRATERNITY SUBCULTURE

Across the nation, university Greek life thrives through fraternity and sorority engagement. Fraternities and sororities are known as social spaces for students to get involved with campus life and, according to Sigma Nu's website (2015), "perpetuate lifelong friendships and commitment to the Fraternity." Fraternities and sororities are also infamous for the party life that accompanies membership. According to Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney (2006), the existence of fraternities in general promotes party life on college and university campuses. They bring together groups of homogenous people, strengthening the group culture, and their members typically live off-campus, where the university has little regulation over Greek parties or behaviors.

Many problems within Greek social life have been exposed in existing literature, including underage drinking and hazing initiation rituals; however, the most societally impactful issue associated with campus Greek life is the perpetuation and enactment of rape culture through the fraternity subculture. Rape culture manifests within fraternity norms and values

through actions such as disrespecting women when in group settings, exercising dominating control over women who attend their parties, and engaging in sexual assault either individually or as a group (Armstrong et al. 2006; Boswell and Spade 1996). In many ways, fraternity life produces and reinforces strong ties to rape culture, whether or not members of fraternities and other Greek members realize it.

This research does not assume that all fraternity men behave in sexually aggressive manners, nor that all men on any social level do. As previous studies have concluded, not all fraternities may engage in this type of behavior, nor are they “equal in their propensity to engage in sexual assault” (Humphrey and Kahn 2000:1320). Sororities can be said to engage in their own rape culture norms as well, but in differing ways than fraternities. This study focuses on fraternities as institutions of women’s oppression, as other studies have shown that rape culture is evident and significant in fraternity culture (Allison and Risman 2013; Armstrong et al. 2006; Boswell and Spade 1996; Martin and Hummer 1989; Tieger 1981).

### *Respect and the Double Standard*

One of the key aspects in which some fraternity men perpetuate rape culture is through peer support of disrespecting women. Humphrey and Kahn (2000) found that men in high-risk fraternities, which are defined as fraternities whose parties are especially conducive to sexual assault, are approached with great peer support from other brothers for committing acts of sexual assault. Peer support can range from being informational, making a joke or a new nickname for the brother who ‘scored,’ or becoming ‘in’ with the other members by adhering to perceived pressure to have sex. In additional studies, it has been found that many fraternity men lack a general respect for women (Allison and Risman 2013; Armstrong et al. 2006; Boswell and Spade



1996; Tieger 1981). This blatant disrespect for women can be viewed through various behaviors in which fraternity members engage.

To a certain extent, being in a fraternity can intensify the disrespect a man has towards women. Boswell and Spade (1996) found that men sensed a pressure to be disrespectful toward women when in groups with other men. When men are with a woman one-on-one, they treat women with more respect, reportedly due to the lack of pressure from their peers. When in the presence of their fraternity brothers, they feel an obligation to treat women as objects of sexual exploitation in line with the expectations of masculinity supported within that community. Boswell and Spade (1996:141) quoted a senior male student who agreed with this logic: “In general, college-aged men don't treat women their age with respect because 90 percent of them think of women as merely a means to sex.” Women in this environment are seen as sex toys, not subjects worthy of equality or friendship. The men in these studies have proven that when surrounded by their fraternity brothers, they are likely to demean and subjugate women, using them solely for sex. These are the types of issues and ideologies that reinforce rape culture. The fact that these men feel pressure to degrade women when surrounded with their fraternity brothers illustrates the normalization of rape culture in society established by the “boys will be boys” mentality (Tieger 1981).

Denying respect to women also denies them sexual freedom. The double standard, in which men's sexual appetite and prowess is accepted by society as natural and normal, while women's sexuality is denied and negatively stigmatized, is a key mechanism in denying women sexual freedom. Several studies have discussed the issue of the double standard in women's ability to engage in consensual intercourse without being stigmatized (Allison and Risman 2013; Boswell and Spade 1996; Burnett et al. 2009). Men are typically encouraged to engage in

multiple sexual relationships simultaneously by their peers as a means of proving their masculinity, whereas women are shunned from active sexual lives as a means of protecting their femininity and perceived purity. Both Allison and Risman (2013), and Boswell and Spade (1996), found the double standard prevalent on college campuses within fraternities. Fraternity members are able to assert their domination over women by controlling and limiting even the most personal aspect of women's lives, i.e. their sex lives. Of course, a woman does not have to conform to the ideal that she should not "hook up" with multiple people; however, she runs the risk of being socially ostracized and bullied by fraternity members, other students, and even society at large (Allison and Risman 2013). Limiting women's sexual freedom while empowering men's shows an evident bias not only on college campuses, but also in society as a whole. In many ways, Western society has made great strides in advancing sexual freedom and expression for women, but ideologies that limit women and promote rape culture persist. In particular, campus fraternities promote and enact rape culture through women's degradation at parties and incidents of date rape.

### *Degradation in the Party Scene*

Armstrong et al. (2006) found that gender roles within the social hierarchy at college parties contribute to women's degradation. When attending parties, men typically exercise control over every aspect of the party, i.e. the alcohol, the music, the transportation, the theme, and even who is granted admission. Some fraternities have members police the front door and allow entry only to certain types of people, such as attractive women, while turning away people who are not in the fraternity network, sharing the same sexually aggressive plan for the evening, such as unfamiliar men who are seen as competition. This regulates what types of people will be

coming to the party, likely homogenous, and shows that men utilize their power in throwing parties to reach the type of women that they want. Fraternities also exercise their control over women by enforcing dress codes, or themes, that expose women in demeaning manners in order to gain entry. These themes, which include things like “School Teacher/Sexy Student, CEO/Secretary Ho, and Golf Pro/Tennis Ho” place women in subordinate positions to men (Armstrong et al. 2006:489). Not only does policing the front door regulate entry, it also communicates to women what is desirable and acceptable according to that fraternity’s standards, which further degrades women by implying that only *certain* women are *good enough* to gain entry.

Once these women are inside, Armstrong et al. (2006) explains that they are responsible for acting appreciative for being granted entrance and the alcohol being served. These women must show a certain level of friendliness to the members of the house in order to maintain their entry status. Because women who attend these parties feel pressure to be amiable to fraternity members, they are placed in a position of potential danger for sexual assault by “fulfilling the gendered role of *partier*” (Armstrong et al. 2006:491). In other words, the gendered role of *partier* is also a gender performance in which women are positioned as meek and amenable to men’s advances, thus making them more vulnerable to sexual assault. Control and exploitation, then, become part of the host-fraternity’s strategy to promote masculine desires. This strategy involves pushing alcohol on women to lower inhibitions and even door-blocking and coercion to prevent women from leaving. This has become a systematic means by which fraternity men extract non-consensual sex from intoxicated women (Armstrong et al. 2006). These practices are not specific only to fraternities. Other all-male groups, such as athletic teams, can exhibit similar behaviors; however, the current study focuses on fraternities as a particular contained instance of

male aggression and privilege at higher-education institutions. Such male aggression often leaves women pressured into fulfilling societal norms and thus, degraded and dehumanized.

This pressure often leads women to succumb to fraternity men's wishes, further dehumanizing them. Once fraternity men have succeeded and acquired a sexual object for the night, women face the "walk of shame," enduring heckling from fraternity brothers who sit on their porches waiting for women to walk by after spending the night with a brother who would not drive them home (Boswell and Spade 1996). "Chatter" is another topic Boswell and Spade (1996) present, in which members in fraternities harass women who sleep over and engage in intercourse with their fraternity brothers, calling these women sluts, bitches, and antagonizing them as they make their way out of the house. The tactics fraternities use assert male dominance over women and create a space in which women are degraded and subjugated within the social realm.

College and university women face a distressing amount of pressure to perform gender roles according to social norms, even at university parties. As shown above, this creates a recipe for potential sexual assault. However, even aside from sexual assault, the dominance of masculinity and male privilege in these contexts affects women's lives in many overt and subtle ways. In response to the rape culture perpetuated on college campuses, and even beyond, women must devise strategies to deflect unwanted advances while still finding room for freedom and self-expression. Women face the challenge of having to choose an appropriate outfit that fits with the theme of the party while still appearing attractive, but the outfit must not be too revealing to the point that others may believe she is "looking for it" (Burnett et al. 2009). Women must also be concerned with being kind enough to fraternity members so that they can feel accepted around campus and maintain a social network; however, she cannot be so kind that

she is taken advantage of. Women must engage in party life to maintain a social status on campus, which may include drinking at a party; however, she must not drink too much, or else those same alleged friends can easily exploit her. The conflict, complicatedness, and imposition of male-dominated rape culture on college women become evident even through these mundane, everyday actions and interactions. These conflicts emphasize how men create and reinforce rape culture, but the contradictions and societal pressures are mostly a burden to women attempting to navigate these complex social spaces.

Men do not feel these same types of pressure. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Men go out, aware of the social hierarchy in which they dominate, and perhaps take the necessary actions to succeed in their mission of acquiring a sexual object for the night (Armstrong et al. 2006). This mindset is troubling for both genders. It provides men the means to act in misogynistic ways and limits women's freedom to interact in their own desired ways due to potential fear of sexual violence. This implies that women are not worthy enough to feel safe around their own university. Due to men's dominance—specifically fraternity men in the university setting—and society's tacit acceptance of said dominance, the majority of men have not been conditioned to care about women's problems or safety. However, incidents such as the banner situation at Old Dominion University threaten the safety of women on campus by even the slightest suggestion of date rape, and thus should not be ignored.

### *Date rape and Sexual Assault*

Some men on college campuses struggle to view date rape as a serious issue (Boswell and Spade 1996; Tieger 1981). Boswell and Spade (1996) found that men in fraternities thought of rape as someone popping out of the bushes and attacking a woman rather than having sex with

a woman who is too intoxicated to consent. One participant even went as far to say, "I don't care whether alcohol is involved or not; that is not rape. Rapists are people that have something seriously wrong with them" (Boswell and Spade 1996:141). These men acknowledged the fact that women get intoxicated at their parties but when confronted with having sex with drunk women (i.e. raping them), they dismissed these actions as "only being human," thus rationalizing the only logical reaction being to have sex with a drunk woman (1996:143). Tieger (1981:155) found similar results, in which men felt that date rape is not a serious crime and found more "enjoyment in rape" than women, meaning that men believed rape was normative and acceptable to sexually enjoy. In particular, Tieger (1981:155) found that "males view rape victims as failing to properly resist the crime." The problem here is that these men are not taking any of the blame for on-campus rape. This conforms to the finding that sexual violence perpetrators deflected their own blame (Gadd et al. 2014); however, it is even more problematic at the fraternity level. These fraternity members believe that strategically getting women incoherently intoxicated at their own parties and then taking advantage of their drunkenness by engaging in intercourse is acceptable, rationalizing their actions by not specifically labeling them rape. Fraternity culture and parties, then, construct a predatory environment. These environments produce a domain in which some fraternity men feel that "no can mean yes," as Denes (2011) stated, which entraps women who feel immense pressures to engage in campus social life. Fraternity brothers draw upon hegemonic masculinity to enforce dress codes and push inebriants in ways that frame female attendees as gender stereotype deviants (i.e. sluts) and thus, set up this constructed environment through power differentials that will almost always lean in the fraternity brothers' favor. This constructed environment is then used as an alibi for perpetrators of date rape on intoxicated women to deflect blame. Society then writes off the misogynistic actions due to the "boys will be

boys” ideology and societal punishment of “loose” women who were “asking for it,” reinforcing and thus, contributing to the reproduction of the violent cycle. This has become such a common occurrence that it is now commonplace fraternity behavior, in which some men find no inherent moral conflict.

Burnett et al. (2009) found yet another issue on college campuses that aids in the maintenance of a rape culture. The muted nature surrounding the communication of date rape both pre-, during, and post-assault on college campuses maintains its prevalence today (Burnett et al. 2009). Culturally, the ambiguous understanding and definition of ‘consent’ promotes confusion among students identifying, experiencing, and reporting sexual assault. Individually, rape myths and societal pressures to follow dominant gendered expectations often leave women silenced and uncomfortable in certain sexual situations. Situationally, women attempt “shadowboxing” against date rape by going to parties with trusted friends and making their own drinks. However, assuming all responsibility for self-protection from rape perpetuates the “boys will be boys” mentality and places accountability on the women. If sexual assault occurs, then it becomes the woman’s fault for not effectively protecting herself from ‘natural’ male behaviors (Burnett et al. 2009). This belief further silences victims and accepts traditional ideologies that subjugate assault victims. Burnett et al. (2009) establish that even post-date rape, if a woman challenges all of the issues listed previously and reports to her friends and/or the authorities, there is usually immediate backlash and a plethora of questions that remove the blame from the perpetrator and place it on the victim. This victim-blaming is common even from other women and amongst friends, leaving the victim with no safe space to speak about the event freely and without judgement (Burnett et al. 2009). Therefore, the victim often feels no other choice than to maintain silence. The mutedness of rape on college campuses before, during, and after the

assault occurs strongly aids in the maintenance of a rape culture on college campuses (Burnett et al. 2009). If men continue to feel that they are able to blur the lines of consent and keep women quiet both during and after the event, this facilitates the continuation of their actions and an increase in assaults. The mutedness surrounding sexual assault and date rape reinforces the normality of these incidents and removes virtually all accountability from men. This reveals men's domination of both the language and ideologies in which society speaks about and refers to rape and consent (Burnett et al. 2009). Unless society challenges that power structure, more students will continue to suffer their victimization in silence.

Fraternity life perpetuates rape culture on college campuses by numerous methods. Masculine hegemony on college campuses gives men strength to influence interactions and ultimately spread the sexist ideologies they enforce. Though not all fraternities perpetuate violent or sexually aggressive norms, it is not a coincidence that the ODU banner incident involved a fraternity making sexually obtrusive suggestions about college women and their mothers.

## SUMMARY AND CRITIQUE OF THE LITERATURE

In reviewing the literature, I have presented rape culture as overarching, with reaches into societal ideologies, media portrayals, and fraternity subculture, all of which coalesce into the current research topic of investigating online societal responses to an incident of rape culture perpetrated by a fraternity. Ideologies, which are streamlined through the media and internalized by their audiences, have created a platform from which men and women alike justify gender violence. Social media aids in this internalization, with the growing popularity of its influence and extensive societal reach. Fraternity members, who consume multiple forms of media daily, and thus are more heavily exposed to the problematic ideologies previously identified, propel



those ideologies of sexual aggression, sexual violence, and sexism as a whole through the very nature of their existence.

Although previous research has addressed each one of these themes separately, there is a gap in the literature in studying the themes cohesively. Studies have included the importance of and the usage of social media; however, they have not made the connection that social media plays a role in the deep-seatedness of rape culture within our society, influenced by societal ideologies. Present research does exist on different forms of media and the portrayal of rape culture, but rarely is there mention of media's role in the maintenance of rape culture via social media. Previous studies have generally employed focus groups, interviews, and surveys to assess beliefs about rape culture, but have not thought to include a content analysis of digital media measuring permissiveness or intolerance of these types of beliefs. Existing research also lacks policy implications for the potential benefits of social media in battling rape culture, especially on college campuses. This research attempts to fill those gaps by conducting a content analysis of comments posted on Facebook, a social media site, in response to an incident on a local higher-education institution campus. The following chapter explains how content analysis of a digital media platform, based primarily on Grounded Theory and a feminist framework, inform our understanding of the pervasiveness of rape culture at higher-learning institutions.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the importance of qualitative research and then gives a detailed description of the research design employed in this study. The proceeding sections discuss the procedures utilized, followed by the process involved in the analyses of the data. Finally, I describe the limitations and provide a brief summary of the chapter.

#### RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this study is to expose the deep-seatedness of rape culture within societal attitudes through a qualitative content analysis of online comments to propose future policy implications for universities.

The ‘banner incident’ occurred at Old Dominion University, a large southeastern university, on freshmen move-in day of the fall semester of 2015. According to CollegeBoard (2015), Old Dominion has a population of 20,115 undergraduates and 4,817 graduate students. The student population consists of 54% females, with the other 46% identifying as male. Among this university’s population, 7% of men participate in fraternities and 6% of women participate in sororities. 13.9%, or 2,795, of the undergraduate population are first-time degree-seeking freshmen. Out of all first-year students, 76% live in on-campus housing. This means that of the 2,795 freshmen, 76% or 2,124 students could have potentially been moving in (perhaps with the help of their parents) the day that the banners were hung outside of a fraternity home and thus, may have been exposed to the banners. Although fraternity members hung the banners on an off-campus home, the home is located on one of the two main road thoroughfares that allow cars to

access the freshmen dormitories, making it a prime location for freshmen visibility. In addition, the number presented above does not include the many other students, or their family members and guests helping with their move-in, who live both off- and on-campus who may have seen the banners that day.

Content analysis was selected as the most appropriate methodology for the current research for several reasons. Firstly, content analysis is typically used in exploratory, inductive contexts, and this research is both exploratory and inductive. The current study does not aim to test a specific theory, but rather create one grounded in the data. Interviews and surveys, which are generally constructed to test specific theories, are not as conducive to the research topic since very little is currently known about the relationship between social media and campus rape culture. The inductive nature of content analysis is critical because it provides the space to truly examine this particular instance of rape culture along with the theoretical underpinnings of “boys will be boys” and hegemonic masculinity. By asking Rosenau’s (1980) famous question, “Of what is this an instance,” I am able to situate ODU’s banner incident as a moment of rape culture within the larger phenomenon of campus rape culture and investigate it in a way that informs the current theory. From this, I am able to generate new theoretical understandings of the complex ways society and heteronormativity are interlaced with ongoing rape culture. Content analysis provides the perfect methodological platform to do this. Secondly, the use of a digital media platform to collect societal responses truly captures the community’s sentiments regarding rape culture around campus without researcher intervention. Participants may get timid and not fully express themselves while in the presence of a researcher, for instance in interviews or focus groups. Content analysis removes such a possibility because the content was made prior to conducting the study—in the current case, research was conducted after responses were already

posted to the social media site. At times, respondents may not be aware that research is being conducted due to the nature of content analysis, which provides more reason for respondents to be true to their own inner sentiments in their comments, whether that sentiment reflects online self or in-person self should they differ. When researching a sensitive topic, such as rape culture, this expressive freedom is key. It opens up possibilities for researchers to question the norms that previous, and perhaps more invasive, research collection methods have not acknowledged. Utilization of this method, in and of itself, produces a specific type of impactful research that other methods would not allow for.

Due to the varying nature of sample sizes and methodologies within the social sciences, one specific sample size has not been deemed appropriate or impactful for qualitative work. Sample sizes can vary from one community or media text to hundreds of participants. Researchers who use qualitative methods do not conduct power analyses, as statistical research often does. Rather, qualitative work attempts to generate in-depth analyses to construct cohesive understanding of a particular issue within society. When forming the sample, qualitative researchers more often ask what would be appropriate for their research question and proposed method than how many would be statistically necessary. Grounded Theory research, in particular, does not specify a sample size prior to beginning the data collection process (Johnson 2015). To dictate a specific sample size or even approximate what I consider appropriate to collect would be jeopardizing my research and potentially biasing the development of my theory by under-sampling or over-sampling fully saturated concepts. Thus, to make a difference in my area of research, I collected enough data to propose a theoretical understanding of this specific incidence of rape culture.

A non-probability sampling method, called theoretical sampling, was utilized in order to complete this analysis. Theoretical sampling derives from Grounded Theory, originated by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, which is inductive and promotes the discovery of theory from data. Theoretical sampling typically involves “illuminating theoretically relevant aspects and dimensions of a phenomenon” (Foley and Timonen 2015:1199). This means that the sampling process in grounded work tends to focus more on collecting relevant theoretical data than setting a specific number of participants to include. “Accordingly, the sampling plan is not fixed upon the inception of the study, but rather is shaped and reshaped as the research process unfolds and theory is developed” (Johnson 2015:263). Johnson (2015) makes clear that prior to delving into the data, the researcher has no knowledge of what the sample size will be or consist of. Rather, the sample is “driven by concepts or categories (i.e., variables) that emerge during data analysis and the need for further elaboration of these categories to develop theory, thus an exact sample size is impossible to know” (Foley and Timonen 2015:1199). Instead of setting a fixed sample size prior to engaging in the research, the researcher continues to collect data until no new themes emerge and all relevant data is completely saturated, allowing the research to shape the sample size itself (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In this study, the sample consisted of comments in response to a news station local to the university, WAVY TV 10, post of an article about the banner incident. A content analysis was performed on original comments, one by one, beginning with the very first comment on the post, until no new themes emerged.

### *Research Questions*

Grounded Theory, an inductive process which works in the reverse manner from typical deductive studies, does not allow for the formulation of hypotheses prior to the collection and analyzing of data due to the potential interpretational bias that could result from hypothesizing.

However, several questions about campus rape culture motivated this study: 1) How do society's reactions to the ODU banner incident demonstrate pervasive attitudes that may perpetuate rape culture on college campuses? 2) What type of language does society use to illustrate the deep-seatedness of rape culture within society? 3) Does gender affect the type of reaction and language used to discuss the banners? As is typical within Grounded Theory work, the initial research questions have the potential to change through the process of data collection due to the manner in which data are collected and based on emerging themes.

### *Variables in the Study*

The independent variables consisted of the various categories that the comments were placed into. As the application of Grounded Theory suggests, these categories were not identified until engaging in data collection and analysis. The categories were only established in the midst of this process, which is to say that they were not operationalized until then. Presumptively, some frequently referenced categories may have included gender, gender violence, harm, joke, and/or funny; however, there was no way to be certain of these until the data analysis stage of the research.

The dependent variable was permissiveness/intolerance of attitudes that perpetuate rape culture. The category that the response fell into determined its permissiveness or intolerance of rape culture, and thus gave a suggestion of attitudes that perpetuate rape culture. Each comment fit in one of four categories. Those were acceptable, not acceptable, undecided (for mixed reactions and/or unclear reactions), and unrelated.

## IMPORTANCE OF QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

For this particular research topic, qualitative methods were more appropriate than quantitative. Qualitative research varies from quantitative in its attempted goals. As McCusker and Gunaydin (2015:537) explain,

These [qualitative] methods aim to answer questions about the ‘what’, ‘how’ or ‘why’ of a phenomenon rather than ‘how many’ or ‘how much’, which are answered by quantitative methods. If the aim is to understand how a community or individuals within it perceive a particular issue, then qualitative methods are often appropriate.

For this reason, qualitative methods were chosen. Through this research, I collected data to understand how the local community perceives rape culture and analyze their attitudes toward it. The goal of this research, parallel to most qualitative studies, was to collect rich, descriptive data that fully explain society’s attitudes. Quantitative methods would not be able to provide thorough details regarding the local community’s attitudes, as they typically focus on generalizations and statistics.

Rape culture, being a relatively new term, has received extensive attention in existing feminist literature; however, it still has yet to be fully understood and explored through each realm of society. Digital analyses on perceptions of rape culture have received little attention and thus, little understanding exists in this area. Johnson (2015:262) explains that, “Qualitative research allows for a more discovery-oriented approach in conducting research and can be particularly useful in exploring phenomena where little understanding exists.” Qualitative research provides the necessary methods needed to explore areas of society that have not been exposed yet. By explaining the ‘how’ or ‘why’ behind a particular phenomenon and developing relevant theories, qualitative research often provides the foundation for future quantitative studies to test these theories and explain ‘how much’ or ‘how many’. For years, in the quantitative versus qualitative debate, the claim has been made that because qualitative work

focuses on situated knowledge and is unable to be replicated, it is weaker. Bhattacharjee (2012:2) contributed to this belief by stating that qualitative work in the social sciences “tend[s] to be less accurate, deterministic, or unambiguous.”

Objectivity, as an ideal most researchers work toward, is said to be important but lacking in qualitative work due to the subjective nature of the research. However, within qualitative work, and particularly feminist work, an acknowledgement has been made that objectivity in its truest sense can never be attained, regardless of the methodology utilized (Acker, Barry, and Esseveld 1991). In fact, as a counter to objectivity within the natural sciences, feminists have adopted the term ‘strong objectivity’ which “acknowledges that the production of power is a political process and that there is a need for greater concentration on social location” (Naples and Gurr 2014:19). Essentially, strong objectivity realizes that there is no valid way in which researchers can be completely objective due to their own unique, personal experiences and characteristics, also known as social location, influencing the research. It is for this reason that acknowledging social location and social background, also referred to as being reflexive, is crucial in feminist and qualitative work (Fonow and Cook 1991). Feminist research, both qualitative and quantitative, acknowledges that true objectivity cannot be obtained, and embraces it on the notion that including personal experience and social location, while still being reflexive, provides a more comprehensive and beneficial picture of the research being completed for feminist research topics, such as the one being studied here.

Feminist qualitative work provides the foundation for subjugated voices to be heard through detailed accounts of oppression (Mies 1991). Qualitative methods, through feminist methodology, obtain rich, descriptive data about personal experiences of the oppressed and analyze them as political and social disadvantages. Even if the specific topic of research is not



women directly, studying societal perceptions of sexism through a qualitative analysis contributes to feminist work and the overall goal of aiding women (Mies 1991). For instance, the topic of this thesis did not specifically focus on women or illuminate the voices of the oppressed per se. Rather, it focused on societal perceptions of a sexist incidence with the goal of locating the sexist ideologies at play in women's oppression in order to combat it. During the process of unveiling the oppressive ideologies, I have exercised my reflexive abilities by checking my social location and how that impacted both my topic selection and interpretation of each comment I analyzed. When selecting my topic, I maintained an awareness of my position at school as a female sociologist and utilized it as a benefit by being confident that it would assist me in conducting exhaustive and thorough work. I also realized that conducting this research as a female who still attends college could aid in my understanding of gender relations at my own university. This reflexivity is critical in substantiating qualitative, feminist work. Without it, my audience could easily discount this research as too emotionally driven, or just the work of an angry woman. Instead, this research highlights the sociological underpinnings of misogyny that undermine women's rights and human dignity through a feminist framework. For these reasons, a feminist framework to inform this qualitative analysis constitutes the best way to examine the interaction and relationship between social media and rape culture on college campuses.

## PROCEDURES AND INSTRUMENTATION

The social media site, Facebook, was selected as a platform to gather societal responses to an incident of rape culture at Old Dominion University (ODU). Facebook users are able to create a profile and become 'friends' with other Facebook users with whom they wish to keep in contact or share information. Once users have 'friends', they can 'like' their friends' posts,

comment on them, and/or share them. As an additional feature, users can reply directly to comments on the original post as a way to engage in direct interaction with specific users. Many businesses, including news channels, have adapted to the use of Facebook as a social marketing strategy due to the popularity and relevance of social media. A news channel local to ODU and the Hampton Roads area of Virginia, WAVY TV 10, was selected as the primary source of information for this study. WAVY TV 10, News Channel 3, and 13 News Now, all local news channels for the Hampton Roads area, were investigated for possible inclusion in the study. One of the news channels, News Channel 3, did not make a post on their Facebook page about the banners, and 13 News Now posted a response to the banners but received an extremely small response from their followers (only 87 comments). In an attempt to gain a more representative and diverse collection of responses, WAVY TV 10 was selected as the single news source from which to draw samples of comments about the banner incident.

Once the banners were hung at Old Dominion, WAVY TV 10 posted an immediate reaction on their Facebook page on August 22<sup>nd</sup> at 6:08 PM. Their post was titled “ODU says signs like this one, that was hung at a home on 43rd Street near the university's campus this weekend, will not be tolerated” and featured an article about the banners along with a picture of the three problematic banners hanging from the balcony of an off-campus fraternity house. Facebook users who follow and have ‘liked’ the WAVY TV 10 page were able to see WAVY’s post on their page and respond to it through comments or by ‘liking’ it. The post received 1,947 likes and 940 direct comments. Likes on Facebook do not necessarily mean that the user enjoys the content, but rather that they appreciate being able to have read it and are using the ‘like’ feature as a gesture of acknowledgement. There were many replies to comments; however, they were not included in this analysis due to the often tangential nature of the replies. Replies to

comments often became sites of trolling, discussed further in the limitations section, in which the conversation diverged from the topic at hand. No membership or registration was required to view the comments included in the data. However, in order to comment on WAVY TV 10's post, users would have needed to possess or create a profile on Facebook.

The primary data used here derived from Facebook user responses to WAVY TV 10's initial message posted on their Facebook page. The comments analyzed were all posted between August 22 and August 25, 2015. The average length of comments was 27.65 words. Comments also included users who only posted a photo, or a meme, meant to add humor or sarcasm to the conversation. These comments were also included in the data. In order to analyze the comments, the WAVY TV 10 page was first navigated to and then searched until the encounter of the first post regarding the banners. Each comment, excluding the replies to comments, was read and recorded separately, in single fashion, before any coding was done. During this first reading of the comments, each comment was separated by the assumed gender of the commenter. This was completed by viewing the profile picture and the name of the commenter. As this is potentially problematic due to the anonymity of the online world, a third gender category, titled 'unknown', was created for profiles who did not obviously display attributes of the male or female gender. After reading through the comments a first time and separating them by gender, the comments were read through again, one by one, this time noting key codes or concepts that seemed to reoccur often. This process was repeated four times. All possible codes were recorded during this time. The codes developed organically. Predicting the codes before delving into the data would not have been possible, nor would it have been beneficial, as it could have produced significant bias in the data interpretation and analysis by reducing my theoretical sensitivity (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and thus, altering the concepts that constituted my theory. In addition to the

comments on Facebook, emails from the university president regarding the banner incident and comments made during a personal interview with the university president were included as data and coded.

As is standard in Grounded Theory, all is data (Glaser and Strauss 1967), meaning that no original comments or commenters were purposely excluded from the research. Due to tangential issues and chances for online trolling, however, *replies* to original comments were excluded. Also, the comments that were made after theoretical saturation was reached were left out of the data in order to restrict repetitiveness.

Analyzing the comments on a public, online forum, I collected unmediated and unfiltered responses to a controversial topic. Use of online data has changed the field of sociology and created its own new branch, named digital sociology, which,

...refers to the branch of sociology that examines the impact of the internet and, more particularly, social media outlets in the perception and even the formation of the relationships that have long been studied within the field... Digital sociology acknowledges that the constructs of relationships, sexuality, community ... and gender have been affected by the massive influence of the Internet. (Dewey 2015:1)

Gathering data through online resources, such as social media, provides researchers insight on human interaction and social construction with “unprecedented rapidity” (Dewey 2015:1), allowing for constant shifting of the research as culture advances. Social media interactions, including posts, comments, and likes, provide researchers an alternative means of engaging in a culture even while lacking a physical presence. Therefore, analyzing posts online, rather than through conventional research methods, provides the researcher with visceral, immediate responses not influenced by the researcher’s presence. Also, due to the partial anonymity provided by the online world, some people gain a sense of bravery to make comments that they may not make in face to face interaction (Rainie and Wellman 2012). In this light,

online content analysis may be even more insightful than perhaps a focus group or interview on the same topic due to the freedom of expression that the online world provides for its users.

Using Facebook as a tool of analysis then, has provided for an exhaustive and in-depth understanding of how some people feel about rape culture on college campuses in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia.

Reliability and validity typically refer, in quantitative research, to a study's measurement consistency and accuracy, respectively. Reliability, which refers to a study's repeatability, is limited in most qualitative research due to the researcher's personal interpretation of the data. Within this qualitative study, reliability was not a major concern; although, due to the documentable and precise methods in which data is collected and analyzed until saturation within grounded research, this study is reliable on a small-scale. Due to the interpretational and personal nature of the research presented, the replicability or reliability of this study in a larger context (i.e. to other universities or areas) is limited due to its inability to produce the "scientifically reproducible fact" (Glaser and Strauss 1967). However, this research intends to build a theory, not test one; therefore, future, larger-scale research could use alternative methods to demonstrate such reliability. Validity is also difficult to prove in qualitative work; although, despite this difficulty, generally qualitative data have high validity, meaning that they accurately capture the concepts they intend to research. Being that the data itself formulates the research questions in grounded theory research, this study clearly captures the concepts it was intended to study and thus demonstrates high validity. Because of the type of data qualitative research tends to collect, that is in-depth and nuanced information, there is not a strong push to uphold reliability and validity as traditional positivist, quantitative research does; however, when at all

possible, qualitative researchers should still strive to maintain reliability and validity to the best of their ability, as I have done throughout this research.

## ANALYSES

In Grounded Theory research, data collection and analysis are typically one and the same.

As Johnson (2015:263) states,

Contrary to many traditional research designs in which the collection and analysis of data are two sequential and discrete processes, collection and analysis in grounded theory are concurrent and intertwined. In grounded theory, collections and analyses occur in a lock-step fashion, each influencing the other. Initial data are analysed, and initial emergent insights are obtained. Based on these insights, the questions in the data collection are amended and/or new questions are added. This process continues until the point of theoretical saturation at which no new insights emerge.

For the purpose of formatting this thesis, however, I have separated the data collection and analysis sections. The content analysis method and steps involved in the analysis for this research are outlined below.

The codes found in an earlier step were transcribed and then clustered into groups to create larger themes. The codes were clustered by relevance to each other and the relationships each had to the others. This step involved the theoretical brainstorming that most grounded theorists utilize. It is in this step that the first themes, which comprise the theory, emerged in the research. After I decided upon all themes, I used them to develop my theory of campus rape culture in order to tie my research to society more broadly. This was done by establishing clear relationships between themes and again, grouping them together. This continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no new data appeared and all of the themes were well-established and saturated enough to create a theory without additional data. At this point, the themes were systematically ordered into an integrated theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The

software program, Dedoose, was utilized in this process to identify and differentiate themes and the codes that comprised those themes. As Glaser and Strauss (1967:4) state, “grounded theory is derived from data and then illustrated by characteristic examples of data,” therefore, exemplary quotes were pulled from the data in order to more clearly demonstrate the codes and themes.

While including exemplary quotes, the anonymity and confidentiality of Facebook commenters was upheld by not displaying usernames and creating pseudonyms for each user who was quoted. Quotes by the same person were attributed to the same pseudonym. In addition, the times and dates of the comments were not disclosed, providing less ability to track the comment. Although precautions have been taken to uphold the privacy of commenters, the data is still public and online, meaning there is a chance, although minimal, that readers could find the comments should they persist. Ferguson and Piche (2015:6) note, “Given the online presence of the comments we analyze, the protection of those whose remarks are studied requires readers to not input excerpts into search engines.” Aware of this possibility, I have included direct quotes even so, “as not doing so would decrease the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings” (Ferguson and Piche 2015:6). As an additional precaution to avoid ethical dilemmas, an exemption form was filed with the ODU Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that this method of research did not violate any ethical codes. In this instance, the IRB was the gatekeeper of information which provided permission and knowledge about what is deemed public, and thus useable, and what is not. Ethical dilemmas on all levels, then, were avoided to the best of my ability.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Several limitations must be considered when interpreting the results of this research. Only one web source was utilized to collect data, WAVY TV 10's post, instead of the various different web sources to form a more representative sample. Further, some would say that the slight liberal political bias of WAVY TV 10 could affect and potentially limit the type of people who would follow their news page. However, WAVY TV 10 has been the most followed and most watched news channel in the area for the past 24 consecutive years, according to Pinto (2015), making it the most representative of the community and thus the prime candidate to include for analysis.

Likewise, some could argue that only analyzing one instance of rape culture, as opposed to broadening the scope of the research to include various incidents on universities across the country, has weakened my approach. Generalizability was not the purpose of conducting this research. Instead, I collected data on a specific incident to inform an in-depth understanding of local attitudes toward rape culture in order to begin addressing the problem on a local level. Also, by focusing on one incident, I am able to focus on inductive theory-building. Future research that aims to test theory deductively by exploring societal attitudes in regards to rape culture on a state or national level could perhaps include more instances of rape culture throughout various campuses.

While selecting only Facebook as the media from which to analyze comments, as opposed to extending the analysis to other social media sites such as Twitter, is interpreted as a limitation, Facebook was chosen specifically because of the linearity of the site, meaning that the structure of the site allowed for specific and direct analysis of comments. As some other social media sites are nonlinear, collection of data and the direction of the conversation about the post



is less clear. Analyzing Facebook alone provided straightforward data that assisted in ensuring the data analysis was exhaustive and thorough, as well as concentrated around the specific topic of the ODU banner incident.

Additionally, research in the online realm presents its own limitations, such as the possibility of some Facebook users commenting in order to provoke an argument or a reaction rather than commenting to express their actual feelings toward the situation, also known as ‘trolling’. Trolling is the act of disrupting conversations on the internet for the purpose of achieving “lulz”, which is explained to be amusement derived from another person’s anger (Phillips 2015). Essentially, trolls create profiles on Facebook (and other social media sites) simply for the purpose of harassing, disorienting, and exploiting others who appear vulnerable. Trolls can comment on their friends and loved-ones’ pages; however, they typically use media pages as prime sources to target due to the highly-opinionated comments that result from media posts (Phillips 2015), such as the comments analyzed in this research. Identifying trolls is difficult. Some devoted trolls follow protocol and name their profile after a popular meme, such as Paulie Socash (Phillips 2015); however, other trolls simply create a pseudonym for their profiles, such as Frank David, which makes identifying them as a troll challenging. For this reason, I must acknowledge that trolls may exist in the data, however, this is a potential source of bias that I am willing to accept. This is a limitation of all digital research and thus is not unique to this study. For the purposes of this study, however, utilization of online content analysis has proven beneficial in grasping the true attitudes of society regarding rape culture due to the expressive freedom users enjoy online (Rainie and Wellman 2012).

As previously mentioned, choosing content analysis of an online forum to research this topic has limited generalizability to a larger target population. The scope of the

representativeness of this study extends to a smaller subset of people who have created profiles on Facebook, use it relatively regularly, and follow WAVY TV 10's Facebook page.

Commenters would predominantly include users from the Hampton Roads area who would be more likely to follow a local news channel's Facebook page; however, Hampton Roads includes a vast number of military families who have not resided here their entire lives, and some who have potentially already relocated but still follow WAVY's Facebook page. Online respondents could represent a more diverse and inclusive sample from varying geographic locations, but may over represent military subculture due to the demographics of the Hampton Roads area.

Although the limited representativeness presented above may seem extremely specific, it is important to note that the incident being studied here is just one instance of a larger phenomenon that affects universities all over the country. The comments in response to WAVY TV 10's post are just one display of attitudes toward one incidence of a much larger, societal level problem. As Rosenau (1980) conjectures, this observed phenomenon is merely one instance of a larger pattern that needs to be theorized. No single phenomenon exists in isolation or is unique to itself, meaning that each instance is deserving of analytical attention and theorization (Rosenau 1980:34), no matter how small or specific.

## SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter outlined the methodology involved in the collection of data for this research. The research design, including a brief description of Grounded Theory and the importance of qualitative research, was described. The procedures and analysis used during this content analysis were defined, along with the limitations of the current study. The following chapter will discuss the results of this analysis.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The format of the findings presented below is standard in grounded theory work, working from the broad, macro level, down to a more specific, micro level. Initially, the codes that emerged from the data are reported in a broad fashion. Each code is defined exactly as it was found in the data and analyzed separately. Then, the codes are presented within their respective themes, making the last section of the findings more specific and central to the theory proposed in the conclusions chapter. Lastly, supplementary data from the president of the university are analyzed to conclude the findings.

Out of 938 comments on the original Facebook thread, 220 comments from 216 different people were coded and analyzed. Theoretical saturation was reached at this point, in which no new themes emerged from the data and comments began to seem repetitive.

The sample consisted of 125 females (56.8%), and 95 males (43.2%), as identified by myself according to commenter profile characteristics. On immediate glance, most of respondents (48.6%) deemed that the banners were acceptable and were permissive of them, whereas only 33.6% thought the banners were unacceptable and dismissed their presence altogether. An additional 5% posted comments that were undecided and did not display strong feelings in either direction. Some of those comments were also too short to be analyzed. For example, a comment was left that simply stated “Ridiculous” and another stated “Wow....”, which made deciding if the commenters were accepting of the banners difficult. Lastly, 12.7% commenters posted comments that were unrelated to the banners. The language utilized in

displaying respondents' permissiveness and intolerance varied, which determined the various codes used in the analysis of the comments.

Thirty-four codes emerged from the data. Table 1 lists each code, a description, an exemplary quote, and the number of hits received. The names for most codes were derived from the data; however, some phrases were shortened in order to make the code names more concise.

<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Exemplary Quote</b>	<b>Number of Hits</b>
Advice to College Women	Comments that directed advice at college women.	"parents please have a talk with your daughters and ladies be SMART when you go out Use good old common sense"	5
Banners Disrespectful	Respondents believed banners were disrespectful and/or showed a lack of respect.	"That's just appalling and disrespectful."	10
First Amendment	Mention the First Amendment and/or Freedom of Speech.	"The first amendment says it will be tolerated."	8
Fraternity	Mention of a fraternity in the comment at all.	"So the news report definitely doesn't say that this was a fraternity home and yet everyone jumps to the conclusion that this was done by a bunch of frat boy rapists."	9
Funny; Hilarious	Respondents stated the banners were funny and/or hilarious.	"i think this is hilarious, it's awesome and it's funny."	37
Get Over It	Indicated that people who were complaining about banners needed to get over it.	"Crybabies get over it"	8
Grow Up!	Indicated that perpetrators of the banners OR people who do not think the banners are funny needed to grow up.	"I'm tired of college students being called "kids", it's time to grow up."	4
Haha/LOL/LMAO	These comments explicitly state the respondent is laughing or did laugh at the banners by including "haha", "lol", or "lmao".	"Lmao, I'm sorry, but this is funny as hell!"	19
Have a Sense of Humor!	Respondents stated the people who did not think banners were funny needed a sense of humor.	"Have a sense of humor plz...."	9
I'm a Girl; Not Offensive	These comments made explicit that respondent was a female and she still thought it was funny, despite being the intended target of the banners.	"I don't find this offensive at all and I'm a girl."	6

<b>Table 1: Codes and Descriptions</b>			
<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Exemplary Quote</b>	<b>Number of Hits</b>
If My Kids Were at This College..	Mention hypothetical situations if respondents' children attended this college; typically angry parents.	"If I was a parent and saw this on my way to drop my child off I might change my mind. And if I was a parent of someone that lived here and saw this, I would yank them out and back home you go!"	6
It's a joke	Indicate that the banners are a joke and should not be taken seriously.	"It's a joke, not a dick. Don't take it so hard."	17
Just College Fun	Excusal of the banners due to simply being "normal" college behavior and/or all in good fun.	"Just some ole college fun....."	25
Lighten Up!	Indication that people who are complaining about the banners need to lighten up & not take the banners so seriously.	"people REALLY need to lighten up"	10
Mention Rape; Not Okay!	These comments reference the reality of rape on college campuses, either within the family or personally, and indicate that the banners are not tolerable.	"For all who thinks this is ok, try stepping in the shoes of a female that has been raped on campus, some still too afraid to tell.... Not cute, hilarious or funny in any way!"	21
Not Boys Anymore—ADULTS	These comments make clear that college students are no longer boys, but adults, and thus their behavior should not be excused.	"let's stop calling them boys, they are adults who apparently don't understand that there are consequences for their actions."	6
Not Funny; Bad Joke	Respondents stated the banners were not funny.	"Is this an attempt to be funny ~ well it's not! You failed....."	14
Not that Serious...	Respondents made clear that that the banners were not serious/did not deserve news coverage.	"Its not that serious.."	16
ODU Affiliate/Local Citizen	Respondents explicitly stated their affiliation to ODU or the Hampton Roads area.	"I am an ODU alum and I say this is horrible!"	16
Off-Campus	These comments reference banners being off-campus, and/or other issues off-campus that ODU should address.	"It was an off campus house odu should of had no authority"	19
Parents (Upbringing)	These comments reference how the perpetrators were raised, indicating that the parents' are to be blamed for the banners.	"Parents need to raise their boys to be respectful. These boys and their parents should be ashamed of themselves."	14
Reference to the Past	These comments compare the banners with behaviors from years past, typically dismissing them as unimportant.	"We did that 30 years ago when I was in school, nothing new."	9
Represent ODU/Reputation	Respondents believe the perpetrators are poorly representing the university and/or damaging the reputation.	"They are representing odu as shown by the light blue odu therefore the school could punish them for poorly representing the university."	10
Rude/Ignorant	Respondents stated the banners were rude and/or ignorant.	"It's degrading and rude"	6

<b>Table 1: Codes and Descriptions</b>			
<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Exemplary Quote</b>	<b>Number of Hits</b>
Society Offended by Everything	Mention that 2015 is the year everyone is offended by everything and/or society is sensitive to everything.	“This overly sensitive society we have now is pathetic.”	13
Stupid	Reference that the banners and/or perpetrators are stupid.	“STUPID PLAIN AND SIMPLE!”	18
Tacky; Poor Taste	Respondents believed banners were tacky or showed poor taste.	“As a resident of the Tidewater area, at best this is very tacky.”	20
These are Boys— Not Men	Distinction that the perpetrators of the banners are boys, not mature enough to be men.	“Yall think this is funny? Until these boys ( <b>not even close to being men</b> ) rape your daughter, right? But, hey, boys will be boys.”	8
They’re Just College Kids	Reference to perpetrators being in college and therefore, not mature.	“Its just college kids being immature and having a good ole laugh!!!”	10
This is Offensive	Banners are offensive, appalling, disgusting, etc.	“Yes, it is degrading and offensive.”	10
This Isn’t Rape	Mention that the banners are not a depiction of rape nor do they suggest rape will occur.	“And to all of the people spouting off about rape, this sign does not say anything about raping anyone.”	9
Warning Sign	Refer to the banners as a warning sign for where to avoid.	“At least it gives the girls a heads up of which place to avoid.”	7
Women as Sexual Objects	Refer to females as sexual beings, equal in promiscuity to men.	“Female will be lining up to get into places like this jus because some have been sheltered for 18-19 years & finally getting the freedom to experiment”	12
Young Kids	Reference to the age of the perpetrators being reason to excuse their actions.	“Just young dudes having fun... Relax.”	9

Out of all 34 codes, “Funny; Hilarious” was the most frequently noted with 37 hits, followed by “Just College Fun” with 25, “Mention Rape; Not Okay!” with 21, and lastly “Tacky; Poor Taste” with 20. With just using these four top categories, it is apparent that most of the respondents to this WAVY TV 10 post about the banners felt that the banners were acceptable as a joke and thus permissive of rape culture on college campuses.

In order to gauge how the community responded to certain types of comments, the number of likes for each comment were compared to whether the comments exhibited an overall acceptable attitude toward the banners or not (i.e. number of likes vs acceptable?). In general, comments that displayed that the banners were acceptable received more likes than comments

that disagreed with the banners. Overall, the community posted more comments displaying a permissive attitude towards the banners which also received more likes and attention from the online Facebook community.

Additionally, shorter comments received more likes than longer comments. The longer the comment got, the fewer likes the comment received. The majority of comments (177) were between 0-37 words and received between 0-76 likes. Only one comment received more than 307 likes and it consisted of 56 words, so moderately short. Furthermore, only one comment that was over 228 words received likes at all, demonstrating that longer comments did not receive much attention from other commenters. It seems as though interaction on social media is limited to short spurts of information due to shortened attention spans that social media may have aided in creating.

#### PERMISSIVE VS INTOLERANT

Each code was analyzed separately to determine which codes had an overall permissive or intolerant attitude toward the banners and rape culture in general. Table 2 exhibits each code in its respective category.

<b>Permissive</b>		<b>Intolerant</b>	
Funny; Hilarious	Not that Serious..	Advice to College Ladies	Rude; Ignorant
Get Over It	Reference to the Past	Banners Disrespectful	Stupid
Haha/LOL/LMAO	Society Offended by Everything	If My Kids Were At This College...	Tacky; Poor Taste
I'm a Girl; Not Offensive	They're Just College Kids.	Mention Rape; Not Okay!	These are Boys – Not Men.
It's a Joke.	This isn't Rape.	Not Funny; Bad Joke	This is Offensive
Just College Fun	Women as Sexual Objects	Not Boys Anymore – ADULTS.	Warning Sign
Lighten Up!	Young Kids	Represent ODU/Reputation	
Have a Sense of Humor!			

Both categories had an almost equivalent number of codes in them, with permissive having a slightly higher number of codes at 15 versus intolerant at 13. Most codes, 28 out of 34, were easily distributed into the permissive/intolerant categories; however, some codes were a bit more challenging as they either fit into both groups or neither. The few that fit into both groups were “Grow Up”, “ODU Affiliate”, and “Parents (Upbringing)”. Within these groups, some statements exhibited a permissive attitude toward the banners, while some displayed an overall intolerant attitude toward them. For example, within the code “Grow up”, one participant stated, “Wait, people have sex on a college campus?? And to all of the people spouting off about rape, this sign does not say anything about raping anyone. Grow up.”, which clearly exhibits a permissive attitude toward the banners. Another participant within the “Grow Up” category was explicit about her intolerant attitude toward the banner and said “Grow up people. This is college, not high school.” A further example of a dually-fitting code was “Parents (Upbringing)” in which some commenters made statements such as, “If you're a parent of a girl and you're offended by that sign and you get scared and worried and are having regrets about letting your



daughter attend ODU then maybe that might be a sign that you're questioning your parenting...” and then continued on to say that the banners were just college fun, clearly expressing his permissive attitude toward the banners. On the reverse side, a commenter stated, “Parents need to raise their boys to be respectful. These boys and their parents should be ashamed of themselves”, which made very clear that she held an intolerant attitude in regards to the banners. Comments in these three categories were thus challenging to neatly categorize into either permissive or intolerant.

In addition, some codes were not clearly permissive or intolerant and were placed into the unrelated category. The unrelated category applied to the codes “Off-Campus”, “First Amendment” and “Fraternity”. These comments did not exhibit any clear attitude toward the banners and instead discussed unrelated content. One such comment read, “Joining the fraternity? Your first task, piss as many people off in one day and let the internet people voice their ‘concerns.’” Another comment placed in the unrelated category read, “So why do they tolerate the actual criminal activity that is ‘not’ on campus.” The codes in the unrelated category varied from the other codes in that they did not speak directly about the obscenity of or the humor in the banners; however, these comments are equally significant to the findings because they represent a subset of the population who created additional debates within the banner discussion, rather than formulating a direct opinion on the problem at hand.

Most of the codes, 28 out of 34, were easily identifiable in terms of how they felt about the banners. However, even though the codes were easily split into permissive and intolerant depending on the language used, that is not to say that each comment was only coded once for either permissive or intolerant. Each comment was separated phrase by phrase and categorized according to each code the participant discussed. For example, the comment “Oh lighten up. It's

actually hilarious. This overly sensitive society we have now is pathetic” was actually coded three different times. “Oh lighten up” was coded for “lighten up”, “It’s actually hilarious” was coded for “funny; hilarious”, and finally “This overly sensitive society we have now is pathetic” was coded for “society offended by everything”. Then, because the comment exhibited an overall permissive attitude toward the banners, it was labeled permissive for descriptor purposes. All comments were coded in this fashion in order to properly gauge how often participants used specific language in regards to the banners. Some comments included codes that fell on both sides of the permissive-intolerant spectrum, so if I had simply coded them for an overall permissive or intolerant attitude, much of the data would have been overlooked. In total, the comments were analyzed for each applicable code and then overall permissiveness or intolerance, in order to better grasp local attitudes regarding the banners. Even comments including pictures were included in analysis and deemed either permissive or intolerant.

## PICTURES

Only three photos emerged out of all 220 comments analyzed. Two were posted by men, and one was posted by a woman. The first picture, posted by a man, was an animated photo of an ambulance with a baby’s head as the driver, captioned with “Oh no, somebody call the Waaaaambulance.” The second photo was a meme stating “The winner for banners on Move In Day” and displayed a picture of a banner from West Virginia University stating, “She called you daddy for 18 yrs. Now it’s OUR TURN.” Lastly, the third photo was an animated picture of Patrick from the Nickelodeon show, *Spongebob Squarepants*, in which he is drooling and googly-eyed, admiration and desire explicit in his expression. Table 3 displays all three photos along with the caption the participant wrote when posting the picture.

Table 3: Pictures and Captions		
Caption: N/A	Caption: WVU wins. Lol.	Caption: Yeeee haaaaaw
	<p>The winner for banners on Move In Day</p> 	

All three pictures displayed a nonchalant attitude towards the banners, clearly permissive of their underlying meaning. The first photo implied that the banners were not serious enough or worthy of complaining about, let alone receiving news time. The participant made it clear through this picture that the people who were bothered with the banners were babies, worthy of sarcastic and demeaning jokes. The second photo carried with it the underlying message that ODU's banners were nothing in comparison to WVU's, and thus not worthy enough to take seriously. This participant made it appear as though ODU was in a competition with other schools to see which school was capable of posting the most crude and offensive banner possible, in which case, ODU lost. In this light, the banners seemed funny and friendly, not worthy of all of the trouble that the banners were causing. The final picture was captioned with "Yeeee haaaaaw" and portrayed all of the lust that the fraternity members packed into the meaning of the banners. The picture of Patrick is a representation of the fraternity members on freshmen move-in day, in which fraternity members drool in lust over the "new meat" on

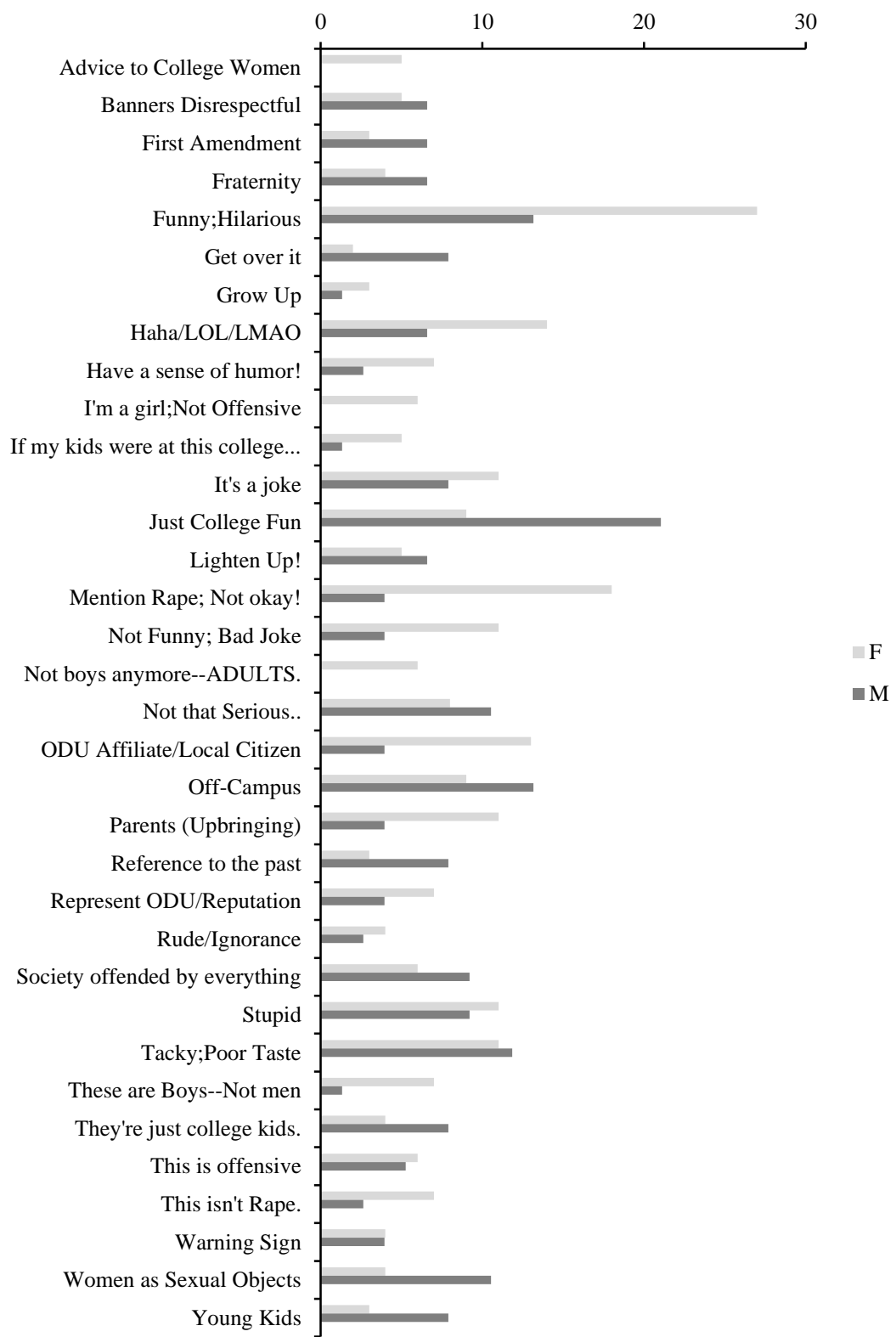
campus. Such behaviors, and even picture representations, are dangerous to college atmospheres and promote normalized sexual aggression by conforming to expected gender norms that follow the hegemonic masculinity model.

## GENDER

In differentiating the various codes, gender played a crucial role. All participants in the data were easily separated in either male or female categories. The profiles that did not obviously display characteristics of a male or female, or had a unisex name, were clicked on and investigated further in order to come to a conclusion on the gender of the participant. There were only three of these cases and in each case, the profile was clicked on and the first sentence that appeared, which says “if you do not know XXX, send him/her a message”, was utilized as the final means of categorization due to the fact that the sentence displays how the user wishes to be identified (i.e. the gender the user chose when creating his/her own profile).

Overall, more women in general responded to this post than men; however, most comments, regardless of gender, displayed an explicit permissive attitude toward the banners, explaining them as justifiable and excusable. Figure 1 breaks each code down by gender, displaying the frequency in which each code was utilized by both genders.

**Figure 1: Gender Differences by Code**



Surprisingly, for each category that deemed the banners funny, such as the codes “funny; hilarious” and “Haha/LOL/LMAO”, women were more likely than men were to utilize this type of language to describe the banners. Women more frequently referred to the banners as a joke, as seen in the category “It’s a joke”, dismissing the banners as comical. They expressed on a more frequent basis that the banners were funny and exhibited laughable behavior, regardless of being the intended target of the banners. In fact, women were frequently explicit in stating that they understood being the intended target and the potential disrespect directed towards them, while still expressing that the comments were funny. This was done frequently enough that a separate category was created simply for these types of comments labeled “I’m a girl; Not offensive.” Comments such as, “As a female, that went away to college for 4 yrs, I found this very funny....” display how some women in the sample wanted to be clear that they were both a female and educated, and still believed the banners to be laughable. Such comments demonstrate how deeply engrained gender violence and men’s dominance over women has become. It is now so intrinsic that women do not see being victimized by men as a problem. This is similar to Strain et al.’s (2015) findings, in which women were so accustomed to sexism that they could not differentiate between sexist and non-sexist jokes.

In addition, women were more likely than men to state the banners did not portray or suggest rape. Comments such as, “It is an awful big leap to say that because these boys hung these signs that they are advocating for violence and rape” and “Eh, who cares. Says nothing about rape”, indicate that these women were not able to see the clear connection between these banners and sexual violence. Even if the fraternity members who posted the banners did not explicitly intend to sexually assault women on campus, they created a predatory environment

which reinforces their dominance on campus—a predatory environment that some women do not recognize as a problem.

In contrast, women were also more likely than men to state that the banners were *not* funny and that they constituted a bad joke. In addition, they were more likely to call the banners and the perpetrators “stupid”, “rude and/or ignorant.” This adheres to gender expectations in which one would anticipate women would be able to recognize that the banners display misogynistic characteristics and thus disapprove of them. Several women made their disapproval of the banners even more explicit by clearly linking the banners to rape, under the code labeled “Mention Rape; Not Okay!” It was in this category that women made clear that the banners do, in fact, reference sexual assault and rape, and thus are not acceptable or tolerable. Some examples of comments that lie in this category are: “The parents of AJ Hadsell, Hannah Graham, Morgan Harrington, and ODU's own Sarah Wisnosky would not find this humorous” and “pretty sure the people commenting that this is a joke have never been sexually assaulted or had a family member who had been raped, but "lighten up its not about rape!!" right?” These comments brought awareness to the reality of the banners, referencing past rape victims and the realization that none of the commenters who were brushing the banners off had likely ever been a victim. The comments in this category brought to light the severity of even the most seemingly unimportant and miniscule actions, such as posting banners meant originally as a harmless joke. The fact that women fell into this category significantly more than men did speaks to women being victims and understanding the brutality of being a rape victim on a more visceral level than men.

Throughout the data, indications for rape myth acceptance were noted. For example, women wrote 100% of the comments that included the code “Advice to College Women”, in

which the commenters advised college women how to behave properly in order to avoid problems in college. For example, “If you subject yourself to a frat house or an off campus party, use your brain. Don't drink a drink given to you, and don't go off by yourself with a stranger.” All of these comments were written by women to other women; however, none addressed college men and how they should behave. These types of comments adhere to rape myths and victim-blaming, in which women are held solely responsible for any sexual assaults taken against them due to not protecting themselves properly (i.e. not drinking or walking off with a stranger). Advice, like these comments, for women to avoid sexual confrontations by not walking alone at night, being “smart”, using “common sense”, and overall adjusting their actions provides men with a scapegoat if and when they sexually assault or rape a woman. Reinforcing the mindset within women that it is ultimately their fault if they are raped maintains women’s silence about rape (Burnett et al. 2009), which then perpetuates the cycle in which men are placed in dominant positions over women.

In accordance to gender stereotypes, women were more likely than men to show care and concern toward their children in the data. They reference, in the category “If my kids were at this college...”, the fact that if their children attended a university such as ODU, they would be disappointed, angry, or pull the children out of the school. One participant said, “If I was a parent and saw this on my way to drop my child off I might change my mind. And if I was a parent of someone that lived here and saw this, I would yank them out and back home you go!” Another participant noted, “I would feel MUCH better dropping off my daughters at a place that didn't make a joke of advertising my baby girls as potential sex toys.” Such comments imply that women were concerned for their children’s wellbeing in a hostile or predatory environment more often than men were, which conforms to societal standards for women in which mothers are the



primary caretakers and guardians. In addition, more women (63.2%) mentioned representing ODU or the reputation of the university being diminished than men (36.8%). This would make sense according to women's constant worry of being judged or scrutinized according to societal expectations of women to uphold a prestigious and proper status. In this case, women immediately felt the concern that the school reputation was being damaged, which would in turn ruin their own reputation by poorly representing their place of education. This directly coincides with the idea that women must perform a gendered role in which they are expected to uphold a proper, upstanding social status, such as in the college party setting (Armstrong et al. 2006), thus further reinforcing gender stereotypes.

Interestingly, women (83.7%) were much more likely to make the distinction between the perpetrators being boys and not men. Only 16.3% of the comments that fell into this category were written by men, which demonstrates that men may be less willing to judge their counterparts for being immature. This could be attributed to two different causes. It could mean that men are likely to understand the mentality that the perpetrators and other college men have, and are thus less likely to judge them due to the collective brotherhood that men feel towards each other, such as in fraternities. A second possibility is that it simply did not come to mind for the men who commented on this post, and instead it was more readily identifiable to the women. Women may be more likely to judge men due to their own standards for what constitutes a "real man" based on the hegemonic masculinity ideal engrained in our culture as a whole. Similar to the findings of Chesney-Lind and Eliason (2006) and Ellis et al. (2012), gender stereotypes and expectations have become so intrinsic that both genders have begun policing the opposite gender on what is right, or in this case, what defines the proper behavior of a "real man."

Most of the categories that men corresponded more frequently to, adhered to gender stereotypes. For example, men were more likely to mention the First Amendment and freedom of speech in their responses than women, which suggests that men were more likely to seek out and utilize logical responses than emotionally-driven responses to the banners, conforming to hegemonic masculine characteristics. Men were significantly more likely to include “get over it” in their comments than women (79.8% vs 20.2%), which, again, validates the idea that men strive to be stoic and unemotional, following the hegemonic masculine ideology. Men were also more likely than women to mention fraternities in their comments, which could represent that other fraternity men are attempting to uphold their reputation, or display more frustration toward their brothers for such crude behavior. Additionally, men were more likely to portray women as sexual objects in their comments than women. This data falls directly in line with characteristics that define hegemonic masculinity, such as men being aggressive sexual beings who see women as simply a means to sex. Comments such as “Female will be lining up to get into places like this jus because some have been sheltered for 18-19 years & finally getting the freedom to experiment” establish that men believe that college-aged women, particularly freshmen who are just receiving freedom from parents, are prone to engaging in sex. This becomes problematic when college men anticipate and expect such behavior from women who do not wish to engage in intercourse, at times leading to sexual assault and/or rape.

Lastly, the code “Just College Fun” was utilized very frequently within the data and most commenters who used this term to describe the banners were men. This is very telling about what men believe fun in college consists of. Perhaps, to men, college is a time of sexual exploration and promiscuous behavior, or a time in which fraternity men should be able to dehumanize women without consequence due to their environment. If an abundance of men feel

this way (i.e. that the banners are excusable due to simply being all in good, college appropriate fun), then there should be no question as to why rape culture still exists on college campuses. That is not to alleviate any of the guilt or blame from women, as some women in the sample referred to the banners as “good ole college fun” as well. Overall, this is a prime example of the profound internalization of sexism and gender stereotypes within society. Both men and women alike were able to make light of the gravity of the banners and the real harm that rape culture causes on college campuses. The language that both genders used portrayed the innateness of sexism and misogynistic humor within American and Western society, making very clear that women still have a great amount of work to do before equality can be reached.

## THEMES

The codes analyzed above were clustered into themes depending on their underlying connections. These themes emerged from the data without manipulation or intervention. They represent the core topics that commenters referenced in their comments. Out of the 34 codes, four themes emerged. These themes were: humor, college, age, and sexuality.

Humor was the largest theme, encompassing eight codes. Those codes were “Funny; Hilarious”, “Haha/LOL/LMAO”, “Have a Sense of Humor!”, “It’s a joke.”, “Not funny; Bad joke”, “Lighten Up!”, “Get over it”, and “Not that serious...” Overall, these codes were clustered due to their obvious connection to humor in some fashion. All of these codes, with the exception of “Not Funny; Bad Joke” implied that the banners were humorous and negligible, demonstrating their permissive attitude towards the banners. Together, these codes demonstrate that as long as humor is used in the degradation and sexual oppression of women, such dehumanization becomes acceptable to society at large.

“Not Funny; Bad Joke” was formed into a sub-theme due to its connectedness with other similar codes and disapproval of the banners. Five codes fell under “Not Funny; Bad Joke”, including “Stupid”, “Rude/Ignorant”, “Tacky; Poor Taste”, “Banners Disrespectful”, and “This is offensive.” All of these codes made clear their apparent disgust with and denunciation of the banners, thus making their clustering very straightforward. This sub-theme represents the portion of the population which recognizes women’s degradation as problematic, even if the degradation is in the form of a joke.

The next theme, college, was comprised of six codes, including “Just College Fun”, “They’re Just College Kids”, “Off-Campus”, “Fraternity”, “ODU Affiliate”, and “Represent ODU/Reputation”. All of these codes mentioned some aspect of college, whether it was describing the type of fun that is allegedly normal college behavior, or discussing that the banners are a poor representation of our college (ODU). This theme exhibited a mostly permissive attitude toward the banners, excusing the banners as typical college behavior and thus permissible. Together, this theme uses college as a location scapegoat, in which immature and sexually crude behaviors are tolerable, normalized, and expected.

Age formed the next theme, which included five codes. Those codes were “These are boys—Not men”, “Not boys anymore—ADULTS”, “Young Kids”, “Grow Up”, and “They’re Just College Kids.” All five of these codes made reference to the age of the perpetrators; however, some exhibited permissiveness while others exhibited intolerance. Codes like “Young Kids” and “They’re Just College Kids” excused the banners as normal, immature behavior expected from this age group. Other codes, such as “Not boys anymore—ADULTS”, made clear that the perpetrators are now in college, and are thus adults who need to be held accountable for their actions. Some examples of these types of quotes are: “Let's stop calling them boys, they are

adults who apparently don't understand that there are consequences for their actions” and “I'm tired of college students being called ‘kids’, it's time to grow up”, which also included the code “Grow Up”.

“Grow Up” became a sub-theme under age because it was directly linked to other, similar comments that referenced parents and the upbringing of children. Under this sub-theme, the codes “Parents (Upbringing)”, “If My Kids Were at This College...”, “Advice to College Women”, and “Warning Sign” were included. All of these codes referred to the perpetrators and potential victims as not being grown adults. “Parents (Upbringing)” made it very clear that the blame should not have been placed on the perpetrators, and instead on their parents for not having “raised their boys right.” “If My Kids Were at This College...” established that the parents would ultimately make the decision for their college-aged daughters on whether or not to attend the university, indicating that the daughters were not capable of making a decision themselves. “Advice to College Women” and “Warning Sign” were both written by parents who were attempting to aid the potential victims of the banners by guiding them in the right direction (i.e. away from the banners), indicating that females on college campuses still needed supervision in critical situations. Together, this sub-theme represents that the college age is a time when parents still feel that their college-aged children are only children, clearly not adults capable of making decisions on their own or being held responsible for their actions. Such beliefs implicitly reinforce the notion that “boys will boys”, due to men’s apparent never-ending youth in which their actions are nearly always admissible.

The last theme, sexuality, is made up of four themes, including “Women as Sexual Objects”, “This isn’t Rape”, “Mention Rape; Not Okay!”, and “I’m a girl; Not Offensive.” “Women as Sexual Objects” clearly portrayed women as sexual toys, there for men’s enjoyment.

Some of these comments also portrayed women as equally capable of posting similar banners and believed women to be just as sexually aggressive as men. “This isn’t Rape” comments made very clear that commenters did not believe the banners referenced rape or sexual assault on any level, and in fact, were not sexually driven. An example of such a comment includes, “You guys are assuming sexual assault... What if he actually baked cookies for them, who knows, stop thinking so negative..... Geesh.” Additionally, the code “I’m a girl; Not Offensive” made explicit that these commenters are comfortable with both their oppression and their sexuality. As a woman, to have no regard for the harm these banners, and types of beliefs in general, speaks to how engrained women’s sexual oppression is in our society. Lastly, the code “Mention Rape; Not Okay!” referenced past and potential victims of sexual assault and rape in order to bring reality to the alleged joke that constituted the banners. These commenters exhibited their frustration with the nonchalant attitude of other commenters due to the danger of making light of misogynistic actions, such as the banners. Together, this theme represents the varying beliefs society holds about sexuality and rape, also giving insight into how men’s sexuality is privileged over women’s.

Overall, the codes and themes analyzed above give an idea about the language commonly used to describe sexually-driven incidents, as well as what ideologies are frequently utilized to discuss sexist humor.

## RAPE CULTURE IN ACTION

Statements regarding the banner incident made by the president of the university at the time of the banners were additionally analyzed. On August 22, 2015 at 9:12 PM, the president of the university sent out a campus-wide email regarding the banners. His first statement was, “I am

outraged about the offensive message directed toward women that was visible for a time on 43rd Street. Our students, campus community and alumni have been offended.” This statement seems well-intentioned and appropriate; however, the rest of his message becomes a bit cloudy. He mentions very quickly that the university has continued to educate students on sexual harassment and assault, but that it just has not “registered with some.” He then references a woman, presumably a student at ODU, who “thought seriously of going home” due to the hurt the banners caused her, who was eventually reassured by the overall negative reaction of students to the banners on their social media pages. Never in this statement does he acknowledge what *he* did for her, or for other students who were hurt or previously victimized. He also did not go into detail about any of the negative reactions that other students allegedly shared. Bringing her story into the email at all seemed questionable and partially inappropriate, as it did not seem genuine. However, the president has a background in Public Affairs, in which people are trained to acquire a “face” of an incident in order to make reporting about the incident more personable. In this light, the president seemed to use this student as his “face” for the banner incident. Further, the president made sure to include this statement while concluding his interaction with this student: “She realized this callous and senseless act did not reflect the Old Dominion she has come to love.” Here, it is clear that he is attempting to wipe away her concerns and clear the reputation of ODU by expressly stating that this student was no longer concerned with the banners because they do not represent ODU as an entity. This gives the impression that because this one student came to terms with the banners after initial heartache, all students should be able to do the same. The overall mention of this student’s story made his response seem practiced and purposeful, as if he was including her story in order to persuade other students to react the same way and limit the potential uproar that could result from these banners. Again, his background in

Public Affairs, as well as his status as the university president, may explain the persuasive nature that he took when constructing the email; however, his background does not justify the questionable aspects of his email, only contextualizes them in the broader picture.

The rest of the email consisted of references to the efforts that the university and student organizations have taken against sexual assault, such as “Monarchs Raising Up”, the university’s freshman introduction class on sexual assault, “First Class”, and the video that student leaders posted as an immediate response to the banners. Again, although necessary and potentially well-intentioned, this discussion of what the university has been doing to avoid sexual assault is irrelevant, as the perpetrators of the banners have clearly disregarded all of it when posting the banners. He does not go on to explain that the university needs to rethink prevention programs or even address the clear issues in the current prevention programs at ODU. This may contribute to the idea that the prevention efforts of the university have not “registered with some,” which the president mentioned previously in the email, and thus the banner incident does not necessitate new programs because these students are simply outliers.

In his concluding statements, he discusses the university’s zero tolerance policy toward sexual assault and harassment and indicates that the incident will be reviewed by those “empowered to do so.” The reference to review by solely those who have the power to do so reveals that the president was not open to hearing from those who do not hold power at the university, and seems like an attempt to keep potential outcries quiet. With this statement, he maintains the power differential on campus and implicitly refers to those without university power as irrelevant in the punishment process, which negates the purpose of the email as a whole.



The email was an attempt to uphold the appearance of the president and university by displaying an outrage toward the perpetrators and empathetic attitude toward hurt students; however, the email came up short in addressing the real problem with the banners and instead skirted around it by mentioning irrelevant and unsuccessful programs. In this email, the president failed to acknowledge that rape culture is real and occurring at ODU, as well as all over the nation. Further, he skimmed on addressing the real harm caused by such “callous” acts, to use his words, to the overall campus environment. He did not confront the concerns of students on campus or parents that these banners promote a sexually predatory campus, and lastly, he left the university with no assurance that the banner incident would be handled appropriately or that we, as a university, could feel confident that situations like these would not reoccur.

His stance against the banners felt weak and uncertain in nature. His response did not display pure indignation toward the perpetrators, and in fact, did not mention the perpetrators or the graveness of the banners at all. For this reason, a colleague emailed him privately and mentioned that he needed to act on the banner incident. After the email, she was invited to a private interview with the president in which she asked if I could attend. The interview took place on October 21, 2015. Being granted entry, I did not intervene in the discussion and instead listened to the conversation taking place in front of me, unless I was called upon. The president initiated the interview with asking about how we felt about the banners, and then immediately took the reins and directed the conversation. The president discussed how much grief he received from students, professors, and outside local community members alike in regards to the banners and how he should proceed, focusing on individuals from Pungo (an area in Hampton Roads) stating that the banners were not serious. He initially presented concern for female students, particularly referencing the same female student he mentioned in his campus-wide email. He

mentioned how she previously stated that she was brought back to her own “unfortunate event” due to the banners, and then proceeded to say “That’s who I do it for. Not Pete from Pungo saying ‘lighten up losers.’” This statement again clearly exhibited utilization of his public affairs background, using her as the “face” of the banners again, and exemplified his role as the university president—similar to a politician attempting to appeal to and persuade the masses with an emotionally moving story. From our perspective, the story simply portrayed an archetypal hero rescuing a damsel in distress, further reiterating the heteronormative misogyny that continues to perpetuate rape culture on college campuses.

He then continued to discuss how the climate for college campuses now is much different than the 1980s, when he was in college. He stated, “What was a joke then is an issue now; it is inappropriate and insulting.” Even though he noted that it is inappropriate at this time and age, he implied that the underlying motivations of misogyny remain, just tempered on the outside by the current political climate. His next comment further situated his ideas into the deep-seated misogyny of our society. “While it’s unfortunate and you shouldn’t have to be concerned with what you wear out on a Friday night, it’s the reality of it. I might want to wear a nice watch I have out, but if I’m not going to the best part of town or a good neighborhood, I can’t. It’s the reality of the situation.” This comment is perhaps the most disturbing of the entire interview. The president equated sexual assault with wearing a watch, and in the course of doing so, completely took the blame away from any perpetrator and onto victims, reinforcing victim-blaming. Comments like this perpetuate cultural ideas that women are to blame for sexual assault or rape and normalize rape by equating it to mundane actions, such as merely wearing a watch and simply wardrobe choices. These attitudes aid in the continuance of rape culture on college campuses and in society broadly.

The interview was nearly over when the president asked if we had any ideas on how to help resolve sexually-driven conflicts on campus. When presented with ideas, such as holding a Women's Studies 101 class as a general education class required for all students, he immediately shut the idea down saying that the College Senate "would have a lot to say about that." He quickly indicated that the Senate would not go for it with no explanation why. Any other ideas he was presented with received the same answer, leading my colleague to reverse the question and ask what *we* could do to help resolve these types of issues. The president stated that the biggest thing we could do was to spread the word ourselves and share our ideas because he needs "people like us to get behind him in the battle." He continued to explain that many professors or faculty are big behind closed doors, but do not want to "stand on the roof with [him] if anyone is shooting," insinuating that when things get messy, no one desires to get involved. He then ushered us out of his office, looked to me, and stated "hey, put a good word or two in your paper about this." It is apparent that he believed the interview went well and he established good publicity with my colleague and me regarding the banners; but overall, the message remained clear: He truly did not feel the gravity of the banners, nor were the banners important or worthy of discussion. There was no recognition for the real harm that the statements on the banners caused or for the explicit sexual oppression of women. The president simply did not share the concern, and instead exhibited, through his email and interview, sharing similar thoughts to those of the perpetrators which reinforce rape culture. The statements from the president exhibited ideologies that are all too commonly called upon for the explanation of men's sexually aggressive behavior, i.e. "boys will be boys" and hegemonic masculinity. However, even though the president exhibited these thoughts on a personal level, the overall response on the university level suggested a clear intolerance of such sexist actions by harshly punishing the perpetrators—

a move in the right direction. In fact, the perpetrators were so severely punished that several members of the outside community were outraged, believing that the incident was not serious enough to mandate such extreme consequences.

In total, all of these facets together—the president’s statements, the university’s actions, the local community’s outcry and the comments analyzed above—demonstrate that although institutions have made positive strides toward the elimination of a normalized and accepted rape culture, the hegemonic nature of sexism and ideologies that perpetuate rape culture still remain. Even at the upper echelons of the university’s administration, traces of these ideologies persist, which suggests that ridding society’s personal beliefs of the notion that “boys will be boys” and the acceptability of sexually aggressive behaviors due to hegemonic masculinity should be the focus of efforts to eliminate rape culture.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS

#### PRIMARY FINDINGS

Three research questions initially aided in composing the direction of this study. Those questions were: 1) How do society's reactions to the ODU banner incident demonstrate pervasive attitudes that may perpetuate rape culture on college campuses? 2) What type of language does society use to illustrate the deep-seatedness of rape culture within society? 3) Does gender affect the type of reaction and language used to discuss the banners?

The overall permissive reaction to the banners suggests that rape culture is not only existent, but prevalent, and seen as permissible to a large portion of society. Most commenters in this study did not recognize the banners as rape culture, seeing as they were initially meant as a joke and were accepted that way to most observers. The attitudes displayed in the comments adhered to the problematic ideologies presented in previous literature, such as hegemonic masculinity, the notion that boys will be boys, and sexist humor. The comments illustrated that while disguised as humor, sexism and rape culture are acceptable due to the excusal of men's behavior through the notion that this is tolerable behavior because "boys will be boys."

The language that was used to describe the banners speaks to this apparent excusal of men and women's continued battle for equality in today's society. Women who proclaimed their gender and acceptable attitude toward the banners illustrated clearly how engrained sexism is within our society. Sexism has become so ubiquitous that it is hardly recognizable and, is thus, cast off as unimportant and tolerable. The comments exemplified this overall permissive attitude by showing a lack of empathy, i.e. by saying get over it, the banners are not that serious, or have

a sense of humor. Even the president of the university exhibited a lackadaisical attitude toward rape culture by comparing it to wearing a watch. Further, only one-third of the comments addressed the banners as an issue, and even less specifically referenced the reality of sexual assault or rape as a result of rape culture. This use of language suggests that sexism and rape culture are seen as funny or humorous to most of this population, and suggests that there is a general ignorance surrounding the real harm of rape culture. Thus, most respondents proclaiming that the banners are funny illustrate that sexism, and thus rape culture, is extremely deep-seated in today's society.

As seen from the findings above, gender plays a significant role the type of language used to describe the banners. Nearly every category that men dominated displayed a lackadaisical attitude toward the banners, such as "Get Over It", "Just College Fun", "Lighten Up!", "Not that serious", "Society Offended by Everything", "They're Just College Kids", and "Young Kids." Only two categories that men dominated exhibited frustration with the banners. In addition, men were also more likely to portray women as sexual objects. The fact that men fell predominantly into these categories suggests that they share common beliefs about how unimportant and worthless women's sexual liberation is. Men viewed the banners as light-hearted fun, unworthy of news attention or societal upset; however, the banners were a clear motion toward the sexualization and dehumanization of women on college campuses. This makes clear the connection between being tolerable of the banners and more frequently portraying women as sexual objects. This type of attitude and behavior can be expected from men who strictly follow gender stereotypes and hegemonic masculinity. Further demonstrating the adherence to hegemonic masculinity, men seemed to utilize logical responses to the banners, rather than emotionally-driven responses. Other categories that men dominated, such as "First Amendment",

“Fraternity”, “Off-Campus”, and “Reference to the Past,” established this. The response categories that men dominated follow nearly every aspect of hegemonic masculinity, i.e. stoicism, apathetic demeanor, ascendancy, and aggression. Clearly, gender stereotypes have become innate and so deeply engrained that hegemonic masculinity is followed and observed at all costs.

Women adhered to gender stereotypes as well, which typically portray women as meek and amenable. The language women used to describe the banners exhibited their susceptibility by claiming that the banners, a clear sexist behavior, were simply a joke. They described the banners as funny, hilarious, and laughable, and made clear that they did not feel this was related to rape at all. However, it is crucial to note that women were also the most likely to mention that the banners were not funny and mention rape/sexual assault in their responses. Either way, women responded to the banners by using an emotionally-driven response—meaning one that was full of *personal feelings*—whether describing the banners as funny and explaining why, or portraying them as a tool in the perpetuation of college rape. This contrasts men’s reactions, which used more lackadaisical and logical responses, and did not typically include the personal feelings that women did. This drives home the fact that gender stereotypes are repeatedly normalized and utilized on a constant basis. Additionally, the fact that women fell on both sides of the permissible-or-not spectrum is telling about how society is currently split. Some women believe in their own equality and recognize sexism in all forms, whereas other women accept and tolerate the misogynistic actions taken against them due to the context in which they are presented and the extreme internalization of sexism in our culture.

## UNDER THE BANNER OF DEGRADATION: A GROUNDED THEORY

Glaser and Strauss (1967) explain that the purpose of grounded theory is to produce in-depth understandings about how recurrent relationships between social agents construct reality on a day to day basis. Through a grounded theory methodological framework, we are able to unveil a new interpretation of our own reality. In the case of the ODU banners, my situated reality revealed that even in the modern age, women still have a tremendous amount of work to complete before reaching sexual equality and liberation. The four main themes within the data, i.e. humor, college, age, and sexuality, demonstrated this.

### *Humor*

Humor was the most commonly used code and theme within the data. Most commenters believed that the banners were meant as a joke and thus, should not have been taken seriously. From this usage of humor, we can conclude that while sexism is presented in a humorous context, it is permissible to the majority of its viewers; however, this is extremely problematic in that humor is subconsciously internalized, so the main message or concept from the humor is then normalized outside of the humor context. In addition, facets of humor are derived from cultural ideas and beliefs, which is to say that this alleged joke was received as funny because it reflects current societal beliefs on women's social standing. This is a severe problem. American and Western culture have made women's inferior status, sexually and within the political and economic realms, a joke. Our oppression has become so innate that it is now laughable and seen as inevitable; thus when a joke is made referencing our degradation, the only appropriate response from society is laughter.



Humor is utilized to mask sexism, making it more palatable to a broader audience. In order to combat sexism and rape culture as a whole, we must begin recognizing women's oppression in all of its forms, including jokes, and stop using humor as validation for the further degradation of women.

### *College*

Throughout the data, commenters popularly referenced college. In regards to permissiveness or intolerance, college as a code word was generally used to exhibit permissive attitudes toward the banners. The participants who utilized college to demonstrate their permissive attitude explained that college is a time for fun and freedom, not a time to worry about being mature or thinking beyond the moment. This theme overall suggested that while students are at college, there should be no expectations of proper or upstanding behavior. Comments such as "It's college. Let it go," suggest that society should have no regulation or expectations for the period that students are in college. While students are in college, they receive a pass for any rudimentary behavior, simply due to their location.

It is apparent through these comments that college has become a place in which society has come to expect sexually aggressive behaviors as normal in the campus environment, particularly the party scene. The excusal of sexually aggressive tendencies or suggestions allows for college men to continue committing these actions, and additionally reinforces the notion that "boys will be boys" by suggesting that sexist behavior is expected and justified simply for being a male college student. Therefore, the "boys will be boys" ideology is expanded upon, adding college to the list of reasons one might excuse a male for his inappropriate behavior, such as justifying and excusing the banners at ODU.

## *Age*

Age was used within comments as a factor in the excusal of the banners. Most commenters who utilized any of the age codes made explicit that the perpetrators were simply young boys, immature, and incapable of thinking beyond the moment. Age was used to justify how careless the perpetrators were due to their inability to process the consequences and repercussions of posting such crude banners, compared similarly to a young child who does not know the difference between right and wrong. Apparently being in college, living on their own and away from parents, does not make the perpetrators old or mature enough to deter them from bad decision-making. This is interesting in that “boys” of the same age who are in the military are regarded as men and held to higher standards. Their age is not a factor for excusal of their behaviors, even when new recruits are around or at the same age of college students. This double standard allows college campuses to be cesspools of rape culture based on a false premise that the college age makes it excusable. Essentially, the college age removes any potential blame from the perpetrators and justifies their actions, similar to the “boys will be boys” notion in which blame is removed from men due to their expected, gender stereotypical behavior. In fact, commenters clearly adhered to the “boys will be boys” ideology by excusing the perpetrators as “boys” rather than the men that they actually are.

Few commenters referred to the perpetrators as men or adults, responsible for their actions. Even fewer acknowledged that the perpetrators should be behaving in an adult-like manner, but clearly were behaving properly due to their childish actions. Women on campus are held responsible for their actions and for how others perceive their actions, and somehow men have been excused from that same responsibility due to alleged immaturity. If rape culture and sexism on college campuses is to cease, we must refer to college-aged students as adults, capable

of behaving as mature. We must hold perpetrators responsible for their actions, even while they are in college and/or college-aged, and stop using age as a cause for dismissal.

### *Sexuality*

A common theme throughout the comments suggested a reference to sexuality and gender. Sexuality was not used so much as an excuse for the banners as the other three themes were; but rather, utilized in a manner to discuss the various beliefs people hold about sexism and sexuality. The comments further objectified women by portraying them as sexual objects, meant for men's entertainment and pleasure. The comments also spoke to believing that rape culture is not rape, nor is it harmful or offensive, even to women. Few comments suggested that these banners were in fact harmful and implied that the banners were not funny due to their real linkage to rape and sexual assault. The fact that many comments did not refer to the banners as harmful or sexually aggressive speaks to the deep internalization of "boys will be boys" and the privileging of men's sexuality over women's. In this case, women were not able to recognize the exploitation of their own sexuality and thought it was humorous that men would refer to women as their sexual tease. There is the possibility that some of these women were aware of their own exploitation and were utilizing their own sexual agency by laughing at rape culture; however, given the overwhelming evidence of hegemonic masculinity and rape culture, even these women's own perceived expression of sexual agency contributes to the perpetuation of these demeaning and dangerous ideologies. Overall, commenters excused the perpetrators' behavior due to the great internalization that women's sexuality is solely useful in terms of men, and that this is expected behavior from men because it is just "boys being boys", thus reinforcing the idea that men cannot control their sexuality.

*Integrating the Themes*

These four themes together clearly exemplify prevalent ideologies that perpetuate rape culture on college campuses, and sexism in the broader context. Humor, college location, age, and sexuality all work together in the justification of men's misogynistic behaviors by reinforcing common ideologies such as "boys will be boys" and hegemonic masculinity. Through humor and the college context, blatant sexual aggression was seen as the light-hearted fun of young, sexual kids. If banners that exemplify rape culture can become seen as lighthearted humor and well-intended fun, what does this say of our culture's standards on what is humorous or "good old fun"? How does the continued oppression of and dominance over women continue to be a joke deemed as "not that serious"? What kind of society do we live in when one must be able to laugh at the oppression and domination of another in order to have a proper sense of humor? These questions cannot be answered simply with this exploratory theoretical framework; however, part of the problem "...is rooted in a standard curriculum and pervasive overarching culture that tells women how not to get raped but does not tell men not to rape" (Forni 2014:26-7). As society progresses forward toward women's equality, we must remember to focus our efforts on telling men not to rape, which occurs by eradicating prevalent ideologies that reinforce sexism and gender stereotypes, such as "boys will be boys" and hegemonic masculinity. Once these ideologies lose traction and popularity, and are replaced with fresh narratives about gender and sexuality, we can begin to see true gains in women's equality and less instances of rape culture. To conclude, this data suggests that all four themes (humor, college location, age, and sexuality) are used as common excusal factors for men's sexually aggressive actions by adhering to sexist ideologies such as hegemonic masculinity, "boys will be boys", and gender stereotypes, which in turn, perpetuate rape culture.

## REAL HARM OF RAPE CULTURE

According to Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth (2005:xi), rape culture is “a complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. [...] A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women and presents it as the norm.” Any culture that condones the oppression of women and privileges men’s sexual experience over women’s is problematic in that women become inferior social beings, seemingly less-deserving of equality. The ODU banners exemplified the dehumanization of women by exhibiting them as sexual toys meant for men’s enjoyment. Rape culture makes this dehumanization normal and allows sexual violence to become mundane, seen as almost inevitable (Buchwald et al. 2005:xi). Many do not see rape culture as inherently problematic because ‘no one is being raped’ alleging that there are no direct, visual consequences since no one gets physically hurt as a result of rape culture; however, accepting and normalizing the degradation of women meets equally severe consequences as sexual violence. Women must maintain a constant awareness of the potential of being sexually assaulted due to their blatant inferiority in society. We must behave with the constant worry that we may be victimized if we drink too much, or wear the wrong outfit, or leave a party too late at night. Men do not face the same distress. Their behaviors are not under the same constant scrutiny. Rape culture provides the foundation for sexual violence by normalizing it, thus allowing sexual assault or rape to be excused under the notion that “boys will be boys” or “he’s just a man”, operating under the hegemonic assumption that men cannot control their sexuality. Of course, I do not mean to imply that all men are rapists. As Forni (2014:6) states, “...Rape culture does not implicate all men in the potential for sexual violence but does encourage a fear of men as potential rapists.” This fear continues to linger underneath

the surface of every woman's daily actions, and reiterates the deep-seatedness of normalized rape culture.

This constant fear and uneasiness is *harmful*. The degradation and dehumanization of women is *harmful*. Women's constant objectification as sexual trinkets is *harmful*. Our self-esteem, ability to interact, and potential success in life as a whole are compromised by the perpetuation of rape culture. We must not continue to permit this type of misogynistic behavior from men, or women, any longer. Universities and college campuses all over the nation need to take a clear stand in the protection and prioritization of women's safety and equality. The fraternity men responsible for these banners must receive appropriate ramifications for their sexually aggressive gesture, and local citizens must be willing to appropriately recognize sexist behaviors as, in fact, sexist and eliminate the use of conventional ideologies that further degrade women. As Dodge (2015:9) stated, "We cannot just hold these boys responsible, but must also pay attention to the pervasiveness of rape culture and the ubiquity of acts of sexism that allow the perpetration of sexual violence to become banal." Rape culture has allowed for the objectification of women for far too long. It is time that we acknowledge the harm in rape culture and stop justifying it. As one participant commented about the banners, "Excusing that kind of behavior from young men opens the door for rapists and murderers. It is dangerous to make light of the safety of young women." The banners were not acceptable. The fact that the banners were meant as a joke should not excuse the perpetrators, nor should their age, gender, or status as a college student. The banners were harmful to women at ODU, the overall campus environment, and women everywhere. It is time that we, as a society, acknowledged that reality.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

The use of Facebook to analyze unmediated responses to an incident of rape culture provided further insight on prevalent attitudes regarding sexism. Facebook responses are unfiltered and immediate, giving a true sense of local citizens' feelings without researcher intervention. In addition, Facebook, and social media in general, provide the world with a new platform in the dissemination of information. In this case, Facebook was utilized as a tool to further spread and acknowledge the banners at ODU. Without the use of Facebook and social media, it is possible that the banners could have gone relatively unnoticed and unacknowledged within the local media's eye. Instead, social media was used to further spread awareness of the banners and thus brought attention to college and university women's inequality, although most responses validated rape culture and sexist behaviors. Unfortunately, such responses "represent the ways that new media can be seen to exacerbate issues surrounding sexual violence by creating digital spaces wherein the perpetuation and legitimization of sexual violence takes on new qualities" (Dodge 2015:2). Social media, in the case of this research, was used a tool in the dissemination and utilization of harmful ideologies regarding the banners and women's equality more broadly.

In the future, social media can and should be used as a platform to aid in the resolution of women's inequality, rather than the perpetuation of it. The main function of social media, which is to disseminate information on various topics, should be utilized in a positive manner, aiding in spreading awareness about the struggles that women experience on college campuses due to the continuance of rape culture. In some cases, feminists have begun using social media as a platform to create new narratives about sexual violence and gender stereotypes, such as the hashtag "#youoksis and posting pictures from the site Blank Noise which focus on the premise

that sexual victims never “ask for it.” In addition, new songs and documentaries have attempted to begin increasing cognizance of the hardships women face on college campuses, such as Lady Gaga’s recent song “Til It Happens to You” and the documentary “The Hunting Ground.” In these cases, social media can aid in transmitting ideas to others about rape culture on college campuses; however, the attitudes of ordinary citizens regarding sexism must change in order for the dissemination to be of use.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This analysis is an attempt to find the connection between common ideologies and their use perpetuating rape culture on college campuses. It aims to provoke further discussion on the use of social media in uncovering unmediated attitudes regarding rape culture and sexism in the male-dominated college domain. This research invites further investigation and critique of the applicability of the “boys will be boys” ideology as well as hegemonic masculinity prevalent in rape culture. In addition, this research offers an exploratory theoretical framework for further investigation on the way in which local citizens dismiss rape culture through the context of humor, age, college, and sexuality. These aspects combined have made it nearly effortless for society to legitimize sexism and the maintenance of rape culture. In order to truly combat it, society must first acknowledge the use of these common ideologies as tools to perpetuate rape culture, and then attempt to revert them through education and activism. Social media must be used as an aid in this activism due to its extreme popularity and wide reach. The university must also acknowledge rape culture as a *real* problem, worthy of addressing and eliminating in hopes of addressing the predatory environment that the allowance of rape culture creates. We, as a



society, must come to grips with the reality of sexual assault and rape and work to resolve the maintenance of rape culture through the elimination of sexist vernacular and ideologies.

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## APPENDIX

## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

(Written and sent to entire campus on 08/22/2015 9:12 PM)

Dear Student:

I am outraged about the offensive message directed toward women that was visible for a time on 43rd Street. Our students, campus community and alumni have been offended.

While we constantly educate students, faculty and staff about sexual assault and sexual harassment, this incident confirms our collective efforts are still failing to register with some.

A young lady I talked to earlier today courageously described the true meaning of the hurt this caused. She thought seriously about going back home.

But she was heartened, she explained, when she saw how fellow students were reacting to this incident on social media. She realized this callous and senseless act did not reflect the Old Dominion she has come to love.

The Student Government Association has recently developed the "Monarchs Raising Up" campaign educating our students on prevention of sexual and relationship violence, bystander intervention, and off-campus responsible behavior. Through video, online and in-person content, we layer education on these topics for all of our students throughout the year. All new freshman just received education this weekend on preventing discrimination and sexual assault in sessions we call "First Class."

Here is a link to a video from our student leaders responding to this event--just one example of how Old Dominion University students take a stand every day in regards to respecting each other and promoting responsible behavior: <https://youtu.be/NC72ruvRtdY>

I said at my State of the University address that there is zero tolerance on this campus for sexual assault and sexual harassment. This incident will be reviewed immediately by those on campus empowered to do so. Any student found to have violated the code of conduct will be subject to disciplinary action.

Sincerely,

[President's name excluded for anonymity]

President

## VITA

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## EDUCATION

B.S. Sociology, Longwood University	2013
A.S. Social Science, Tidewater Community College	2011

## ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS

Member of the Golden Key International Honor Society	2015-2016
Member of Alpha Kappa Delta Sociological Honor Society	2013-2016
Member of Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society	2011-2016

## PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Teaching Assistant, Old Dominion University	2014-Present
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Aided in teaching classes; served as substitute teacher when needed. Collected research and worked in conjunction with professor for publications. Graded assignments and posted grades with feedback for classes. Responded to student emails about class material.