

**New Heteronormativity:
The Gay-Straight Tipping Point in Suicide Prevention Amongst Male
University Students in the U.S.**

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Abstract

In the United States, suicide is the second leading cause of death amongst university students aged between 25 and 34, and the second leading cause of death overall for people aged between 15 and 34. Men die by suicide at four times the rate of women across all age groups, at roughly 20 deaths per 100,000 individuals. This has been the case since the 1950s and stubbornly persists; defying interventions and harm reduction efforts designed to contain it. While such figures and trends are reflected across much of the western world, the U.S. has a particular problem. Young men at university are at the epicentre of the crisis. Prevention efforts increasingly focus on identities and social lives, with research fractured along concepts of sexuality, masculinity, and social constructs. This thesis examines this multifactorial, social ecology, and adopts a phenomenological framework to understand the place of prevention in the social and private spheres of male students at U.S. university campuses. The study explored the lived experiences of 29 students and utilised interpretative phenomenological analysis. The study found considerable understanding of constructed and socio-political factors amongst the group, including how recent shifts in the U.S. government had contributed to societal views of young men. Despite this self-insight, wavering resilience, and a growing frustration with the failure of statutory systems and the government to intervene has led to stalled prevention efforts in many university contexts. Academic and public health models must, jointly, find new means to consider wider influencing arenas on suicidality, heteronormativity, masculinity, sports, politics, and their place in the higher education environment. Findings are of considerable importance to agencies related to, and working at the forefront of, suicide prevention efforts and the intersection of masculinities and suicidalities.

Keywords: suicidality, heteronormativity, masculinity, alliances.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“Teenagers and young adults in the United States are being ravaged by a mental health crisis – and we are doing nothing about it. How is it possible that so many of our young people are suffering from depression and killing themselves when we know perfectly well how to treat this illness?”

Friedman (2020:1)

“Suicide is far more common among White men in the U.S., the same category of men who feel the world owes them a well-paying stable job, and the respect that comes with that. ...more than 30,000 men every year in the U.S. take their own lives without telling us why. But the fact that they are men tells us a lot about why.”

Barker (2018:8)

Young gay men in the U.S. experience alcoholism, drug abuse, violence and suicide ideation and attempt² at significantly higher levels than their heterosexual friends and peers (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2015). Contrary to Friedman’s (2020:1) assertion, *“we know perfectly well how to treat this illness”*, evidence on effective, long-term strategies to curb suicide risks amongst young people is virtually non-existent. Suicide rates amongst young gay men are higher than ever and while treatment options for contributory mental health conditions may be broad, recent American Academy of Pediatrics data indicate prevalence amongst adolescents and young adults in general is increasing, and existing treatment is becoming ineffective³.

U.S. national data on suicide and prevention strategies present a somewhat jumbled picture, as shown with the interchangeable use of ‘young men’, ‘young adult’ and ‘young gay men’ across research, guidance, and policy. Ream (2019) unpicked national reporting data in an attempt to better understand the bigger picture of suicidality amongst all three of the named groups. The results presented five facts common amongst suicide in young men, which the study claimed were obvious but often overlooked: mental health issues rarely predicate suicide, relationship problems are a key issue, most men who attempt suicide die on the first attempt, have no history of suicidality and, contrary to common beliefs, do not typically fail to get help. The findings were predictable and blindingly obvious to professionals working in the

² The combination of such risk markers is commonly referred to as ‘suicidality’, which is used throughout this paper to denote the presence of one or several risk indicators. There is strong correlation to mental health needs but a person need not have a known, or diagnosed, mental health condition to experience suicidality.

³ Mojtabi et al. (2016) reviewed nationwide data that included 172,495 young people between 2005 and 2014 and concluded the study with substantial criticism of mental health treatment methods and options.

field⁴; that they are so rarely adhered to in prevention efforts reflect an urgent need for change and redirection. Reams' work crystalises the need for renewed commitment to such change.

1.1 Preamble: the gay-straight paradigm

In 2014 I led a pilot research project with higher education students in the U.S. and U.K., exploring student experiences of gay-straight alliances (GSAs) and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) inclusion at university. We asked questions about how safe LGBT students felt on campus alongside recognition of high-profile media campaigns that placed heterosexual gatekeepers at the forefront of support and protection against suicide and victimisation. Gatekeepers were entertainment celebrities and fronted the *Straight But Not Narrow*, *Give A Damn!* and *It Gets Better* campaigns.

Students were generally happy with heterosexual spokespeople leading campaigns aimed at LGBT inclusion and suicide prevention, although they questioned the need for such campaigns considering achievements that broadened social acceptance of gay people⁵. This broadly reflected findings that media representation of LGBT people had improved exponentially, and that LGBT people and their allies found such imagery and cultural normalisation to have a mainstreaming effect, in which marginalised people felt less othered and felt a sense of safety and pride as a result (Padva 2008; Calzo and Ward 2009; Gomillion and Giuliano 2011).

This presents an interesting counterpoint: gay students are often bullied and catalysed to suicidal thoughts by ubiquitous straight male prejudice. Historically, this has led to LGBT young people forming their own support systems and groups. However, better mainstream representation reflects a similar pattern in suicide prevention, with a new trend for interventional campaigns to frontline heterosexuals, reposition gay students as peers to be defended, and incorporate them into wider communities.

This gay-straight paradigm in university settings could signify a new model of inclusion, focusing on the importance of heterosexuality in the prevention of LGBT student

⁴ Contributory factors to male suicidality amongst younger age groups (12 – 29) are well established, as are higher risk factors for LGBT young people and young men in particular. Long-term quantitative studies and smaller qualitative studies repeatedly present similar findings, such as that prevention efforts are ineffective because they fail to target causal factors and that LGBT young men need a different preventative approach than their straight peers (Paul et al. 2002; Peter et al. 2017; Lyons et al. 2019).

⁵ The pilot project took place in 2014, prior to a significant shift in political landscapes in both countries. Students reported feeling hopeful for the future and safer because they were reassured by the progression of legislation to enshrine their rights in law. This included the repeal of the Defence of Marriage Act (1996) in the U.S. and the implementation of the Equality Act (2010) in the U.K. Populist rhetoric and movements to reinstate sweeping anti-equality legislation have had a substantial impact since 2014 and thus the pilot research should be considered in the context of the time in which it took place.

suicide. This is important because of the persistent, profound differences in suicidality between gay men and straight men, which has remained largely unchanged over the past three decades (Rich et al. 1986; Lyons et al. 2019; Ream 2019). Such a paradigm seeks to reconcile the social and structural divisions present between gay and straight individuals through the increasing acceptance that sexual identity, while an intrinsic element of the life course experience, is a combination of humanistic constructs that are fragmented depending on theoretical framework through which they are viewed (Hammack 2005). Close personal relationships between straight and gay men are increasingly prized by those within them (Ismail 2020), demonstrating the benefits of improved social cohesion that could be used as the basis for a suicide prevention inclusion framework.

To address this problem, I am particularly interested in McCombs' and Ghanem's (2001) agenda setting and framing as a contextual framework, within a constructivist epistemology and phenomenological methodology. McCombs' work on agenda setting is placed in mass communication theory (Trigueros and Lacasa-Mas 2018) and explores the salience created by the media in presenting issues for us to think about and, crucially, *how* to think about them. Spanning myriad topics of study from politics to religion, agenda setting provides an important backdrop for us to consider how individuals interpret the media messages to which they are exposed. The original theory dates from 1922 and Lippmann's work on public opinion and the relationship between the print media and our interpretation of reality (Barbosa e Silva 2008). His conclusion, that our behaviour is a response not to the environment as it exists but to how we *think* it exists, has application in this research to understand how students interpret, filter and respond to messages designed to support them.

1.2 Statement of topic and focus

Understanding heteronormativity and its relation to suicidality can only loosely be defined as a topic in its own right. While this paper is interested in the interconnectedness of the two, we must acknowledge the complexities around trying to neatly categorise either. There are innumerable linked topics and avenues of exploration around heteronormativity, mainly in the social sciences field, and around suicidality in public health, policy, and criminology spheres.

The reference to a tipping point in the title is indicative of the sociological context of the study, which takes place in the higher education setting. Relations based on sexual identity, in this case gay men and straight men, span sociology, anthropology, psychosexuality and dozens of other disciplines and specialties. An attempt to explore the

heteronormativity/suicidality topic through each academic, education or health angle would dilute the focus and result in an excessive amount of information to be of any use to future researchers and policymakers. To achieve some clarity, the focus of the research is on the experiential, constructed social context and education environment of university settings. The overarching topic is informed by six key words:

- Heteronormativity
- Suicidality
- Prevention
- Masculinity
- Identity
- Gay-Straight Alliances.

The research questions are designed to explore the lived experiences of individual students in relation to their understanding of the three key words, including in their social spheres and exposure to the higher education lived and conceptual environment. One key question provides the foundation and overarching context for the research and three sub questions support its purposes, to explore the situating and meaning of GSAs and masculine identities in the context of suicidality

Research questions:

Aim: How is suicide ideation and attempt amongst gay male students in higher education institutions influenced or changed by the existence of gay-straight alliances and preventive services led by straight men?

1. How do university students perceive LGBT media-based suicide-prevention campaigns that are led by straight male gatekeepers?
 - a. From the perspective of straight male students?
 - b. From the perspective of gay male students?
2. Can gay-straight alliances be effective as suicide prevention tools in higher education institutions?
3. How do shifting concepts of masculinity influence suicidality amongst male university students?

The questions are linked together based on existing knowledge, specifically the impact of factors such as masculinity and the existence of GSAs on the university experience. While the existing work on student suicidality is extensive, it is repetitive and highlights a gap between our understanding of cause and effect in suicide and a more critical gap between the implication of research knowledge and successful prevention work. In threading the LGBT experience and efforts to connect the marginalised with the non-marginalised, the research question structure acknowledges that situational privilege does not act as a protective factor against suicidality⁶.

1.3 Tension: holism and reductionism

The lack of a single, defined topic and focus presents a tension, centred on the common qualitative debate of reductionism versus holism. That is, can we understand the student experience in relation to suicidality and heteronormativity, either by distilling the multitude of component parts of each concept, or by acknowledging that the student experience cannot be understood by those component parts? Simply speaking, can we interrogate each contributing factor to a student's mental health and social experience to understand their philosophies and beliefs or should we instead explore experience at a macro level?

This research does not set out to conclusively place the topics into quantifiable indicators or components, nor does it seek to advocate for a reductionist or holistic approach to supporting students at risk from the broader conflicts of heteronormativity, including suicide. Instead, it acknowledges Verschuren's (2001) philosophy that reductionistic research cannot always grasp reality to a meaningful extent, while reflecting Mason et al.'s (2010) assertion that the concepts are interrelated and indicative of a duality in humanistic perspectives, particularly in relation to health.

It is important to decentralise the holistic-reductionist debate to ensure it sits as a background contextual consideration and not as a central query in and of itself in the empirical research. Lincoln (1992) finds some traction in side-lining the debate through the view of connections between qualitative methodology, social theory and behavioural health as sympathetic toward one another, thus driving a purposiveness of more use in a constructivist paradigm than conventional research models. On this basis, the topic and foci are situated in

⁶ Fortgang (2014), a student at Princeton University, an elite Ivy League school, rails against the impression professors have of him because of his White privilege. He cites the experience of his grandparents, fleeing Nazi Germany, penniless and scared, who built the foundation for his life today. Scathing of the "check your privilege" reprimand he hears often, his narrative is defensive and wounded and is a key example of why the experiences of non-LGBT students should not be summarily dismissed in favour of focusing on a singular group of people amongst which to focus equality efforts.

the experiential context of the participants, whose responses and input may well guide us to a clearer understanding of how to resolve the holistic-reductionist tension.

This leads us to another, perhaps less pressing tension. Should an exploration of suicidality in a university setting be inductive or deductive? The methodology employed does not readily synergise with deductive theory in that there are too many abstract and ungeneralisable data and models in place to define a theory from the information available. Instead, the narratives of participants more persuasively direct us to an inductive reasoning approach to understand the relationship and experiential impact of heteronormativity and suicidality. While this could be useful for directing future research and concurrent dialogue, it should be considered within the context of our original tension: which is more important, the whole picture or the component parts?

1.4 (Traditional) Heteronormativity

“We pulled ugly green frog skin of heterosexual conformity over us, and that’s how we got through school with a full set of teeth. We know how to live through their eyes. We can always play their games, but are we denying ourselves by doing this? If you’re going to carry the skin of conformity over you, you are going to suppress the beautiful prince or princess within you.”

Harry Hay, American gay rights activist, date unknown

Warner, a social critic and theorist, introduced heteronormativity to the gender and social studies lexicon and playbook in 1991, assigning it to represent heterosexual self-appointed dominance and superiority with a sharp sense of inevitability and entitlement (Howarth 2004). More than a descriptor of the hegemonic dominance of one group over another, Kerpen and Marston (2019) layer the concept with a number of overlapping considerations including institutional practices and the prevailing assumption of every facet of modern society that a person, group or action is predicated in heteronormativity unless proven otherwise. Harry Hay, quoted above, held similar views when he initiated the American gay liberation movement in the 1940s. A controversial figure⁷, Hay worked, lobbied, and fundraised to deconstruct the heteronormativity on which he saw the world was based, decades before social scientists or activists had a word for it.

⁷ While Hay is credited with the birth of the American gay rights movement, he attracted significant legal, cultural, and social controversy through his support of the Communist Party U.S.A and his membership of the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) (Kohler 2020). NAMBLA advocates for the dissolution of the age of consent for sexual activity, explicitly to allow men to have sex with boys. While internationally recognised as an illegal organisation that promotes paedophilia, Hays was not the only high-profile gay advocate to join its ranks. His membership did little to detract from his achievements elsewhere (Timmons 1990).

Situating heteronormativity in both academia and in activism is not a paradox; it sits comfortably in both and allows social researchers to agitate and interrogate in both worlds to understand its impact and pervasiveness. Stuart Timmons and Mark Thompson, Hay's biographers, explicate the importance of combining the voices of those who came before us in trying to make society more equal (1990: introduction):

“Behind Harry’s achievements of stirring things up, blazing trails, and calling forth movements, there is a kind of life story that is rarely told – a gay life story. If everything doesn’t at first appear to be there, do what Harry does: Read between the lines.”

Traditional and contemporary heteronormativity is depicted in all social strata of society, from health inequalities to the labour market to politics and finance. In depth research on the wide-ranging effects of the concept are plentiful and linked to problematic political structures such as right-wing authoritarianism and dictatorship (Habarth 2008) and disastrous social norms such as marginalisation and ultimately detachment from society (Downey 2015).

Many studies view heteronormativity through a sexual lens, such as Howarth's (2004) exploration of the hyper-sexualisation of Las Vegas and the city's long-standing historic legislative attempts to keep anyone other than highly sexed heterosexuals out of its resorts. Skover and Testy (2002) track how the commodification of LGBT people by commerce ultimately unravelled laws aimed at excluding non-heterosexuals through the usual churn of capitalism, which begrudgingly allowed the slow breakdown of enforced heteronormativity as long as there were profits to be made. Such value-laden judgements, however, do not enable a balanced comparison with places in which a preference for LGBT customers is also viewed through a sexual lens.

Mirroring Howarth's studies in Las Vegas, Motschenbacher (2020) considered the homocentric spaces of Wilton Manors, an overtly gay neighbourhood in Florida. The study found layers of homo-exclusivity, ranging from the existence of businesses that catered primarily to LGBT consumers to road signs that demonstrated an explicit preference for gay male visitors. While the research identified this as problematic because of the resulting silencing of anyone who was not a gay man and the abject preference for White, affluent gay men, Bettani (2014) found significant fluidity and overlap between those who identified their social environments as either homonormative or heteronormative. This suggested gay/straight binaries were complex and not fixed and the author described their existence in the same culture as “messy”.

This returns us to Warner's proclamation, that tentative steps to bridge social theory with gay and lesbian studies resulted in challenges to the pervasiveness of heteronormativity. Challenges to progress come with a caution against erring towards homonormativity, the act of non-heterosexuals conforming to heteronormative behaviours. In such a scenario, LGBT people change their behaviour and ideology in exchange for greater acceptance and social currency, an outcome queer scholars warn does nothing to address discrimination (Robinson 2016).

The multidimensional focus of this project acknowledges a number of theories, models and schools of thought. Situating heteronormativity amongst young men in the variety of disciplines of suicidality within the university setting directs us to the sub contexts of sexual behaviour and masculinity. There is growing research in these overlapping arenas⁸ that is supportive of the links between sexual script theory and heteronormativity, which focuses on the softening of some sexual norms (Drury and Bukowski 2013). This provides a precedent for consideration of areas of social life that we know contribute to suicidality under certain conditions. In relation to young men, this means gendered societal expectations and sexual experimentation.

1.5 Defining masculinity

"Heteronormativity imposes a pattern of masculinity that has overwhelmed everyone indiscriminately."
Saraiva et al. (2020: 1)

While the foundation of this paper is predicated on the experiences of the whole LGBT community, and those added to the acronym and welcomed in the community on a continually expanding basis⁹, the topics and focus are concerned with the experiences of men. There is a considerable need to explore the gendered experiences of students from multiple angles and identities. However, to incorporate this into a single qualitative research project would be unmanageable. Widely different suicide data based on gender further obfuscates the

⁸ Eric Anderson, a sociologist and sexologist, has written extensively on the topics of overlapping sexualities and masculinities, specifically in relation to young men. In *21st Century Jocks: Sporting Men and Contemporary Heterosexuality* (2014), Anderson presents detailed accounts of changing heteronormative behaviours and how boundaries between sexual identity and behaviours blur between generations, with significant disruption between Generation X and the iGeneration.

⁹ Gold (2018) provides an interesting commentary of the growth of 'LGBT' to denote gender and sexual minorities. As with your author in this paper, Gold had exposure to just four letters to represent a vast minority group when he came out. He tracks the addition of letters such as Q for Queer, I for Intersex and A for Ally, resulting in an unwieldy but more representative LGBTQIA+ moniker. I use variations of the acronym throughout this paper, reflective of organisational policies, referencing published research, and the preferences of participants.

issue, indicating projects across named, specific gender identities is of greater importance than a combined approach.

Heteronormativity and masculinity are associated concepts and men who fall outside of the predetermined stereotypes of young, athletic, and handsome, experience marginalisation and barriers to social currency (Saraiva et al. 2019). In traditional forms, both concepts are inextricably linked to sexual practices and structural views of society, which is contested by a creative, progressive youth culture (Herz and Johansson 2015). ‘Progressive youth culture’ does not relate solely to those who attend university and changing society and driving the equality agenda is not the exclusive domain of students. In the mid 2000s, the news media began noticing significant shifts in how American youth viewed the university system. In a June 2017 interview, the *Denver Post* spoke with a young man who had dropped out of college to pursue his own path, noting his curiosity about the world but his scepticism at an education system he felt was in place only for profit. The paper grounds the interview in national data that depicts a 30% drop-out rate for male students in their freshman year (Whaley 2017) and a gradual decline in the number of men on campus since the late 1960s.

In the same year, *The Atlantic* spoke with students at Carlow University and noted men were a “new minority”, a situation they attributed to an anti-school sentiment embedded in boys from kindergarten age. Using Brake’s (2013) examination of youth culture, the decline of young men in university is not unexpected or surprising. Brake suggests there is little correlation between youth progressiveness and attendance at university and the inherent masculinist typology of youth cultures and subcultures prevail regardless of environment. Young men are in the crosshairs of this paradigm; they are less likely than ever to go to university, more likely than ever to contribute to social change yet they exist in societal structures that doggedly promote a homogeneous masculinity and heteronormativity.

Morgan’s apprehension at his path ahead as a young man during an age of social change (and social media) is a common expression of discontent. It mirrors the overwhelmingly negative academic, literary, and popular media definitions of masculinity, which increasingly default to a ‘toxic masculinity’ label. The term refers to attributes such as male violence and aggression and is often used as a default explanation for events such as rape, mass shootings, misogyny and homophobia. Offering a more thoughtful balance, de Boise (2019), offers an alternative; that we focus on behaviours rather than on men as a whole. In this model, we can apply theories of masculinity to the university setting and to the social spheres of male students indiscriminately, allowing us to listen to their individual stories and experiences, whilst working within the caution of Petkovic (2018): homophobia, toxic- and

hegemonic- masculinity, normative gender, and sexuality are inextricable from cultural constructs.

1.6 Setting the scene(s)

“We are at an amazing point in time – we are at a new intersection. It is at this intersection where we can collide or change. Moments throughout the day, at events, on motorcycle rides and rallies. At LGBTQ events, protest, pickets, boycotts, and even over coffee. I have tried to steal a moment from each by being still long enough to observe and extract the essence of the experience, and its meaning.”

Davis (2015: op-ed)

Autumn 2010 saw a rash of suicides resulting from homophobic bullying. Five young men under the age of 20, including two university students, killed themselves. Each representing a different state- Indiana, Texas, California, Rhode Island, and New Jersey – these were not the only deaths by suicide at the time, but their quick succession and the young age of each person generated unusual scrutiny. Tyler Clementi, a student at Rutgers University, jumped from the George Washington bridge in New Jersey after Dharun Ravi, his dorm roommate live-streamed a sexual encounter with another man across the university’s student digital service. Raymond Chase, another university student, hanged himself in his dormitory room. News media responded swiftly. Schwartz (2010: WK1), wrote in the *New York Times*, “Tyler Clementi may have died from exposure”.

Clementi’s case stirred the most media attention, even in the right-wing press, whose track record on concerns about LGBT people is homophobic at best and grossly abusive at worst. While LGBT issues become legitimised in much of the developed world, the right-wing media have intensified criticism and literary attacks, including in their framing of LGBT people as inherent threats to family structures and children (Amenta & Elliott 2017; Velasco 2020).

1.6.1 The academic and public health scene

U.S. media interest in Clementi’s death was overwhelmingly anchored in race, and not the possibility of intersectionality at work; Clementi’s roommate was an Indian national while he was White¹⁰ American. Ryalls (2018) suggests this is symptomatic of a monolithic approach to

¹⁰ There is considerable debate amongst anthropologists, journalists and sociologists over the capitalisation of ‘White’ and ‘Black’, but little consistency in guidance and application. The Associated Press and the New York Times prefer “White” and “black”; the Chicago Manual of Style allows authors to make their own decisions. Editors and academics vary in their stance, often preferring “Black” and “White” to denote the reality reflected for Black people in literature and the need to avoid ascribing a majority identity to White people. Tharps (2014)

covering bullying and its impact in the press and calls for a more critical approach from policymakers, which in this case includes higher education leaders. Two news sources pursued a more balanced, investigative approach to understanding why Clementi took his own life. Both ABC News (Cuomo and Shearn 2012) and the *New York Times* (Perez 2011) explored the actions of Ravi more objectively, finding that he had shown a disproportionate interest in Clementi's sex life and that Clementi himself was openly, comfortably gay and did not attempt to hide his sex life. Hill (2011), writing for Forbes, refocused the story on the issue of digital privacy and Clementi's family relationships, such as his mother's rejection of his sexuality and her racism towards Ravi when she found out the identity of his roommate. Rather than divert attention away from our understanding of the subjectivities in student suicide, such media coverage is important to highlight the complexities with which students live and how these impact their wellbeing and social existence.

The press, usually muted on student suicide, professed racial outrage as it sought to hold Ravi to account, demonstrating that the loss of a young gay man to suicide was unacceptable; but only when a non-White, non-American bully had perpetuated the circumstances. Writing in *New American Media*, Roy (2012) labelled Ravi's trial an indictment of a broken immigration system more powerful than the failure of the university system to address bullying. Outside of brief, angry outbursts in the tabloid press, little information had been published about the perpetrators implicated in the other suicides, all of whom were White, American and straight. The conclusion was that as the bearers of White straight male privilege, they had the right to exert power over those with less social currency. As a non-White foreign national, Ravi, although straight, was considered to be a lower-class citizen on the social strata, indicating that mediatisation of LGBT identity constructs (Whitcomb & Walinsky 2013) is subject to the same racial profiles as other sexual identities. Motschenbacher (2020) found powerful elements of this finding in their work during their landscape analysis of Wilton Manors, finding that White middle-class gay men were the primary, and sometimes only, target group for adverts promoting commercial services.

Addressing gaps in research on intersectional experiences of gay men, Petsko and Bodenhausen (2019) found non-White gay men experienced persistent deracialising, or "Whitening", in the perceptions of others. For example, people generally presumed men to be White and wealthy when they thought of a gay man and applied White stereotypes to Black

and Perlman (2015) note a simple reality, that "White" and "Black" maintains an equilibrium, denotes respect and correctly presents both for people, races and tribes. In this paper I follow the standard of Tharps and Perlman.

and Hispanic men when asked to describe identity traits. This is reflective of Whitcomb and Walinsky's (2013) media work and indicates such structures are deeply embedded. Similarly, Wade (2019) found racial discrimination to be ubiquitous in LGBT communities, particularly in digital fora. Balsam et al. (2014) identified multiple minority stress factors to be particularly applicable to the social experiences of LGBT ethnic minorities. While LGBT communities work to expand the inclusivity of their acronym to include variations for nonbinary, intersex and other identities, race and intersectionality remain stubbornly side-lined (George 2020).

As an academic in the public health field with an interest in the divergent fields of media representation and masculinity, I understood the complexities at play in the media's branding and messaging. I follow the international LGBT press closely and knew that advertising media could contribute significantly to empowerment, despite operating in overwhelmingly heteronormative environments (Searle 1995; Tsai 2011). Although there is on-going debate about the meaningfulness of inclusive media representation to deconstruct harmful stereotypes (Aldoory & Parry-Giles 2005; Allen 2007; Ayoub & Garretson 2018; Burk et al. 2018; Ramasubramanian et al. 2020), there is little question that seeing positive, happy role models naturally placed in media fora help LGBT people to feel less isolated and that these were either resoundingly absent or present but ineffective in the life worlds of the young men who had died by suicide. Ramasubramanian et al. (2020) consider this in the broader context of prejudice reduction during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and found similar mediators and counter-stereotyping processes at play in social structures as before the pandemic, highlighting the complexities of making progress towards equality.

Outside of the commercial, advertising, and news media circles, I worked with young gay men in the sexual health field, using social marketing strategies to engage them in discussions of risk and disease prevention. I knew that such media could deliver high-impact results if designed effectively and had noted the straight men who led our contracted design agency were more adept at reaching gay men than professionals in the LGBT community itself. Similarly, I was aware of some high-profile digital campaigns led by straight men to improve mental health and reduce suicidality of gay peers.

In a circuitous way, I began mapping together the overlapping factors in these areas and wanted to know about the public health implications of media strategies and the roles straight men play. Essentially, I had seen first-hand how straight men could have a positive impact in health outcomes for their gay peers and I wanted to know why the young men who had taken their own lives had not been reached by equivalent, protective messages, and supportive relationships.

1.6.2 The personal scene

I haven't been touched by suicide on a personal level. I've never had suicidal thoughts and none of my friends or family have ever attempted suicide (that I know of)¹¹. I live in a time when, as a gay man, my rights have slowly evolved into a close approximation of those of my straight peers. I travel regularly, presenting my work on public health and enjoy the international relationships this has built. I haven't had to face the grinding, life-limiting bullying and harassment from straight men, something that many of my gay friends have had to learn to deal with. In secondary school I was bullied, by the archetypal sportsmen, for not liking sports. They were suspicious of me because I shunned the activities that defined their existence.

When I came out, the bullying stopped. They weren't homophobic, they were distrustful. The ringleaders spent much of our last semester apologising and protecting me against the 'real' homophobes, who had appeared after I came out, identified through sexually oriented verbal abuse. When I got a job as a flight attendant for a U.K. regional airline, the executive team changed corporate policy to stop gay crew flying to the Isle of Man, a location that lacked statutory protections, after I was harassed on a layover. When I had a bad breakup and struggled to go to work, my straight, male boss took me out for beers and a chat, which he said was the straightforward way to fix any problem. His intention was to deal with my situation in the same way as he did with his straight male friends when they had breakups with girlfriends. I appreciated his forthright approach and the absence of any specific modification to his strategy based simply on my sexuality.

These experiences don't feel typical because we only hear about the bad sides of men with different sexual identities coming together; the behavioural sides, for instance, that result in suicide. It puts me in a place of privilege and makes me curious about the sociocultural forces at play in my relationships compared with the wider gay community. I discuss this often with my straight male friends. Their point of view is a balance of disgust in their peers who are openly homophobic and a level of detachedness, placing them as natural, if reluctant, allies. In a circuitous route, this brings us back to the context of this project: why did Clementi and the others not have the friends they needed to protect them? And if they did, were these friends silenced out of complicit fear or resignation? And where were the education administration systems that should have given them the tools, support and resilience to find a solution?

¹¹ Suicidal people often do not show any obvious signs of planning. Studies suggest up to 8% of people make efforts to actively conceal their intent (Friedlander et al. 2012). Therefore, a lack of explicit awareness does not equate to the absence of risk.

In 2016, 613,000 people pledged to work towards ending LGBT victimisation as part of the international It Gets Better campaign (Northwestern University 2016). Sociosexual experts and media commentators leveraged swift criticism, targeting the campaign's "...*passive, impractical, homogenizing and exclusionary*" nature (Goltz 2013:135). Goltz (2013) argued the campaign was intended to address historic, persistent tension between LGBT young people and the older generation, responding to a stereotype that older gay men are fixated on younger men to an extent that contributes to suicidality (Corey 1998; Gross 2001; Goltz 2010). His criticism did not resonate with me but I understood its premise, that if you lived in a homophobic country or in a hostile family unit, then being told "it gets better" by people to whom you can't relate would feel unachievable.

The campaign was created by a gay man with a respected, international media presence. Critics used his identity in their concerns, citing their perception of his privileged position as counterproductive to the goals of the media, mainly because he had not acknowledged experiences of suicidality himself. The implicit argument, that he is therefore unable to connect with those at risk in a meaningful way (Veldman 2010), feels insincere and arbitrary, that some elements of the community are resistant to exploring novel solutions to social problems.

1.6.3 Heteronormative scenes

Anti-gay rhetoric, and a shift away from equitable policy, has been building in the background as this project progressed, driven by ultra-conservative changes in government in the U.S. and the U.K. and by rapid, divisive social influencing scaffolded by the media. This means the social world in which this project is published will differ greatly from the world in which it was inceptioned. In 2012, a representative sample of Americans found 3.4% identified as LGBT (Gates and Newport 2016). Those aged 18 to 29 were over three times more likely to be open about their sexual identity. In 2017, the Office for National Statistics noted an increase, to 2%, in the U.K. population who identified as LGBT. These data reflect better protections and broader social acceptance and integration; both of which remain critically important if we are to stop political changes contributing to greater suicide rates.

Strategies to adopt straight men as spokespeople or gatekeepers for suicide intervention work made sense to me. I knew from my work in health promotion and from my personal philosophy that straight men and gay men working together can build highly effective, productive environments. There is substantial research in this area to legitimise the concept of changing heteronormative standards in our society, a 'new heteronormativity'.

Such work focuses on the de-centring of the heteronormative privilege that patriarchal societies award straight men, a reduced acceptance of homophobia amongst these groups and growing acceptance of the visibility of same-sex attraction.

Roseneil et al. (2013:1) found a, “*radical shift in the landscape of heteronormativity in Europe*”, which they noted as representative of the emergence of normalised non-heterosexual sexualities and a process of ‘homonormalisation’. Similarly, Allen and Mendez (2018) track changes in hegemonic heteronormativity and find new spaces for LGBT people. While the significant driving forces for these changes are amongst LGBT people themselves, researchers increasingly find straight men, particularly young straight men, are vocal supporters of a more diverse sociosexual landscape. Such work is promising but it promotes the idea that broad social progress is underway across the continent, which is far from the truth. A political wave of nationalism and right-wing exceptionalism has degraded the safety and daily lives of LGBT people in Poland, Hungary, Greece, Turkey, and Bulgaria. And in Portugal, Spain, and Finland, the emergence of far-right political groups, enjoying new clout amid rising populism, have prioritised the re-normalisation of hypermasculine ideals, ensuring patriarchy in its most fundamental sense is front and centre. This is balanced to some extent with the election of gay heads of state or government in Iceland, Luxembourg, and, surprisingly, Serbia.

In 2019, 100 local municipalities in Poland introduced ‘*Strefy wolne od LGBT*’, or LGBT-free zones (Dyjas-Szatowska 2019; Sarrubba 2020). Essentially banning the existence of LGBT ideology in these areas, local officials, community leaders and law enforcement systematically removed any reference to LGBT existence. They closed gay bars and community centres, often by force, and made public announcements asking LGBT people to leave. Emboldened by an increasingly right-wing government, local mayors endorsed violence against the community and proudly erected large signs indicating the areas had been ‘cleared’ of LGBT elements. Poland is a complex case study. It legalised same-sex activity in 1932, introduced an equal age of consent and allows gay men to donate blood, something prohibited in both the U.K. and U.S. However, most LGBT protections are not enshrined in legislation and because the LGBT-free zones are largely symbolic, not legal acts, civil rights groups are struggling to intervene. The European Parliament, in response, adopted resolutions on discrimination and hate speech and the European Commissioner for Equality summarily withdrew funding for all municipalities with LGBT-free zones. That some would go to such lengths to ensure LGBT people do not obtain equality, in 2020, betrays Roseneil’s progressive homonormalisation.

McCormack (2012) talks about the shifting definitions of masculinity and heterosexuality amongst teenage boys, and Anderson (2011) discusses changing masculinities at length. Such discourse follows the seminal work of Savin-Williams who, in 2005, announced a new era for gay teenagers, noting their sexuality was of little interest or concern amongst a peer generation who were redefining identity. There is substantial evidence that Savin-Williams was accurate in his assessment but the gap in applied knowledge that led to a series of suicides in 2010 is one that demands attention.

While such works have not had a noticeable reductive impact on suicide rates, the separate phenomenological field of suicide theory is equally as complex and there is limited work between the two disciplines to understand opportunities for reduced risk. As we unearth more about masculine identities, reduced homophobia in social settings and the role of straight men in redefining the nature of their relationships with gay peers, my philosophical standpoint is placed in the shifting concepts of heteronormativity, in which we may have reached a tipping point. Regardless of the political forces at play, reducing the social acceptability of homophobia must be key to our understanding of suicidality amongst young men. This may now have sufficient momentum to be irreversible and this project is firmly placed in the sphere of a conceptual new heteronormativity.

1.7 Research setting

In general, young gay people demonstrate adaptable levels of resilience to protect themselves from bullying and harassment (Russell 2005; Scourfield et al 2008). However, inconsistent translatability of LGBT representation from the media into reality continues to apply pressure. This is particularly prominent amongst White men who inherit societal privileges in patriarchal Western societies. Hackman (2016) cites phenomenological changes in heterogeneous masculinity as challenging for men to accept. Men interviewed for the paper acknowledge their sense of entitlement and “inherent favourable bias”, which they feel has been taken away by the drive for gender and sexual equality. This confusion has contributed to emerging media-driven visibility of, and research into, how men establish and maintain relationships.

We know that where young people with diverse and fluid sexual identities are supported through an inclusive social environment, they thrive (Vásquez. et al 2014; Kull et al. 2016; Wexelbaum 2018; Fields and Wotipka 2020; Kang 2020). Higa et al. (2014) built on Hatzenbuehler’s 2011 large-scale assessment of LGBT student experience in the educational environment to demonstrate the pervasiveness of negative environments, at home, at school

and in other group environments. Many universities publish support guides for staff and faculty to help them structure the environment to ensure it is welcoming and protective of the threats LGBT students face¹².

Western Governors University recommends strategic actions such as the implementation of a 'safe space' programme and normalisation of LGBTQ topics by integrating them into lectures (Barile 2017) while the Southern Poverty Law Center recommends enabling students to verbalise their experiences of marginalisation caused by social inequalities (Collins and Ehrenhalt 2020). There are key similarities between recommendations for protective structures in social environments in education, religious institutions, home life and the workplace. It is profound that research in 2020 to understand how corporate environments can better support their LGBTQ staff suggests almost the same strategies that advocates have tried to implement in schools and universities for years, centring on inclusivity and representation, citing both as imperative (Dupreelle et al. 2020).

The commonalities across knowledge bases suggest those students who experience suicidality lack a caring environment that encompasses responsive, expansive, adaptability factors that are mutable in the lives of students who have intersectional lived experiences in such circumstances. New approaches to health promotion, media engagement and educational policy need new frameworks to develop them and new strategies to deploy them. In this sphere, it becomes increasingly important to understand why more positive educational climates for LGBT students continue to develop whilst suicide rates continue to climb. There are some signs of change in the education system, part of an evidence base that suggests that new frameworks, strategies, and approaches, when delivered with rigour, can generate significant lasting change.

In 2012, Rutgers University, delivered specialist training to 130 gay-straight allies, provided student housing for LGBT students, and was awarded the maximum rating from a national student equality rights group (Kaminer 2012). Multidisciplinary change embedded in social discourse, constructs, and media representation, needs to begin to prove its worth in quantifiably better health for LGBT youth. Initiatives such as this one are evidence of the

¹² Research into socio-environmental experiences of LGBT youth is heavily focused on risk factors and preventative measures to reduce them. The American Psychological Association refreshes guidance for education institutions frequently based on the latest research. It promotes the measures discussed above, such as overt inclusivity through the formation of a GSA and promoting inclusive curricula whilst adding the need for more defined leadership to prohibit discrimination and stop bullying (APA 2015; APA 2020). Hall (2018) identified protective factors were effective for LGBQ students but not for transgender students, whose risks were more severe and more complex. Advocacy organisations are aware of these risks and typically respond with new guidance for policymakers following suicides, such as a Health Canada Safer Schools initiative launched in 2012 in part as a response to growing concerns about LGBT youth suicide.

positivity that can result. GSAs and other alliances that provide a safe environment to foster relationships and understanding between different groups of people are common in schools, colleges, and universities. This project is situated in the university system with institutions that have a GSA or equivalent group¹³ to help provide a foundation for understanding how male students interpret, construct and exist in their social world.

A notable proportion of the burgeoning interest in masculinity and heteronormativity has been driven by news media, social media, advertising and opinion writers (Lenskyj 2012; Light 2014; Giaccardi et al. 2016; Timke and O'Barr 2017), focusing on the social elements of the bromance trope or homosocial relationships (Hartwell 2013; Casey 2014; Nettleton 2015; DeAngelis 2016; Lam and Raphael 2016; Savin-Williams 2019; Prudhon 2020). While such work has taken place outside of rigorous research protocols, thorough and transformative investigative journalism and experiential narratives have added substantial understanding to help assess social changes. This trend presents important insights into cultural 'temperature' and the topics in the public psyche, subjects of importance to those in the university environment. In particular, dissenting voices in the effects and applicability of such work provides those in higher education settings with valuable guidance on improving outcomes for marginalised students. Notably, van der Toorn (2020) found the pervasiveness of heteronormative ideology, propagated through institutional and social structures, reinforces prejudice and prevalent ideology, despite interventions designed to tackle this.

The increased visibility of men's health has been noticeable as experts in the field discuss changes in gender placement and differences in society. In 2018, Black wrote in the *New York Times* about the negative impact on boys and young men resulting from a 50-year focus on reducing gender inequality and promoting women's rights. Discussing the deconstruction of how we define masculinity, Black (2018: 1) notes,

"Boys have been left behind. No commensurate movement has emerged to help them navigate toward a full expression of their gender. It's no longer enough to "be a man" – we no longer even know what that means."

This is a controversial and perhaps incendiary viewpoint, implying that the U.S. Department of Education 'No Child Left Behind'¹⁴ policy failed, and that women's rights and the work of the feminist movement can only succeed in their goals if men's identities are

¹³ A GSA equivalency is defined here as a structured, named, organised group that explicitly welcomes people from different sexual backgrounds, or explicitly rejects admission criteria based solely on sexual norms. In the university setting such groups include alliances, clubs, and fraternities.

¹⁴ The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) was a U.S. Act of Congress that reauthorised the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as a strategy to improve access to education (U.S. Department of Education 2020).

subjugated. To some extent this is true; the power and privilege afforded to men has been at a cost to women, an imbalance in need of transformative, fundamental change. However, it is interesting that rather than a re-evaluation of privilege and entitlement, many health commentators suggest men's rights are being taken away. This is useful for context. More importantly, as an educator and health professional, I am interested in how young men interpret and express their identities and life meanings in a society in which their expectations of their presence have been displaced.

Interviewing 30 undergraduate male students in the U.K., Robinson et al. (2017) found bromances to be prolific, normative, and prized by the men in them. Noting a significantly improved environment that allowed and nurtured same-sex non-sexual intimacy and emotional diversity, students cited reduced homophobia and their findings that bromances had led to improved mental wellbeing. Possible reasons why such experiences are not yet as normalised in the U.S. are discussed in chapter 5 through student narratives although there are signs of the appropriation of cultural codes by men into same-sex, mixed-identity friendships (Casey 2014), *"I tend to think the bromance might demonstrate how contemporary culture is evolving past Michael Kimmel's "masculinity as homophobia" thesis; but... straight male homosociality still depends, to a certain extent, on the repeated disavowal of queer desire and the reaffirmation of heterosexuality through sexual conquest."* This is further evidence of van der Toorn's (2020) caution on viewing new forms of same-sex relationships as an antidote to prejudice and discrimination.

The separation between gendered existence and health is mapped into health systems. A focus on silo working in public health, education and suicide prevention mean that we have not gained the benefits of interdisciplinary working and the crossover of theoretical models from each specialty. Some specialist think tanks and public service organisations have researched, tested, and published extensively on niche models to address the systemic problem of othering each specialty when a combined approach holds more promise.

Despite the disparities highlighted when scrutinising prevention work through a gendered lens, there are pockets of crosscutting work and success in some U.S. communities. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), part of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, has developed an extensive, evidence-based toolkit for community-based suicide prevention (Mathews-Younes 2010). Establishing a five-step model to drive a suicide prevention framework based on multiple models of health, SAMHSA centralises the use of a cyclical process of discovery in place of a more traditional

linear process. This enables communities to accept a back-and-forth process of success and failure, learn from mistakes and prioritise change that is sustainable.

The framework was tested in American Indian and Alaska Native Youth communities, with a focus on young adults (Mathews-Younes 2010), although quantitative outcomes to measure successes and failures were not published. However, experiential and narrative learning is remarkably translatable and presents a valuable opportunity to transpose the key, multimodal components to other communities, including young gay men and young men more generally. Although this is useful to ongoing prevention efforts, Redvers et al. (2015) identify the absence of outcome data as a key deficiency in a range of projects and toolkits aimed at suicide prevention.

To a casual onlooker or lay media consumer, the representation of identity in the context of men's health is confusing and represents an interminable number of opinionated voices. Broom et al. (2009) attribute this confusion to the expansion of the empirical and theoretical work that rapidly expanded in the 2000s and the introduction of sociological concepts of health and wellness. There are multiple contested, overlapping territories in healthcare interventions aimed at men (Schofield et al. 2000) despite long-standing knowledge that young men, in particular those at university (Courtenay 1998), are at elevated risk of poor health outcomes. Further investigation demonstrates while there may be some conflict, the discussions are critical if we are to understand how best to support and guide young people, particularly as much of the research repeats itself from the 1980s to the present day. An understanding of how social structures can work to reduce mental health struggles and improve quality of life is similarly important. Popular discourse has been slow to reflect work in the field that began in the 1980s, when Connell's sociological exploration resulted in the identification of multiple masculinities based on a range of sociodemographic factors.

Traister (2000) aptly named their prediction of the growing momentum in masculinity and men's sexuality studies as 'American Viagra', noting its predication in Showalter's paradigm-defining work on feminist critique. There is little consensus on the path forward for talking about masculinity with young men, although a drive to prevent the harmful, simplistic labelling of 'toxic' to anything that denotes a masculine identity (Salter 2019) has a solid grounding. Somewhere between the sensationalist tabloids and academic research sits a more thoughtful press, which increasingly places young men under a cultural microscope. Again, rigour is not a key publishing priority, but the journalists do include the voices of those living with questions or conflict. Writing in *Esquire*, Percy (2019) speaks with Ryan Morgan, a high

school senior, about growing up in a time of ‘social upheaval’¹⁵. Morgan has considerable insight into the impact of the changing political landscape and predetermined masculine ideals expected of him in school.

Asked about his friendship and social life, he prefers to stay away from the typical activities of the other boys, *“Parties are stupid because it’s where guys get drunk and talk about threesomes. It’s lame.”* He goes on to say, *“I’m really happy with who I am”*, but notes conflict in how he is expected to simply be. *“I know what I can’t do, I just don’t know what I can do”*, he states in response to an incident with a female student. This is one of many case studies across the media spectrum that gives traction to discussions about the socioecology of young men. Notably, the article linked the interview narrative with recent data on suicide risk amongst Morgan’s peer group, categorised by four areas; social pressures, school, sex and screen time. Building a picture of typical adolescent males, various data sources note that 59% of boys have been cyberbullied, 41% have had sex before 18 years old¹⁶ and 33% feel pressured by society to display their emotions in a ‘traditionally masculine’ way.

Morgan’s narrative is an autoethnography in the continuum of thoughtful critique and shares commonalities with his peers, namely that hegemonic masculinity is ambiguous and often problematised through their interpretation of masculine norms and socioecological expectations (Carless 2010; Drummond 2010; Sweet 2017). Each of these three authors share similar worries about their place amongst other men and the expectations of explicit affiliation with the sports world, a significant theme discussed with participants in this study in chapter 5. The act of challenging normative and hegemonic masculinity is a less prominent theme in autoethnographies, although some authors present a clear framework to explore changing models of both. González-Calvo (2019) labels current masculinity as “broken” and calls for more discourse on neoliberal identities to understand how men can better understand their emotions and identity in the current patriarchy.

This is interesting from a social standpoint and these areas of discussion occur frequently in this study, demonstrating clear commonalities in the identities of males as they transition from adolescence to young adults. Most concerning is the inclusion of suicide risk, a 44% increase in suicide rate for adolescent boys between 2007 and 2016, equating to an increase from 6.1 deaths per 100,000 to 8.8 deaths per 100,000. The past experiences of

¹⁵ The author pitches social upheaval as a combination of challenges, presented in the article headline, “What’s it like to grow up White, middle class, and male in the era of social media, school shootings, toxic masculinity, #MeToo, and a divided country.”

¹⁶ Early sexual debut and sexual activity in teenagers is correlated to a significantly increased risk of depression and suicidality, although it is not clearly understood why (Rector et al. 2003; Gonçalves et al. 2017).

university students reflect their wellbeing and progression as they move towards graduation and the next stage of life, and it is important to maintain a sound contextual understanding of this.

There is an extensive range of suicide prevention tools available to educators and specialists in healthcare, psychology services, law enforcement and public services. At the 2018 annual conference of the American Association of Suicidology, there were hundreds of demonstrators, presenters and respected experts in attendance. Tools in development included virtual reality software to help predict suicide attempts and to help counsellors interact with clients more effectively. There was significant focus on bullying and on gender and sexuality identity support services. I was in attendance as a chairperson, presenter, and volunteer and the energy was palpable, with a level of exhaustive momentum rare on the conference circuit that continued well after the last day.

The stubborn refusal of suicide data to begin a downward trend is not because of a lack of ideas, research, expertise or strategy. Interestingly, a growing interest in artificial intelligence (AI) in public health as a prevention tool does not always centre those at risk of suicide. A tool in development at the University of Southern California (Kent 2019) uses AI to identify individuals within social groups who could be trained to recognise the warning signs of suicide. Other countries have had much more success with addressing suicidality, suggesting a need for embedded interdisciplinary strategies to learn from outside of the immediate U.S. systems and environment. For example, Fonseka et al. (2019) explored the application of AI and big data in New Zealand and Australia to address young suicide and found it had far-ranging uses, including in identification of otherwise invisible risk factors and the clinical management of medication and behaviour therapy for those with self-disclosed suicidality.

To contextualise the scope of suicide attempt in greater depth and to help bring together a sense of centrality amongst the myriad data sources at play, an initial review of national suicide surveillance data was carried out. Open access data from the CDC Self-Directed Violence (SDV) Surveillance database, the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, the American College Health Association National College Health Assessments (ACHA-NCHA), The Trevor Project, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the American Association of Suicidology were used to establish an initial broad evidence base to understand variations in suicide attempts nationally in relation to the location of study of each participant.

U.S. surveillance data, while available in large volumes, is subject to criticism from social researchers, commentators in the suicide sphere and the data agencies themselves. In the 2011 SDV data summary, the authors include a section advocating a need for better quality data

with more accurate reporting and standardised classifications. The publication cites differential underreporting as a causality of significant misunderstanding of suicide risks in key demographics, despite multiple multi-agency initiatives since 2003 to try and address this issue. Weiss et al. (2006) refer to CDC surveillance data as based on “thin” sources, which reduce reliability and validity. In light of this criticism, the multiple agencies used to assemble an initial understanding was important to build a picture of trends by triangulating sources.

The ACHA-NCHA aims to broaden government-mandated data surveillance by increasing the scope of the student experience in surveys, to include alcohol and drug use, sexual health, personal safety and mental health. The survey is a paid opt-in service and so not all institutions buy into the service, although quarterly data summaries are useful to add depth to the broader national CDC data. Data in late 2017 indicated 1.6% of male college and university students reported a suicide attempt in the previous 12 months alongside contextualising factors such as alcohol use and sexual activity. The survey included 31,463 student respondents, which reflects a sample size of 0.2% of the U.S. student population. This underlines the criticisms of data collection and surveillance reliability but is useful to provide background context to qualitative studies.

Studies that combine quantitative data sets from all the listed sources are rare and are most often presented selectively by the press. Despite the challenges in extrapolating data from multiple sources with varying degrees of reliability different periods of surveillance, there are data trends that remain predictably uniform. These depict persistent nationwide levels of suicide attempts and deaths, with significant differences across the country. In 2005, the differences in suicide deaths ranges from fewer than 10 per 100,000 people in the continental northeast to more than 36 deaths per 100,000 in the northwest of Alaska (Ingraham 2018).

Drivers behind this data are well established; high rates of drinking, drug dependence, and economic challenges disproportionately affect people living in the rural west while counties with higher populations of Hispanic and black residents see lower rates of suicide risk. While this study cannot, by scope or design, incorporate factors at the granular level that are possible with large-scale quantitative surveillance, individual narratives about how students interact with factors such as race, socioeconomic background, and inequality can provide insight at an individual level. It also uses benchmarking data as a discussion point for participants, most significantly a 30% increase in national deaths, from 10.5 suicides per 100,000 in 1999 to 13.9 per 100,000 in 2016 (Ingraham 2018).

The CDC’s WISQARS (Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System) Fatal Injury Mapping Module provided more scrutiny of the data at a geographic level. As the

universities changed during the course of data collection, the surveillance databases were revisited to ensure patterns of risk were maintained for each site. The databases provided information on suicide risk relevant to age and gender, but the U.S. does not collect surveillance data on sexual identity and suicide.

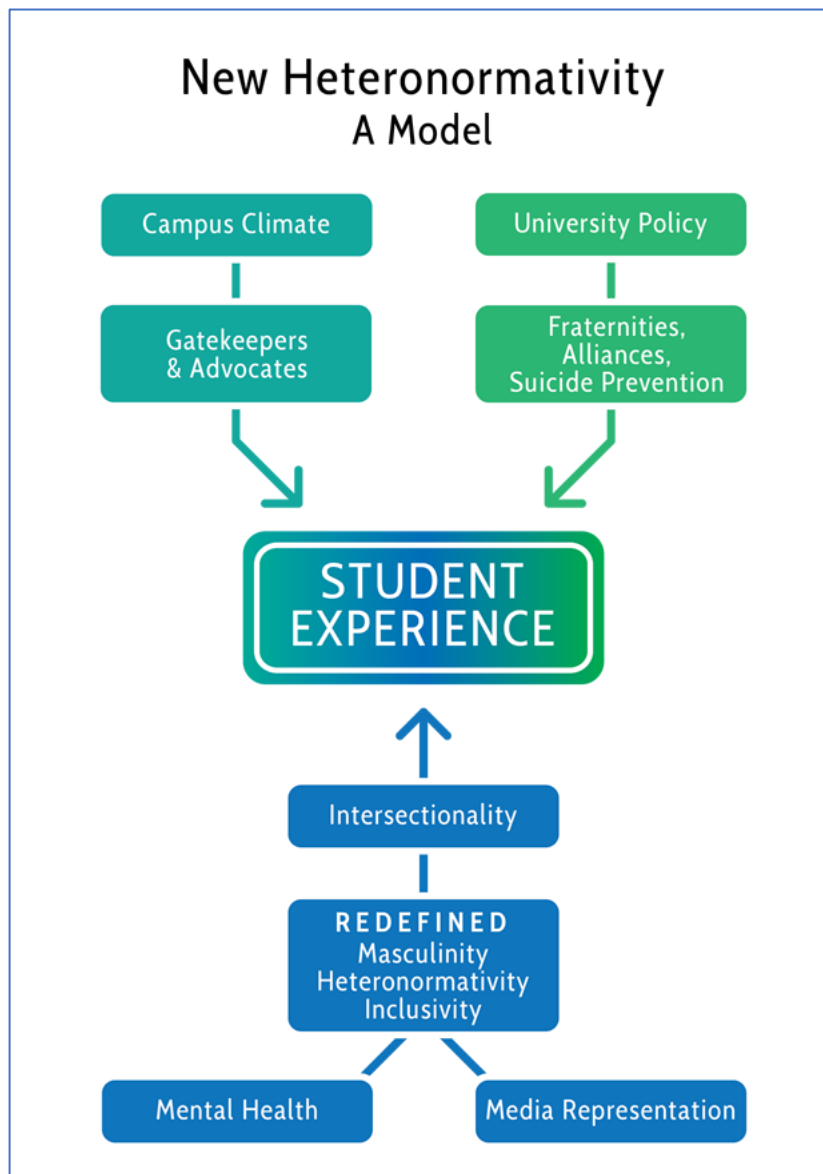
1.8 Thesis structure

“In a sense, whichever story you choose can be safely left to personal choice. More important is whether you are telling some coherent story. This means that the structure of your thesis should only rarely flow from the chronological order in which you happened to find out things”.

Silverman (2000: 243-44)

The project has cycled through many iterations and the title focus shifted from suicide prevention to the media, to student mental health, the education system and back to suicide prevention. I presented the preparatory work at university conferences aimed at diverse student audiences and gauged the reaction of students and faculty, to test the climate of acceptability. I used these sessions to understand what was important to students and to better understand their challenges and ideas for change. This led to the establishment of ‘new heteronormativity’ as a conceptual focal point, with the broader subjects of suicidality, prevention, and the education system as critical contextualising factors. Image 1 depicts this conceptual model as a fluid process.

Image 1 – New Heteronormativity: A Model



The project has developed over four years, during which time the social, educational, and political landscapes have changed significantly. To maintain a sense of recency and meaningful currency on the topic, I developed the literature review fluidly and concurrently with the interviews. This enabled me to keep abreast of changes in media representation and suicide data. While suicide data and monitoring did not change significantly, discourse on masculinity and heteronormativity became more frequent and socially intense. Mapping social medial and news media articles on masculinity and heteronormativity would be a useful academic exercise in its own right as a strategy to understand changes in interest. I monitored news and social science articles publicised through social media during the main research

period using 12 different news websites, which identified over 800 articles. This project won't attempt to analyse these, but their existence reflects new interest and momentum in the field of study. They are also reflected in the findings and recommendations.

The thesis is focused on the beliefs, opinions and experiences of students and those working with them. The thesis structure was developed within a fluid, qualitative framework that enabled me to be opportunistic with interviews and adapt the approach to meet the preferences of those taking part. This approach meant analysis was on-going, which enabled me to adapt the question structure to reflect topics important to students.

Using a semi-structured questionnaire as a prompt within a phenomenological framework, I interviewed 29 university students. The project's research questions were designed to gather abstract narratives and experiential discourse from students, to build a picture of themes. Educational and environmental context was important and I carried out desk-based exercises in advance to gauge the campus climate for diversity and inclusion at each site. This included a check of the nature of alliances and LGBT organisations on site as well and a review of the university's Campus Pride Index¹⁷ rating.

This information was contextual and not included in the discussion chapter because not every university took part in the rating scheme, making it difficult to consider a fair comparison. Of note was that the University of Nebraska - Lincoln had been awarded a four-star rating out of five and had been identified as a 'premier campus' for its range of services and resources for LGBTQ students. The University of Oklahoma was also rated with four stars. None of the other universities attended by participants featured in the index.

During the course of the research, I came into contact with people who wanted to talk about the topic. This included people who wanted to talk about their experiences with suicidality and related issues. Many also viewed the topics of heteronormativity and masculinity with frustration because they link so closely with the bullying, harassment, and inequality still endemic in many social environments¹⁸. In each case, the conversations were poignant. The customer service agent at an airport rental car counter, when he found out the purpose of my visit, took a coffee break and asked if I would listen to the story of his brother's suicide in the previous year. A taxi driver said he was a freelance journalist and had written

¹⁷ Campus Pride Index is a non-profit national benchmarking tool to help prospective students, parents and faculty review the track record of a university in facilitating LGBTQ-friendly campuses. The tool triangulates a number of factors such as application of anti-discriminatory policies and provision of resources to help students achieve a good quality of life. Importantly for this study, the index considers whether a university actively promotes and includes straight allies in LGBTQ initiatives. See the critical geography section for more discussion.

¹⁸ While these voices are outside of the scope of the results and analysis, they form an important contextual sphere and are presented later as part of consideration of accidental ethnography.

about a spate of suicides in a local youth detention facility. A barber said he was a de facto counsellor for the young men who came for haircuts from the local university, many of whom would discuss their personal lives¹⁹.

The project is exploratory in nature and in concept and does not seek to provide definitive answers or solutions to the problems it presents; public health and educational challenges rarely have straightforward paths to improvement. Instead it seeks to open discussion, on topics many find challenging, including participants themselves. It also helps to contribute to a new model that practitioners in suicide prevention, and educators with young people under their charge, may wish to consider as part of the range of resources already available. Most importantly, the project started discussions with students and faculty about their lives at university and what happens next. The overriding conclusion, encompassing all the smaller specific points and themes, is that young men feel challenged by the present but hopeful about the future and that moves to equality, equity, and inclusivity can work only if all parties understand each other, through dialogue and shared experiences. Students were acutely aware of the increase in research and public interest in the topics at hand and had considerable insight into how these matters affected them and their friends. The structure of this paper reflects the fluidity of the project itself, with intentional open ends for future exploration.

1.9 Methodology

Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), I created a semi-structured script²⁰ to be used as a base structure for interviews with participants. This was brief and acted as a starting point for the discussion, which I based on themes. Interviews were participant-led, and they established the direction of the conversation, its intensity and the type of language they were comfortable with. Some participants were interested in the subject matter but nervous at the concept of an ‘interview’ and so took time to trust me and the process. Others, particularly at a university that had an exceptionally poor track record of mental health and suicides amongst students, were outraged and used angry, emotive language to express themselves. In all cases it was important students felt comfortable and confident and could speak freely.

¹⁹ The experiences of the barber are particularly interesting considering an international focus on this setting as an environment uniquely placed to tackle poor mental health amongst men. The Lion’s Barber Collective offers an international network of barbers trained to provide mental health support during a haircut. The barber I spoke with was not part of the collective but had found the setting well-placed to support good mental health.

²⁰ See Appendix.

The overriding priority was to ensure participants felt able to express themselves, and the methodology was structured to ensure their experiential narratives were at the centre of the discussion. The complexity of the topic and interconnectedness of multiple disciplines made it likely that the results would be broad, discursive, and possibly abstract. A qualitative approach to results analysis, focusing on themes, was therefore chosen to ensure the student's opinions and insights were not muted or obscured by an overly rigid process.

1.10 Realising the objectives

The research aims and objectives are based on the central premise of exploring the meaning, location (situation) and application of heteronormativity amongst male university students in relation to suicide risk. Specifically, the project looks at the relationships between men of different sexual identities and whether this can have an impact on social fulfilment, mental health and suicidality.

Realising the objectives took a circuitous journey and included a pilot project between my home institution and a university in the U.S. This helped to establish acceptability of the topics and guide a more focused approach from the initial plan of multiple concurrent themes. This removed early plans for focus groups and narrowed the media-based element of the project. Media is discussed throughout as important measure of influence on the participant group and is used to identify understanding and discourse of the gatekeeper role of straight men in gay men's suicide prevention strategies.

The research topic and methods are placed clearly in a phenomenological philosophy and a constructivist paradigm. Early philosophical concerns and conflicts centred on my personal and academic ontological standpoints. I have neither a wholly critical realist belief nor a wholly relativist belief and accept hallmarks of both with an open, inquisitive mind. The critical realist domain does not require observation of a phenomenon or entity to determine that it exists (Levers 2013) and typifies truth as an achievement through reasoning rather than observation because we need to understand causation itself rather than just the outcomes (Clark et al. 2007). In suicide studies and in public health, this ontological domain is useful in determining human behaviours as phenomena, and causation factors for areas in which we already know the outcomes. For example, we have a range of suicide data at our disposal and we do not need to observe a death to know that suicide exists. Similarly, we know that suicide rates are worrying but we don't know enough about causality to prevent them.

While this standpoint presents an appropriate milieu for this project, relativist ontology also has value. Guba and Lincoln's (2005) perspective that a relativist perspective has no

distinguishable difference from our subjective experience of reality, meaning that human experience and reality are one and the same, also holds its own in the disciplines here. Within this domain, researchers seek to understand the subjective experiences and multiple truths of people. Suicide can be the result of depression and psychobiological factors that could be treated with medicine; facts not in dispute.

This paper is concerned with the subjective reality and lived experiences of those in population groups known to be at elevated risk of suicide. As such, we are not concerned with whether a student has ever received treatment for a mental health problem but with their experience, journey, and relationships that influence their feelings and decisions. While I did not achieve a satisfyingly final ontological standpoint, I have applied Morgan and Smircich's (1980) philosophical assertion that qualitative research is an approach and not a rigid set of techniques. As such, it should be delivered in a way that reflects the abstract, complex and unpredictable nature of the social phenomena researchers seek to explore and agitate. Smith et al. (2011) are more assertive in their philosophical standing for qualitative research, noting that authors undermine the possibilities and outcomes of their own work by over-deliberating on the philosophical standpoint and excessively strict adherence to it.

Pragmatically, there were a number of challenges and hurdles. Approaching universities in a different country with, essentially, a 'cold calling' approach to engagement was time-consuming. While most universities were either disinterested or simply did not reply, when an institution did engage positively, structuring the logistics was a significant piece of work. While the methodology may have allowed interviews by remote video link, I much prefer in-person interaction and scheduled interviews that could take place in this way. It was also important to visit campuses to gauge the climate for male and LGBT students, a subjective but useful contextual exercise. I ultimately succeeded in securing interviews, over five times more than the minimum I had planned and hoped for, through the generosity and kindness of faculty and student representatives who saw importance in the subject matter. With this in mind, the practical challenges were insignificant in the totality of the research²¹.

1.11 Themes to be investigated

The project is participant-led inasmuch as each student had the title, a basic overview of the aims, and directed the narrative based on their interests and experiences. Themes were not

²¹ This is not to dismiss the importance of practical and logistical elements of my work. However, the literature demonstrates with exceptional breadth that the qualitative paradigm is epitomised by challenges. Näslund (2002) offers a good conceptual grounding for flexibility when carrying out qualitative work.

rigidly pre-set, although several were implied through the title and briefing: heteronormativity, sexual identity, suicidality (suicide ideation), intervention media, GSAs, masculinity, and straight allies in LGBT settings. While some predicted themes did emerge as threads through the discussions, students demonstrated several thematic commonalities in their standpoints in relation to university leadership, administration systems and teams, the availability and quality of mental health liaison support as well as counselling, sports, and politics.

The theme of sports in relation to sexual identity was substantial and persistent and led to a new prompt being added to the semi-structured interview script. The sports theme was complex and one I was familiar with from a lay point of view, particularly in relation to media representation. Students were either passionately *for* all-inclusive sports teams, or passionately *against* their own participation in sports. This was notably the theme that caused the most divisiveness and negativity amongst gay students, particularly in the context of the perception of hyper masculinity in sports. Some gay students had found a new level of acceptance in university through sports participation although they noted the level of masculinity could be problematic:

“...I came out on my hockey team and then I was part of this brotherhood... like we're a brotherhood we're going to sit behind each other... we're in it. You see it in like those movies, like 300 men, or like war movies that are popularly male and you just see like this brotherhood in the powerfulness. When you're behind this veil of masculinity, hyper masculinity on a sports team, you feel powerful, you feel committed, you feel dedicated. And as a result... your own inner self-esteem gets an overinflated ego and that overinflated ego as a result has you make decisions that you think that you can make because you are a male college athlete on a team. And you're like, I can in very inappropriate terms, I can take advantage of a woman, I can discriminate against ethnic individuals, I can discriminate against a homosexual man that may have been hitting on me. So that's why like, you get you get this sense that you can do whatever you want. It's just, it's damaging. It can be very damaging.”

Student in the West region, gay man.

1.12 Summary

“We are the generation that has hundreds of thousands of people coming out on a daily basis as everyone among the LGBT spectrum. You can't speak to someone of my generation today who has not met or interacted with an LGBT person. Within the university community, it's people who are actually more willing to fight because it's something that they've seen, it's people they know, it's people they care about.”

Student in the South region, gay man.

The working title of this project was ‘Perceptions of Acceptance and Inclusion’. It reflected the inequalities experienced by students of sexual minorities and the failure of initiatives and

systems to reduce suicide rates, particularly in universities, where the vulnerability of students is well documented. A series of suicides amongst young men, feedback from previous research and talking with students helped to develop a plan to focus on male students. Compounded by my personal interests and philosophical standpoint in the masculinity, education and public health spheres, the project evolved.

We are at a notable counterpoint. A new standard for suicide prevention campaigns to frontline heterosexual gatekeepers, outraged at the tarnishing of their own community reputation by a vocal anti-gay cohort, repositions LGBT students in the risk group. A shifting gay-straight paradigm in educational settings could signify a new model of inclusion and a tipping point in intra-male relations. Such a change seems slight in the overwhelming picture of increasing suicides and deteriorating standards of equality. However, in the discipline of suicide prevention, progress can only be made with bold, if small, steps. The Defense Suicide Prevention Office, which provides support for a group at very high risk of suicidality, noted *“Small steps saves lives”* in their 2019 conference. As we found with the outcomes of SAMHSA’s leading edge research in community-based prevention, change in specific communities can hold great advantages for others.

Chapter 2

Literature review

“Nevertheless, she persisted.”
McConnell, Congressional Record 2017

2.1 Introduction

The narratives of student participants are the most important part of this paper and substantively direct its path. The research began on the back of a pilot project that suggested society was becoming a more welcoming place for LGBTQ+ young people and ended with rapidly diminishing certainty about the maintenance of equality and the stability of social life in the near future.

This research project is concerned with the experiences of men, including discussions of the identity of men within the LGBTQ moniker and straight men. The literature on life and social experience is significantly representative of the broader LGBT terminology, which is cited in this paper, in places, in absentia of more specific research based solely on gay men in the university setting. While research on gay men is readily available, it tends to focus on topics such as HIV, sex, addiction, mental health and cultural differences. Research set in higher education and focused on the core topics here is less common and tends to follow the pattern identified by the Williams Institute in trying to standardise the LGBTQ+ experience.

Think tanks and specialist research institutions mirror these frustrations. The Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan ‘fact tank’, found in surveys in 2013 that LGBT people felt the American public was becoming more accepting of them. However, the survey sample poses some challenges. A disproportionate number (40%) identified as bisexual, and some results indicated more promising rates of acceptance for gay women than for gay men. This is a significant finding: the experiences of bisexual students are underexplored and underreported, but we have enough information from disaggregation from the LGBTQ identity group to know that bisexual students are at particular risk of suicidality (Robinson and Espelage 2011).

Durkheim, credited with the introduction of modern sociology in the 1870s (Sinha 2017), proposed four theoretical bases for suicidality (Recker and Moore 2015); fatalistic, egoistic, anomic and altruistic. Each focuses on the sociological aspects of suicide and various stressors that contribute to patterns of suicidality that are threaded together by the overwhelmingly gloomy claim that people die by suicide because they feel they are not good enough for

society, or that they feel society will be better off without them (Stack 1979; Breault and Barkey 2016). This is a critically important philosophical and theoretical basis for this research as university students are situated in social and physical environments in which a sense of meaning and purpose are central to success and contentedness.

Each of Durkheim's approaches reflects the period of time in which they were established. Despite their age, they can be clearly recognised today. The fatalistic model of suicide persists with changes in social structures and demonstrates few changes in its characteristics over the last 40 years, namely that over-regulation of any description is a significant factor in suicide risk (Stack 1979; Grayson et al. 2020). Conversely, anomic suicide occurs more typically during times of societal shift, when people feel vulnerable due to a social environment of 'normlessness' (Hodwitz and Frey 2016).

While the need for social cohesion is rarely contested, Kushner and Sterk (2011) argue against the popular interpretation of Durkheim's work, namely that the application of social theory to population-based health in modern times results in greater risk of mortality. Instead, they claim that high levels of social integration are correlated with high levels of self-destructive behaviour and suicide-related deaths. Essentially, this means connections between good population health and social capital should be viewed with scepticism. Further criticism of Durkheim's work suggests the intentional omission of available data to knowingly exaggerate suicide caused by a separation from society (Marson and Lillis 2019) is problematic, although research in higher education environments suggest the sensitivities of social change have a profound impact (Godor 2016).

Considering the sociology of suicide through a social capital lens, Recker and Moore (2015) found distinct structural differences in counties with higher rates of suicide in the U.S. Higher rates of suicide were correlated with unemployment and poverty whilst lower suicide rates were correlated with stronger social capital, more diversity and higher population density. This suggests an interesting contextualisation for suicidality on university campuses, which are typically diverse and promote robust social capital.

Connecting the trappings of modernity with an increasing reliance on digital technology to fundamentally change social communication, Condorelli (2016) pieces together elements of common knowledge to conclude that fragmentation of social systems do not result in greater instances of suicide. Significant assumptions about the causality of suicide are therefore less certain and the complexity of its etiology remain in need of exploration. A focus on modern social structures and strata remain important, and research on the experience of young people should consider their narratives on an individual level with an understanding of

their “special challenges” (Gunn III and Goldstein 2017). Frustratingly, such approaches persist in their failure to acknowledge the sociological groundwork established in the 1890s (Crossman 2020) and continue to ground indicative stressors in genetic predisposition and personality characteristics (Bilsen 2018). Such considerations are, of course, part of the key to understanding suicide but are somewhat impotent when given exclusivity in the suicide prevention toolkit, which needs to be more diverse, more dynamic and more reflective of lived experiences if it is to be effective with LGBTQ young people.

2.2 Understanding identity

Much of the existing research relating to sexuality-based health inequalities and suicide risk is based on studies of the LGBT community as a singular group. The Williams Institute (2009) identified this as a gap in knowledge of the experiences and behaviours of individuals who identify as LGBT as it represents a subsumed identity into a standardised designation rather than a more individual identity. The report called for more accurate research into the numbers of people in the U.S. who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender and to ensure this is differentiated from people who have engaged in any lifetime same-sex behaviour or who disclose same-sex attraction²².

The U.S. Census Bureau records the numbers of same-sex partners living together but has not historically documented the prevalence of LGBT+ identities. The Bureau planned²³ to introduce this measure in the 2021 census, which would have provided better data for researchers and policymakers²⁴ and bucked the international trend to resist LGBTQ+ inclusion in census data collection (Poushter and Kent 2020). The Trump Administration’s decision to stop this change in census data coincided with their earlier decision to remove

²² There are significant differences between men who identify as gay or bisexual and those who identify as straight but engage in sex with other men. Men who identify as straight may have sex with other men whilst men who identify as gay may not engage in sex at all; the important difference is between identity and behaviour. Each identity group has variances in risks and predicted outcomes. Loue (2008) provides an interesting discussion on semantics and behaviours.

²³ At the time of first writing, in 2016, this sentence read, “The Bureau plans to introduce this measure in the 2021 census...” In March 2017 President Trump’s administration removed this intent, stating through the Office of Policy and Strategic Planning that the decision to cancel the planned inclusion of sexual identity was based on a policy decision (Wang 2018). This was a highly symbolic development because it demonstrated the lengths to which some government departments will go to ensure LGBTQ people remain disempowered and invisible; clear predictors of suicide risk.

²⁴ The U.S. is not alone in historic avoidance of asking questions about identity on its national census. As of summer 2020, no country includes sexual identity as an aspect of their census (Cooley 2019). The U.K. plans to introduce this in 2021 although LGBTQ organisations remain divided on whether this a positive step forward, citing concern from the Office for National Statistics that because the head of household often completes the census form, there is a privacy and safety risk for teenagers who have not yet disclosed their sexual identity (Cooley 2019). Churchill (2019) counters that such risks are mediated by the manifest benefits to young LGBTQ people through increased, normalised visibility.

sexual orientation and gender identity from the National Survey of Older Americans Act Participants (NSOAAP) (O'Hara 2017) and cancelled plans to include sexual orientation and categories on transgender health from the Annual Program Performance Report for Centers for Independent Living (Cahill and Makadon 2017; Sendensky 2017). This was significant because it erased a greater area of LGBT life from public view and jeopardised data integrity of the needs of vulnerable people, in these cases the elderly and those living with disabilities.

The experiences of transgender men in the U.S. are heavily influenced by an array of policy changes, equality rollbacks and deeply partisan public opinion, with large scale differences across each state (Transgender Law Center 2020). The Movement Advancement Project, part of the Transgender Law Center, tracks differences in gender equality rights and practices across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and five U.S. overseas territories, including Guam and Puerto Rico, categorising each according to a policy tally that reflects protective laws and policies in place. The five categories range from a high gender identity policy tally, reflecting significant protective legal and policy existence, to negative gender identity policy tally, indicating laws and policies inhibit equality or actively work against it. In 2020, the negative gender identity policy tally had the greatest number of inclusions, with 17 states and three territories, reflecting the substantive challenges transgender people face for civil acceptance. Fifteen states and the District of Columbia are categorised as having a high gender identity policy tally, with the remaining 18 states and two territories spread across medium, fair and low tallies.

In June 2020, the Trump Administration reversed Obama-era protections that protected transgender people from discrimination in healthcare, including protection against service providers that refused to treat them based on their gender identity (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2020). The administration also began proceedings to force homeless shelters to take gender into account when offering a vulnerable person a bed for the night and to restrict military duties for transgender men (Sanger-Katz and Weiland 2020). A federal judge subsequently blocked the healthcare rollbacks from taking place but the ferocity with which the administration pursued the reversal of minority protections was of great concern (Luthi 2020). The developments, while significant setbacks, are not new challenges to the transgender community, whose track record of threats and problems is profound. In 2015, transgender activists called growing violent crime against transgender people a state of emergency and in 2017 the Human Rights Campaign tracked 29 murders against trans people in the U.S., committed as hate crimes. The accurate murder rate is likely much higher.

Extensive research from health authorities suggests gay men as a sociological group, or men who have sex with men (MSM) as a behavioural group, are at significantly higher risk of health and behavioural factors that are linked to suicide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2015). The LGBT experience as a collective group is still relevant to this study as it includes the shared experiences of exclusion and marginalisation but wherever possible, literature that identifies the gay male experience as a distinctive concern is considered.

2.3 Finding the right words

“If you call someone gay, he better be a guy who likes guys.”
Killermann (2020).

Etymologically, the use of the word ‘gay’ instead of ‘homosexual’ to describe men who are attracted to other men entered the U.S. lexicon in the 1940s, with the publication of a behavioural psychology paper in the Rorschach Research Exchange and Journal of Projective Techniques (Hegarty 2003). The 1970s saw a surge of research by psychologists to understand gay identity and facilitating, contributing factors. Troiden (1979) identified a number of stages men progress through before formally ‘acquiring’ a gay identity and concluded that most men who experiment with homosexuality, whether in fantasy or practice, do not identify as gay on a permanent basis. Similarly, Cass (1979) identified a six-stage process within a homosexual identity formation model. Much of the literature on gay lifestyle, culture, and behaviour in the U.S. since the 1970s parallels significant social change in the same period, including sexual liberation, the Stonewall riots, and the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s.

Along with the changes in politics during this project, a shift in the use of ‘gay’ has occurred, often now used as synonymous with ‘bad’ in the microaggression *“that’s so gay”* (Nadal 2013). McCormack (2012) equates the prolific use of “that’s so gay” to similar phrases that would be culturally unacceptable, *“You wouldn’t say “that’s so jew” or “that’s so black” – that would be racist – so you should also refrain from saying “that’s so gay.”* However, he believes young people do not use the phrase with homophobic intent. Ashenden (2015) found a similar response when speaking with young people in London as part of a project for Stonewall to identify the gaps between language, meaning and intent and concluded a generational gap was key to understanding perceived homophobia. In contrast, Mathies et al. (2018) found LGBTQ university students experienced worse academic outcomes when they attended institutions that did not address the problematic use of the “That’s so gay” phrase, finding the

microaggression synonymous with heterosexist college climates. Mostly relegated to the annals of youth street talk, Killermann (2020) notes the change in vocabulary has resulted in people across the research and public policy spectrum revert to using ‘homosexual’ in an attempt to assuage any assumption that they disapprove of the gay identity.

Conversations with young men in the education system suggest they are more likely than ever to be supportive of diverse peers and to be critical of homophobia (McCormack 2012). This suggests that a rejection of homophobia from the users of the phrase is more than a tokenistic default, it is a genuine claim from those who separate the literal meaning from their philosophy and beliefs.

This linguistic tension is symbolic of broader contradictions within LGBTQ groups and in their external relationships (George 2020). One such tension has already appeared in this paper; the inclusion or exclusion of ‘Q’, for Queer, in LGBT/LGBTQ. Higgins (2020) discusses the various manifestations of the Q and provides a good introduction to the fluidity of its use and how individuals use it to mean different things. This variance, and its tension in the LGBTQ universe²⁵, remains even amongst those in the community, again more likely to occur along generational lines (Madrone 2020).

2.4 A Brief History Lesson: health, advocacy and language

“My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you.”
Audre Lorde (2007)

In February 2017, Senator Elizabeth Warren, a Democrat, opposed the confirmation of Jeff Sessions, a Republican, to the U.S. Senate on the grounds of his poor record on civil rights. The Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, also a Republican, silenced Warren, berating her for persisting in her argument despite being instructed to stand down by her (male) counterparts. McConnell’s patronising criticism resonated across the media and civil rights spectra and the feminist movement quickly adopted and weaponised it into a hashtag slogan for change (Garber 2017). Such appropriation finds quick traction amongst groups eager to fight injustice and is reminiscent of the Act Up!²⁶ movement in the 1980s, with the rapid

²⁵ Similarly to the “That’s so gay” discussion, the discussion over the use of “queer” plays out along historic lines. Madrone (2020) notes that older LGBTQ people, particularly gay men, are averse to using the term because of its past use as insulting hate speech. While much discussion has taken place over the reclamation of its use by gay men (Birch-Bayley 2019), discussions with older groups suggest the acceptability of the reclamation is limited.

²⁶ Act Up!, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, was founded in 1987 in New York City as a grassroots organisation led by activists who wanted to force the U.S. government to take control of the unfolding AIDS

deployment of renewed energy and commitment to change. Both Sessions and McConnell are wealthy, aging, heterosexual, conservative, White men of power.

Warren shares some of these traits but has a history of fighting for equality and, crucially in the eyes of the White patriarchy, embraces a Cherokee family history and identity (Madison 2012). Such additional personal features no doubt further infuriated McConnell, whose ultimate response was a textbook representation of how endemic inequality is deeply cherished in government and reflected structurally across the functions of society.

The current trends in health inequalities attributed to sexual identity are indicative of the long-term impact of structural inequity generated by sociocultural and political responses to same-sex desire and relationships (Escoffier 2008). The politicisation of homosexuality in modern American culture can be traced to 1944, when Robert Duncan published *The Homosexual in Society* at a time when the U.S. was struggling to reconcile its views on humanity with that of its state-sanctioned persecution towards Black citizens, political deviants, and gay population. The Stonewall riots in June 1969 marked a move away from passive political fights, towards decisive, radical action (Walsh 2019) in the journey towards equality. The event is widely recognised as the beginning of the modern LGBT rights movement because of the cultural shift it catalysed in the empowerment of the gay community and in how this was perceived (Armstrong and Cragg 2006), although social movements to improve equality and rights for gay groups significantly predate the Stonewall riots (Morris 2015).

The period of sexual liberation, or sexual revolution, that occurred amongst gay communities in the U.S. (Beasley 2005) was sandwiched between the Stonewall riots and the AIDS crisis. There were similarities between the challenges faced by gay people during the 1950s and 1960s when they were fighting for political recognition and equality and the 1980s and 1990s when they were fighting for AIDS research and treatment. During both periods the gay population had to assert itself and build links with straight people sympathetic to their cause, referred to as allies (Stotzer 2009; Lapointe 2015; Rostosky et al 2015), to project a voice to policymakers and politicians.

Crucially, allies were often politicians who began motions to implement wide-ranging equality legislation. One such example was California State Assembly representative Art Agnos in 1976 who tried to add sexual orientation to California's employment law protection criteria (SF Gay History 2016). Such protection took decades to achieve in practice. Sluggish

crisis. The organisation is entrenched in modern LGBTQ history and its existence is synonymous with high-profile action against sluggish government departments, such as the Food and Drug Administration, and right-wing conservatives who felt gay men deserved the consequences of the epidemic.

progress suggests that while effective in working together to improve equal rights, gay and straight lawmakers and cultural leaders working together have not addressed the longitudinal impact of such entrenched inequality, most recently that of health inequalities amongst young gay men (Gamarel et al 2012; Siconolfi et al 2015).

The term ‘gay-straight alliance’, to describe a peer group or resource based on sexual identity, uses ‘gay’ and ‘straight’ in lieu of ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’. This vocabulary serves to legitimise the terms in lay groups and to indicate a non-clinical reference to terms describing sexual behaviour and attraction. A cursory search of terminology on university websites, at the beginning and at the conclusion of this paper, indicates U.S. institutions include the terms ‘gay’ and ‘straight’ routinely in their LGBT resources (University of California at Los Angeles 2004; California State University 2015; Portland State University 2020; Vanderbilt University 2020) and the terms are readily used by U.S. national public health departments, including the CDC. Academic and professional use of non-clinical vocabulary in research and practice associated with sexual identity further legitimise their use (Proschan 1997).

2.5 Suicide ideation, risk and preventive measures

“The Grim Reaper has darkened many college students’ doorsteps lately.

College students have a lot on their plates nowadays. Whether its family, tuition, jobs, exams, grades, etc., each is a block in a wall that feels like it closes us in. A wall that surrounds us and leaves some people feeling like there is only one exit: suicide.”

Bastible (2010), *The Shorthorn*, University of Texas-Arlington student newspaper

LGBT young people in the United States are more than twice as likely as their heterosexual peers to attempt suicide (Russell et al. 2009; Russell & Toomey 2012; Shields et al. 2012; Baams et al. 2015; Hottes et al. 2016; Raifman et al. 2020), with further elevated suicide risks identified for transgender youth (Grossman & D’Augelli 2007; Duncan & Hatzenbuehler 2014; Johns et al 2019), those with more than one marginalising feature (Shadick et al 2015) and vulnerable students (Walls et al 2008; Ruch et al. 2020). Although not a recent social or health phenomenon (Roesler and Deisher 1972), the international media catalyzed outrage in 2010 when five young men died by suicide in the U.S. (LGBTQ Nation 2010; New York Times 2010; Pink News 2010; The New Yorker 2012) as a result of homophobic or minority-related bullying and victimization.

Student contributors to university presses responded quickly and with a focus on raising awareness of bullying and increasing community support and protection for minority young people (Allen 2010; Neilsen 2010; University Wire 2010; Wade 2010; Zymet 2010). Cyberbullying (Andeniji 2010; Sullivan 2010; University Wire 2010a; Weis 2010) and broad national inequalities and apathy (Allen 2010; University Wire 2010b) were frequently highlighted by student writers as contributing factors to anxiety, depression, bullying and ultimate suicide ideation. This representation of risk aligns with the social philosophical grounding of Durkheim's suicide theories, particularly that people who feel marginalized and less important than others are much more likely to experience suicidality. This is significant: students manifest self-identified risks through a literary/media discourse, which is contextualized in theory dating back to the 1890s, but there is little evidence that such knowledge has prevented avoidable deaths.

The risks and agitation described by student authors are reflected by Hatzenbuehler (2011), who identified the social environment inhabited by LGBT youth as a key component of their feelings of exclusion or inclusion and associated suicide risk in a study of 11th grade students. Meyer's (2003) minority stress model suggests environmental factors are significantly linked to mental ill health amongst LGBT young people and operate in a cycle to generate a less tolerant social environment as mental health deteriorates (Plöderl et al 2014). Wolff et al. (2014) built on these findings by identifying wide variations in how education institutions responded to bullying and victimisation. In an analysis of the media coverage of 29 youth suicides, multiple forms of bullying before the person's death were reported in 49% of articles, including verbal, physical, and cyberbullying. In only 19% of cases the education institution had been aware of the bullying and responded to it. In 17% of cases, the student's education institution was aware of the bullying and failed to act before their death.

The systemic failure of education institutions to extinguish toxic and harmful environments for young people (Wright 2010; Wolff et al. 2014; Wolff et al. 2016) means that suicide risk remains persistent and damaging (Caiola 2012; Abbott et al 2014). This may persist beyond the immediate school or university environment and be facilitated by structurally homophobic governance policies and leaders (Hatzenbuehler & Keyes 2013; Highbeam Research 2016) or local law enforcement (Dwyer 2015). Such research in schools is an important indication of the social environments to which LGBT youth are exposed prior to entering higher education, despite extensive national efforts to establish greater acceptance.

Combining the minority stress model with data connecting bullying to suicidality obfuscates an already confusing societal picture. Suicides have increased exponentially and

between 2014 and 2019, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) found highly variable attitudes amongst the American public. In an annual survey to gauge the acceptability of LGBTQ people amongst the general public, GLAAD found positive change between 2014 and 2017 followed by a substantial deterioration in 2018 amongst young people aged 18 to 34. This took the advocacy sector by surprise and was at odds with longitudinal research that suggested substantive and sustained improvement in compassion and understanding towards LGBTQ people since 1990 (Keleher and Smith 2012).

The Pew Research Center has been asking this question – whether it is acceptable to have LGBT people living openly in society – since 2002. The survey matches GDP per capita as a marker of development alongside the percentage of people who think homosexuality should be accepted by society. Figures from 2019 indicate the U.S. continues to lag behind comparable economies (Pew Research Center 2020). While its GDP is the highest amongst the 34 countries surveyed, the percentage of LGBT acceptance is lower than 11 other countries, including the Netherlands, which has the closest GDP, and the Philippines, where GDP is over \$50,000 per capita less. In this analysis, the U.S. is a significant outlier and reflects the only nation with GDP over \$45,000 per capita with a lower than 75% acceptance view of LGBT people, at 72%. This surveillance data is helpful in understanding the lived contextual spheres of students, as it indicates simply existing in a rich nation does not predicate social acceptance.

The focus on social spheres across the spectrum of reporting underpins advice from the CDC and the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (2008) that LGBT youth require a safe, supportive and inclusive environment in which they are protected from harm. GLAAD encouraged this approach in their conclusion to the 2019 Accelerating Acceptance²⁷ report, noting eroding levels of acceptance must be addressed with facilitated cultural change and communication.

Societal constructs persist, particularly in relation to identities and relationship structures defined by the use of social networks (Durkee et al 2011; Mazzoni and Iannone 2014), between stages of education. Such indicators are supported by a multitude of research trajectories, including that gaps in belongingness at school and significantly higher unexcused absences in middle and high school predicate heightened long-term risks for LGBTQ students (Robinson and Espelage 2011).

²⁷ The Accelerating Acceptance Index is an annual, national poll amongst adults in the U.S. In 2018 the operator of the survey, The Harris Poll, attributed a surprising decline in LGBT acceptance amongst young people to the influence of the Trump administration.

Shields et al (2011) analysed data from the 2009 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey to identify risk factors for suicide ideation and found victimisation or bullying and depression to be significantly correlated to suicide risk. Wolff et al. (2014) identified a gap in the literature with regards to understanding bullying outside of the dominant White male discourse in media representation, a phenomenon that can be addressed with new considerations of media-based relationships according to Venzo and Hess (2013). This ‘bias’ is not ostensibly acknowledged by GSAs, which typically identify a reduction in victimisation and community resilience as primary objectives regardless of race (GSA Network 2016). However, because no robust data exist on causes of suicide identified after death (Institute of Medicine 2011; National Institute of Mental Health 2020), prevention strategies typically focus on reducing known contributory factors (Wolff et al. 2014; Mullaney 2016).

2.6 Interventional Digital Media

Aside from general CDC advice regarding inclusivity programs (CDC 2014), the principal response of community-leading organizations has been to harness the use of digital communication media to ‘speak’ directly to LGBT youth with the intent of promoting inclusion in their environmental spheres. Three high-visibility digital media campaigns, Straight But Not Narrow; Give A Damn! and It Gets Better (Parker-Pope 2010; Lauper 2011; Bouska 2013), were launched in the U.S. in 2010 and 2011. All three campaigns used online media channels as their platform of access and delivery, generated international discursive online communities and had elements of celebrity representation. Straight But Not Narrow and Give A Damn! intentionally sought representation from straight celebrities as their spokespeople, particularly individuals who would be easily identifiable from entertainment media by adolescents. Recognition of, or signposting to, the campaigns in the media following a suicide death is variable. Wolff et al. (2014) found 14% of 78 media reports of a suicide death included a reference to It Gets Better and 13% referenced The Trevor Project, a national LGBTQ suicide prevention organisation.

Haas et al. (2011) identified the media as a useful platform for suicide prevention education. Although this primarily related to how the news media report on suicide, there are myriad positive outcomes of using media for health-related communication in connection with suicide prevention (Jenner et al. 2010; Collings 2012; Carli et al. 2014; Eggertson 2015; Scherr & Reinemann 2016; Keles et al. 2019). However, the relationship between media representation of suicide and its use by those at risk of suicide ideation is complex and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2001) found the risk of suicidality

could be increased by representation through the media, whether this was via news media or in a fictional story. This risk, termed media contagion (Gould et al. 2001), is present even amongst adolescents who have never ideated suicide, ostensibly because the impact of a suicide death forces the cultural script of suicidality into their social discourse (Mueller & Abrutyn 2015; Arendt et al. 2017; Roth et al. 2020).

The notion that media exposure can introduce or increase suicide risk through careless or harmful messaging forms a component part of suicide contagion theory, the concept that suicidality is both a behavioural contagion and an element of social learning theory (Gould & Lake 2013). Increased rates of suicide as a result of media exposure is longitudinal, conclusive and transcends the usual cultural differences between risk markers (Fekete et al. 2001). Suicide rates increase in line with the degree and saturation of media exposure (Hagihara et al. 2007) and increase significantly if media coverage is distributed digitally (Hagihara et al. 2007; Shah 2010.) Such knowledge results in substantial tension: Students rely heavily on live digital media during their studies and to build social support networks.

While the literature is consistent in its analysis of the impact of news and digital media, more recent developments in the field concern the impact of *social* media and suicide contagion²⁸ as a public health issue (Luxton et al. 2012; McClellan 2017; Pourmand et al. 2019; Fung et al. 2020). This is a more complex issue as influencers in social media exist beyond simple subjective representation and include groups set up to encourage self-harm and suicide as well as exposure to social situations young people are not equipped to deal with, such as cybervictimisation (Kim et al. 2019; Massing-Schaffer & Nesi 2020). Rapid, extensive traction has been made in this research field alongside emerging, compelling evidence that in transferring their social lives from the real world to the digital world, adolescents are subjected to more powerful harmful forces, including cyberbullying, that lead to increased suicidality (Hinduja and Patchin 2018; George 2019; Sedgwick et al. 2019; Roth et al. 2020).

We should consider two additional, crucial factors, in our understanding of the role social media has to play in suicidality. The first is that the risks for LGBT youth are enhanced, in the same way they are in media contagion risks in other formats (Wright and Townley 2019). The second is that the literature presents an overwhelmingly negative portrait of the dangers of social media with only limited substantive evidence of any mediating or rehabilitative factors. For example, social media has been used effectively in areas of health promotion to bring together groups of people with common goals, such as to improve mental health and recover

²⁸ Suicide contagion is a phenomenon in which suicide attempts rise in a group, or 'cluster' of young people, following their exposure to a death by suicide (Shaffer et al 1994; Hanson et al 2002; Irwin et al 2014).

from trauma. As a suicide prevention tool, there are few examples of studies to support the medium. Robinson et al. (2015) found young people felt positively about social media as a prevention tool despite the existence of harmful bullying while Ali and Gibson (2019) found young people reported the same contributory factors to suicidality online as they did in real world settings, noting limited preventative effects.

The lack of research data, and the speed at which social media use has grown, presents a confusing theoretical picture, which requires clearer understanding. An emergent consensus is that while social media holds some preventative properties (Leiva and Freire 2017), safe engagement for embedded use should be developed with young people themselves within a clear framework of understanding of the risks already presented by the platform (Robinson et al. 2017).

That this exposure can stimulate suicidality amongst those not known to be at risk suggests a double-edged sword of critical magnitude. It is also reflective of the risks inherently present in providing counselling or psychological group support; teenagers close to each other, temporally or geographically, make up 5% of suicides in that group. Such clustering takes account of pre-existing risks such as mental health problems and substance misuse but only tentatively suggests suicide clusters occur most often amongst young people struggling with the same challenges (Joiner 2003).

Robertson et al. (2012) and Silenzio et al. (2009) assert that social media communication tools can be useful for adolescents who have experienced the suicide of a friend or associate but highlight a correlation with suicide contagion that develops across education institutions and are not confined by geographic limits. Bale (2001) and Sisack & Varnik (2012) recognised the potential for both positive and negative media impact on suicidality and highlighted the need for individualised, highly sensitive media coverage of suicide deaths that actively avoid sensationalism and for prevention campaigns that are realistic in their portrayal of facts, including that suicide by highly lethal means is rare.

The need for intersectoral approaches to suicide prevention is commonly referred to regardless of the professional sector of the researcher, with some fields including the arts and drama-based projects (Silverman et al 2013). Particularly in relation to men, suicide prevention efforts focus on place and conversation, in recognition of the impact of loneliness and internalised life stressors with no social diffusion (Eells et al. 2012).

2.7 Heteronormativity as embedded cultural hegemony

“I can't turn on the radio without hearing a song about how much a boy loves a girl. I can't watch television without seeing hetero couples on every station. Sometimes I can't even look at advertisements because they show the perfect nuclear family with a mom and a dad. Do you know how disheartening that is for a community that already feels ostracized from society?”

McClellan (2015), Colorado Mesa University, *The Criterion* student newspaper.

As an ideology, heteronormativity places heterosexuality as the normative identity or behaviour in societal constructs, including the education system (Ceplak 2013; Herz & Johansson 2015; Lapointe 2015). This inevitably results in embedded heterosexism that is acutely experienced by adolescents (Zera 1992), placing social pressure on straight men and enhancing marginalisation amongst LGBTQ youth. This restricts understanding of how sexual identity and behaviour, particularly in the scope of broad variances posited by queer theory (Britzman 1995; Linville 2009), influence pedagogical practices (Britzman 1995; Lapointe 2015).

The existence of heteronormative environments often implies, through normative societal discourse and media representation, that all straight individuals are implicit in the maintenance of such constructs. However, Goldstein et al (2007) and Lapointe (2015) describe an exponential increase in the willingness of straight individuals to challenge LGBT prejudice and homophobia as this becomes more overt²⁹. There has been increasing evidence of this concept during the development of this study and identification of the key findings. Political landscapes have changed dramatically and without precedent. So too have social values and structures, an acknowledgment of the conceptual ‘new heteronormativity’ on which this paper is based. Normative societal discourse is becoming more balanced and while it remains driven by heteronormative ideals, there is almost daily evidence that the new heteronormativity is less prejudiced and marginalising.

Such individuals are likely to recognise and acknowledge heterosexual privilege (Kumashiro 2002; Lapointe 2015; Nunn & Bolt 2015) as a damaging presence in education environments. Miceli (2005) found that the willingness to speak out against homophobia or minority abuse is possible only when the individual concerned has insight into the broader implications of their status. The equality-based, inclusive nature of GSAs is therefore likely to offer a safe platform for individuals to explore concepts of privilege and work within a diverse

²⁹ The existence of functioning diverse alliances and the basis of this paper – straight men as gatekeepers in the drive to reduce suicidality amongst gay men – are indicators that while heteronormative environments remain prolific, they are by no means exclusive.

community setting to reduce negative structural and individual impact. However, the variable ability of young straight students to recognise their own privilege (Nunn & Bolt 2015) is likely to restrict impact without expert facilitation for self-reflection (Grauerholz 2001).

Dhaenens (2013) considered how adolescents may renegotiate their place in heteronormative social and education environments through popular culture representation, such as the television fiction show *Glee*. Important as a representation of prevailing hegemonic ideologies (Fiske 1987), including masculinity and heteronormativity, fictional media enables the reconstruction of accepted norms and ideals by presenting challenges to established constructs (Cavalcante 2015).

Glee was one of several contemporary shows to include gay characters on a spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities and experiences, including the lived experience of prejudice and marginalisation but also of friendship, safe relationships, and broader social integration. Dhaenens (2013) argues this continues the counter-narrative of gay adolescents identified by Rasmussen (2006) and Driver (2008) in which young men increasingly depart from the socially constructed script of self-loathing and negative social outcomes. The characters depicted in *Glee* are representative of Bettani's (2015) 'dynamic heteronormativity', in which urban straight men are increasingly less willing to subscribe to exclusive heterosexuality as they become more accustomed to spending time in gay spaces or with gay friends and family, also identified by Cronin (2015) in a study of friendship cultural norms. In turn, this shift in social behaviour means young gay men are more likely to exhibit resilience against challenges to their identity (Craig et al 2015).

Recognition of the benefits of education environments that promote equality and the dismantling of heteronormative communities, structures and policies is a key feature of the establishment of changing archetypes of heteronormativity (Connell 2009). In particular, for young men to act as straight allies, they must transgress behavioural norms dictated by social expectations of masculinity to be able to join a GSA or publicly denounce homophobia (Pascoe 2005; Connell 2009; Lepointe 2013). The masculine constructs they often have to overcome to do so are embedded in U.S. society to the extent they contribute significantly to chronic health conditions and early mortality in part by a reluctance by men to seek out help and support for fear of appearing to reject masculine norms (Courtenay 2000; Etienne 2018; McKenzie et al. 2018; Courtenay 2020).

The importance of race in studies of masculinity is linked closely with concepts of structural and experienced privilege (McCormack 2012) and the dominant patriarchy that prevails in the U.S. (Thomas 2008; Cohen 2012; Bareket et al. 2018; Quek 2019; Foltz 2020).

Such concepts lead to a diverse, divisive range of propositional theories, such as Bareket et al.'s (2018) claim that men's sexual objectification of women (subordinates) and patriarchy-centred ideology result in a 'Madonna-Whore Dichotomy' that has a significantly detrimental impact on their relationships with women and other men. Foltz's (2020:1) work adds a timely update to the field; through a study of the media response to the burgeoning protests in the U.S. against police brutality and institutional racism, that the image of an 'American man' remains grounded in "*whiteness, patriotism, and subservience...*" and persistently framed through a nationalistic sports lens³⁰.

Furthering the concepts of hetero- and homonormativity in social spheres, Mutchler (2000) and Yadlosky (2015) continue the sexual scripts theory work of Laumann and Gagnon (1995), indicating that constructed subscriptions to normative identities can be better understood if considered in the context of specific community connectedness (Bersani 1996). While this exacerbates already complicated conceptual and theoretical frameworks, it highlights the complexity of the social spheres in which university students are situated and enables us to apply the myriad influences on their social lives and wellbeing to better understand levels of risks associated with suicidality.

2.8 Gatekeepers in Prevention Efforts

"You go from your mom's house to a gay club where a lot of people are on drugs and it's like, 'This is my community? It's like the fucking jungle'."

Hobbes (2017)

Evidence that gay men struggle with anxiety, loneliness and mental health problems throughout the life course abound in popular culture. Quoted above, Hobbes reflects on the challenges gay men encounter when they leave home for the first time, regardless of where they are on the scale of being out, suggesting the support of straight friends and allies may be desirable at any stage of life. More formal manifestations of friends and allies, gatekeepers are used routinely in health and social care work, both operationally and strategically. Historically in a safeguarding role (Hek et al. 1996; Miller et al. 2013; Kay 2019), their position is based on positional power with an inherent protective factor. While their intent in health promotion and intervention work comes from a wish to help or support, studies caution blind acceptance

³⁰ In this narrative, Foltz is referring to the Black Lives Matter movement and the response of many NFL players, including Colin Kaepernick, which has generated much debate.

of their role as it can lead to the smothering of the very group they seek to protect (Hek et al. 1996; Lowes & Hulatt 2005; Liang et al. 2019).

The use of straight men as spokespeople or gatekeepers in high-profile campaigns aimed at improving social inclusion for LGBT youth and reducing isolation and suicide risk is reflective of the premise of GSAs in U.S. educational settings. Such clubs are intended to foster a safe and inclusive environment for students with different sexual identities, foster alliances between students of different identities (Stotzer 2009), provide a framework to reduce social exclusion (GSA Network 2009; St. John et al. 2014) and facilitate platonic intimacy between gay men and straight men in their friendships (Fee 2000).

There is scant literature on the ethics of straight men representing gay men in harm prevention media. Growing discourse around the sexuality-focused representation and imagery of men in the media provides us with an adjacent approximation of ethical standpoints from which to build an understanding. The concept of the straight gatekeeper is, essentially, that gay men may benefit from the influence of their straight peers, who have greater agency and influence as a result of societal heteronormative structures³¹. Through a media lens this power balance is shifted, at least some of the time. Boedeker (2003) and Hart (2004) consider the inverse power shift caused by the TV show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, in which a group of (gay) fashion experts were enlisted to makeover straight men whose social lives were suffering because of their sloppy dress sense and personal presentation. The show redefined relationships between gay and straight men and in doing so gave us a foundation on which to carry out social work ethically.

The straight gatekeeper approach may help to reach those men who do not identify themselves as gay, or part of the LGBTQ community, and as such are unlikely to engage with a gay spokesperson. Considering the likelihood of engagement on a continuum of male identity (Silva 2019)³², centring a straight man to deliver a gay message may well reach those men who have sex with men and are at risk of the same mental health problems as self-identified gay men (Benoit et al. 2012). In such a scenario, straight gatekeepers may be ethically justified, if narrowly so.

³¹ Beardsley (2019) considers this evidence of Straight Identity Power (SIP), essentially a benefit that straight, cisgender people can elect to harness to their advantage. Building on Fricker's consideration of identity power as epistemic injustice, Beardsley suggests a number of antidotes to the toxicity of SIP. Primarily this involves LGBTQ people adopting their own Queer Identity Power (QIP) and straight people rejecting the voluntary nature of SIP in the first place. In the gatekeeper context, straight men either extend their SIP to the benefit of their gay peers or reject it entirely in place of a pseudo-QIP that enables them to ethically engage.

³² Silva's claim is reflective of the wider debate around how straight a man's behaviour needs to be before he can be considered fully straight, highlighting the increasing understanding of 'straight-ish' identities (Savin-Williams 2017).

Law (2019) furthers this discourse with the consideration of straight men as gatekeepers in research on women's reproductive rights. The charged, political nature of this debate is outside of the scope of this paper but the principles of ethics in gatekeeper structures is an interesting consideration. To some extent this supports Law's findings as it suggests some men in the gay community will reject overt images of men who fully embrace their sexuality and be more likely to engage with men with divergent identities.

Aside from such tenuous links in building ethical lines in the gay-straight representation debate, most recent analysis is generated by the film industry. The increase in gay character representation on TV and the silver screen is welcome in many aspects of the LGBTQ community but is undermined by the lack of associated increase in opportunities for gay actors. Gilbery (2019) considers the duality of opinion from actors themselves in this debate. They assess the standpoint of Darren Criss, a straight actor who elected to stop playing gay roles after winning a Golden Globe for his portrayal of a gay fashion designer. He attributed his decision to the derision he received for 'taking' the role from gay actors in the first place. In contrast, Gilbery quotes Chris New, a gay actor, as noting straight roles are closed off to him and the only possible representation for gay characters relate to sex or oppression. In this paradigm the debate stops because barriers are inflexible and do not allow for deep consideration of ethics and identity.

In Gilbery's discourse, Dan Krikler, a straight actor, notes the work he did with gay friends to help him prepare for a gay character role, asking them questions about how it felt to hold hands with another man in public. This was predictably met with some degree of derision from LGBTQ corners but demonstrates a willingness amongst straight men to learn the challenges of those they are representing. That, at least, must be a positive example of how straight men can adopt a gatekeeper or presentative role. Dawson (2020) acknowledges the positivity of cross-representational roles but is critical of the lack of intersectional representation, noting as is the case with the sample media in this paper, White men retain the monopoly on representation, whether straight or gay. This complicates the ethical debate as it presents a question of how diverse representation needs to be before it can be considered diverse enough.

2.8.1 Gatekeepers and their environment

“I was at a gay bar with some gay friends and this young guy wearing a friggin’ suit walked up and asked me for a dance. I told him I wasn’t gay and he said, ‘I just came out and I want my first dance to be with someone beautiful’. I did a slow dance with the dude and went on my way. Dude deserved it for that A+ line.”

LaConte (2021)³³

Whereas public health campaigns aimed at improving the health of LGBT people typically present an exclusive visualisation of the target group, GSAs, the Straight But Not Narrow, and Give a Damn! campaigns instead shift focus to the acts and responsibilities of heterosexual allies. These allies are presented as community gatekeepers with the ability to reduce homophobia amongst male-dominated heteronormative groups.

The impact on LGBT youth who are unsure if they are a full, contributory citizen of their country has not yet been assessed or understood, although Hatzenbuehler (2011) identified social environment as the most important contributor to suicide ideation. Similarly, St. John et al. (2014) found that the improvements in the education environment fostered by the existence of GSAs, was of tangible benefit to gay students and their friends. Long-term benefits of GSA membership, particularly once students graduate and leave university, have been questioned by Scudieri (2011), who suggests they have limited applicability to the social capital needed to challenge the heteronormative expectations of U.S. society.

Mayo (2003) notes a frame of ‘ethical curiosity’ through which research of GSA members can be fully justified. Noting the voluntary, relational nature of GSAs, Mayo notes members tend to see their presence as an antidote to the crushingly oppressive nature of normative sexuality and identity in educational environments. As active drivers in the agitation of such norms, members are both obliged and enthusiastic in being scrutinised. Extending Mayo’s depiction of social agency into the crossover between ethics and morality, Ioverno et al. (2016) note GSAs do much more than improve mental health and feelings of acceptance. Their work finds a reduction in bullying, improvements in environmental safety and life-saving reductions in depression and self-harm. If a structured environment is needed to help students build such

³³ LaConte considers the boundaries and blurred lines between gay and straight male identities, particularly in relation to masculinities and toxic applications. This quite is one of 16,000 replies, within six months, to a Reddit social media question that asked: “Straight males of reddit, what’s the gayest thing you’ve ever done?” The post received attention from the mainstream media, LGBTQ media and innumerable other online chat forums. LaConte considers a selection of responses that help us to reconsider masculine concepts, identities, and values amongst straight men. The original post was archived with all 16,000 comments and is available at https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/kocp7v/straight_males_of_reddit_whats_the_gayest_thing/

bridges, researchers have an ethical imperative to explore this further in vulnerable communities, including those at risk of suicide ideation (Roffee and Waling 2017).

The concept of 'masculine capital' (Anderson 2011) is brought into question in educational environments with diverse student groups as the hegemonic masculinity so common in western cultures is being eroded by grassroots equality organisations with similar principles to that of GSAs, such as Sport Allies³⁴. Wilson and Plummer's (2014) perspective on masculinity theory highlights the interaction between personal and social identities and suggests varying degrees of genderisation within men's community groups, enabling particular scrutiny of the university micro-climate.

That the acceptance of gay team players in traditionally masculine university contact sports depends on performance (Anderson 2011) is a framework of identity now being addressed by two key factors. The first is the coming out of a number of high-profile gay sportsmen in mainstream U.S. sports, representing basketball, football, diving and swimming. Secondly, university-based sports teams have begun to recognise the negative impact a closed, exclusive community or team of straight men can have on team performance and wider relationships. More prominent in the U.K. and spearheaded in 2014 by the Stonewall *Right Behind Gay Footballers* campaign and the University of Warwick Sport Allies rowing team, such activities are only sporadically and tentatively discussed in American gay press and digital media outlets.

Sports narratives maintain the recent focus on the discourse and cultural scripts of White men (Chakraborti & Garland 2009; Kimmel 2014; Patton & Bondi 2015), highlighting the need for a reconfiguration of how behaviours directed by sexual identity and gender identity are understood in structured environments. In the subordination of traditional masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005) and the discourse against hegemonic dominance (McCormack 2012), such developments provide an important update to the three tiers of masculinity proposed by Connell (1995), particularly as the tiers were dependent on socioenvironmental marginalisation.

³⁴ Sport Allies is a non-profit organisation that works with sports teams to drive diversity, inclusivity, and equality. Warwick Rowers is part of this as a university team and the organisation also works with professional rugby teams. Lowe and Gough (2016:53), in the first academic study of the organisation's work, found significant opportunity and agency to, "[Nurture] positive, inclusive behaviours and practices within sporting cultures," in addition to reconceptualising traditional masculinity.

2.9 GSAs as a concept

“I’ve got it - you’re gay and I’m straight, so why don’t we call it the gay-straight alliance?”
Miceli (2005:27).

There is no definitive national database or evaluation of GSAs in university settings (Worthen 2014) but advice for higher education institutions is closely related to that offered to high schools and elementary schools. GLSEN, formerly the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, advocates for GSAs at school level and the GSA Network maintains a national registry of schools with an active GSA. In 2016, 37 of the 50 states had an active GSA network (GSA Network 2016). Although neither organisation publishes a map of national GSAs, GLSEN does allow university-based groups to register and access resources. Similarly, Gay Library’s Gay Straight Alliance portal encourages gay students to ensure their experience in higher education is spent with an institution that supports academic and social equality and where straight allies are present (Gay Library 2016).

Mayo (2013) identified the opportunity for academic advisors to include critical pedagogy in the GSA environment through the facilitation of student activism and reflection on critical interactions with friends and families. This approach does not detract from the typical primary goals of GSAs around community empowerment and highlights the benefits of improved pedagogical outcomes for participants, including academic advisors. Britzman (1995) is critical of this approach and maintains that inherently heteronormative spaces such as schools and universities cannot fully integrate the academic and social needs of non-straight students until there is a fundamental shift in how these students are inherently ‘othered’ by the system and spaces in which they exist.

The period of transition between school and university is a period of personal growth and opportunity, but feelings of isolation and fear are enhanced for LGBT students (Foy 2010; Rankin et al. 2019; Wilson and Cariola 2020) who are often perceived as tentative members of the wider student community (Zimmer 2010). Student contributors to university press also indicate a need for better understanding of the risks inherent during this period and how universities can better equip students for it. Zymet (2010) identified their own university campus as “gay-friendly” with multiple resources and student-led groups supportive of equality and inclusion but found a gap in outreach activities with local high school students. The writer suggested the university send liaison workers to high schools and promote its

inclusive environment and ethos as a resource that would ensure a safe learning and social space for gay students.

It is important to consider the risks of suicide ideation and the associated roles of victimisation and GSA existence within the context of male developmental factors. Russell and Toomey (2012) found suicide risk is highest during adolescent years and is not a singular risk as men enter their 20s and young adulthood. As GSAs are most often focused on education associated with adolescence and young adulthood, this is a significant finding as it suggests young men may experience developmental factors as they age that inherently reduce their risk of suicide ideation at the same time as they leave an educational environment and the protection a GSA can provide. In addition to the potential impact on suicidality, well-structured and inclusive GSAs may also contribute to a reduction in the broader health inequalities experienced by young gay men, particularly in relation to drug abuse (Heck et al 2014).

2.10 GSAs as place

Eric Rofes, an HIV activist and educator, threaded health promotion and environment into an inseparable, richly detailed tapestry in his seminal work. By identifying the characteristics of the environments in which gay men seek pleasure and satisfaction as transcendently more sensual than those sought by their straight peers in contemporary city and suburban settings, Rofes contributed to our understanding of the nature and spread of HIV in the early days of the epidemic. His work is often considered singularly as it was placed in a time of disaster for the gay community and the equal rights movement. However, his findings are reflected in the breadth of work considering the reclamation of the word 'queer' by LGBTQ groups in the early 2000s (Giesecking 2014) and the associated queering of spaces, both private and public (Jagose 1997; Browne 2006; Oswin 2008).

University Wire (UWire), a college press release and wire service with over 650 affiliated university student newspapers and magazines, registered 1540 press releases related to GSAs between September 1st 2010 and November 1st 2016³⁵. Press releases included a broad range of student-led narratives in relation to GSAs with a consistent focus on empowerment, community cohesion and supporting vulnerable and victimised students. For example, the president of the GSA at Georgia Southern University identified the group's goal as, "*...provide a space of safety and encouragement to be one's self all while we attempt to educate the campus on [gay, straight,*

³⁵ A search of the wire service during this period was useful to gauge student feelings and actions about GSAs following a series of male student suicides and prior to the start of substantive qualitative research for this paper.

minority] issues” (University Wire 2016a). Community activities were often promoted to increase awareness of the GSA as well to encourage members to build supportive relationships, such as joining pride parades in various parts of the country, including Texas, Illinois and Missouri (Brooks 2015; University Wire 2016).

Press releases typically promote positive activities of GSAs or substantive drives to establish them as social or community opportunities not necessarily linked to academic progression or achievement. This is echoed by guidelines issued by the Gay Library (2016) and the GSA Network (2016) that recommend focusing on social justice and the establishment of intersectional equality groups as a tool to increase student engagement and thus foster a more inclusive environment for learning.

The activity level and effectiveness of GSAs is highly sensitive to the engagement of the individuals who attend them and are more likely to be sustainable if established members maintain a trajectory of stability and actively work to attract new members and allies (Scheer & Poteat 2016). This is particularly thought to be the case with straight male members of GSAs, who are more likely to disengage if they do not feel welcomed by LGBT peers or when they fulfil a personal goal, such as making a new friend (Scheer & Poteat 2016). A predisposition towards pre-university exposure to LGBT friendships and the principles of social justice are also significant factors when establishing consistent, longitudinal engagement by straight allies in equality activity (Broido 2000; Fingerhut 2011).

The consistently positive tone about GSAs used in University Wire press releases and broadly positive findings of studies of the impact of GSAs in high schools reflect the four processes related to stress in Meyer’s (2003) minority stress model. For example, discourse within GSAs and guidelines issued for those seeking to establish them typically aim to reduce discrimination by increasing visibility of sexual minority students and providing tools for them to defend against the well-established suicide risks associated with internalised homophobia (Meyer 2003; Heck et al 2013). Straight allies with an experiential understanding of sexual prejudice and LGBT inequality are more likely to substantively contribute to GSA work and development, particularly in relation to demonstrably reducing homophobia and minority oppression (Stotzer 2009; Duhigg et al 2010; Scheer and Poteat 2016; Dessel et al. 2017; Goldstein 2017).

There is variable evidence GSAs are effective suicide prevention strategies in their own right. In one study, GSA membership was seen as a buffer to suicide risk in schools where victimisation of LGBT students was low but this correlative protective effect decreased with higher rates of reported victimisation (Toomey et al. (2011). However, this is a paradoxical

relationship as GSAs are linked to overall lower levels of victimisation (Marx & Kettrey 2016) and therefore a range of additional contextual factors should be taken into consideration. This includes the number of ‘safe adults’ available for adolescents to speak to as part of a GSA arrangement, which is positively linked to reduced victimisation and thus reduced suicide risk (Seelman et al 2015).

The formation of GSAs, or other alliances with explicit inclusivity, is synonymous with the collective drive of LGBTQ people to form protected enclaves and territories for themselves (Giesecking 2014). We can see this practice through the eyes of historians of the gay movement as well as through criminology and sexology disciplines. Giesecking notes such areas afford more navigability than broad, chaotic environments with overwhelming cultural stimuli that typically promise little protection against marginalisation. Notably, Brown indicates such space can be imagined³⁶, a transient locale that provides only fleeting safety (Chauncey 1994). If such ‘territory’ can be transposed into the university environment, therefore, can students subjugate the threat of suicide-causing influences through the creation of imagined safe spaces? Such an ability would, perhaps, increase protection for those in institutions that fail to implement structured protection, including religious institutions and those guided by politics.

While queer theory is a relatively new concept³⁷, research on the deconstruction of queer space and the manifestation of gay cultures in otherwise nondescript spaces, suggests LGBTQ communities exist and prevail despite the efforts of social and structural forces to destroy them (Aldrich 2004). This supports the theory that place is fluid, dynamic and in synchronicity with the fluidity of gay identities (Proshansky et al. 1983). That we began to acknowledge the importance of place and our ability to thrive alongside sometimes insurmountable change decades ago is a good omen for the effectiveness of GSAs. Students now face challenges that would have been unrecognisable in the 1980s but the rich narrative history of LGBTQ+ communities is indicative of the power of social change.

³⁶ Brown’s work predated the advent of the digital social age, with online communication platforms replacing some of the staple physical environments occupied by gay men. Most significantly, apps designed to facilitate fast sexual encounters that connect men based on location have led to the demise of gay bars, renowned for their historic sense of community (Weinstein 2012; Ghaziani 2014; Ghaziani, 2021; Hanhardt 2014).

³⁷ de Lauretis is credited with the coining of the term in 1991 although its numerous critical and cultural contexts, spanning AIDS activism to radical feminism, predate this (University of Illinois 2020). The term entered the literary and public mainstream in 1998 (Smith 1998) and ignited discussions around the demarcation between gender and sexual identities. Interestingly, de Lauretis’ discourse coincided with revived work from the American Psychological Association’s Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns to reduce heterosexual bias in everyday language (American Psychological Association 1991).

2.11 Intersectionality

“There is a growing conviction that the affective experience of social marginality transforms our critical strategies.”

Ridgway (2004)

Contemporary discourse on matters of equality increasingly use concepts and theories of intersectionality as a basis for research and discussion. Crenshaw (1989) and Collins (1990) introduced the first frameworks and broadly accepted academic narrative on intersectionality to explore the experiences of women who experienced gendered and racial marginalisation. Early concepts maintain this focus and researchers typically apply them to understanding cultural ideology and the associated social constructs (Belkhir and Barnett 2001). Despite the multidisciplinary, theoretical nature of intersectionality, researchers in sexuality and identity do not often apply it clearly to studies based outside the fields of feminist theory or race identity (Monro and Richardson 2010; Rodriguez and Freeman 2016; Abrams et al. 2020).

A move away from a narrow application of intersectionality expands the theory and enables us to apply it to concepts of inequality more broadly, including non-feminist gender, sexuality and social deprivation (Grabham et al. 2009). Rosenblum (1994) introduced an understanding of queer intersectionality, which Fish (2008) developed by applying it to wider LGBT identity work. Organisations concerned with intersectionality at the social and experiential level have begun to reflect a broader, inequality-based understanding.³⁸

Applying the theory in a relational sphere enables us to test the agency and potential scope of the model to social construct studies, including those with an interest in identity and, by association, fields such as suicidality. Clay (2018) decentres intersectionality from a focus on race and relocates it in the cultural distinctions and norms that present themselves in suicidality and suicide theory. Their work looks at the similarities in suicide patterns between cultural groups such as Korean Americans, Latinos and American Indians and uses intersectionality theory to consider influencing factors beyond the usual labelling of generic depression to risk factors.

The complexity of understanding suicidality and the nature of the sphere tends to lead research to centre on theories and models based on the act of suicide itself, such as suicide

³⁸ YW Boston, a non-profit organisation with a focus on empowering women and tackling racism, includes nationality, disability and sexual orientation in their model of intersectionality. See <https://www.ywboston.org/2017/03/what-is-intersectionality-and-what-does-it-have-to-do-with-me/> This is an example of how organisations tasked with reducing inequality use the model to be more inclusive in their own practice.

contagion theories. Studies with an intersectionality framework can supplement work on understanding suicide risk by building themes with associative factors, which help us to understand the complexity of the issues more clearly. King et al. (2017) and Tejera et al. (2019) are critical of the isolationist approach to intersectionality in suicide studies and consider suicide risk amongst students with a non-heterosexual identity and a disability. Concluding that multiple inequalities compound to increase suicide risk, the authors add weight to the body of evidence that calls for more effective application of intersectional concepts, which demand prevention approaches reflective of the range of student identities.

While the introduction of intersectionality to suicide studies enables interdisciplinary frameworks to be applied to the identities of those at heightened risk, the most significant value is when the theory can be used to unravel complexity and identify opportunities to develop targeted interventions. Intersectionality highlights confounding factors of inequality, such as sociodemographic influences and access to education and financial resource. Ferlatte et al. (2017) considered multiple angles of identity through an intersectionality analysis and found gay and bisexual men to be at heightened risk of suicide attempt due to the inherent sociodemographic inequality they typically experienced. Elevated risk in this population group is not new knowledge (Saewyc 2011; Burk et al. 2018), but the splintering of multiple identities within minority sexual groups within an intersectional framework of suicidality adds substance to the existing, narrowly defined surveillance data.³⁹ This suggests more traditional methods of suicide prevention may benefit from combination with intersectional studies, rather than being maintained in exclusivity.

Recent, inclusive models of intersectionality increasingly consider fluid concepts of identity and are critical of restrictive definitions, which researchers align with ongoing inequality and suicide risk. Moffitt et al. (2020) call for a realignment of intersectionality and inequality to the psychology field as a strategy to balance the constructs applied to social identities. Similarly, Parra and Hastings (2020) consider a psychosocial lens critically important when planning models of integration and inequality reduction and note the heterosexist and racially biased constructs of existing models, which the authors note can be counterproductive.

Presenting a counterpoint to expanding the social identities represented in intersectional work, Gilroy (2004) suggests people are fearful of cultural fluxes caused by those who belong to multiple identity groups. They base this on the idea that cultural production

³⁹ See the results section for further discussion on the availability and limitations of surveillance data.

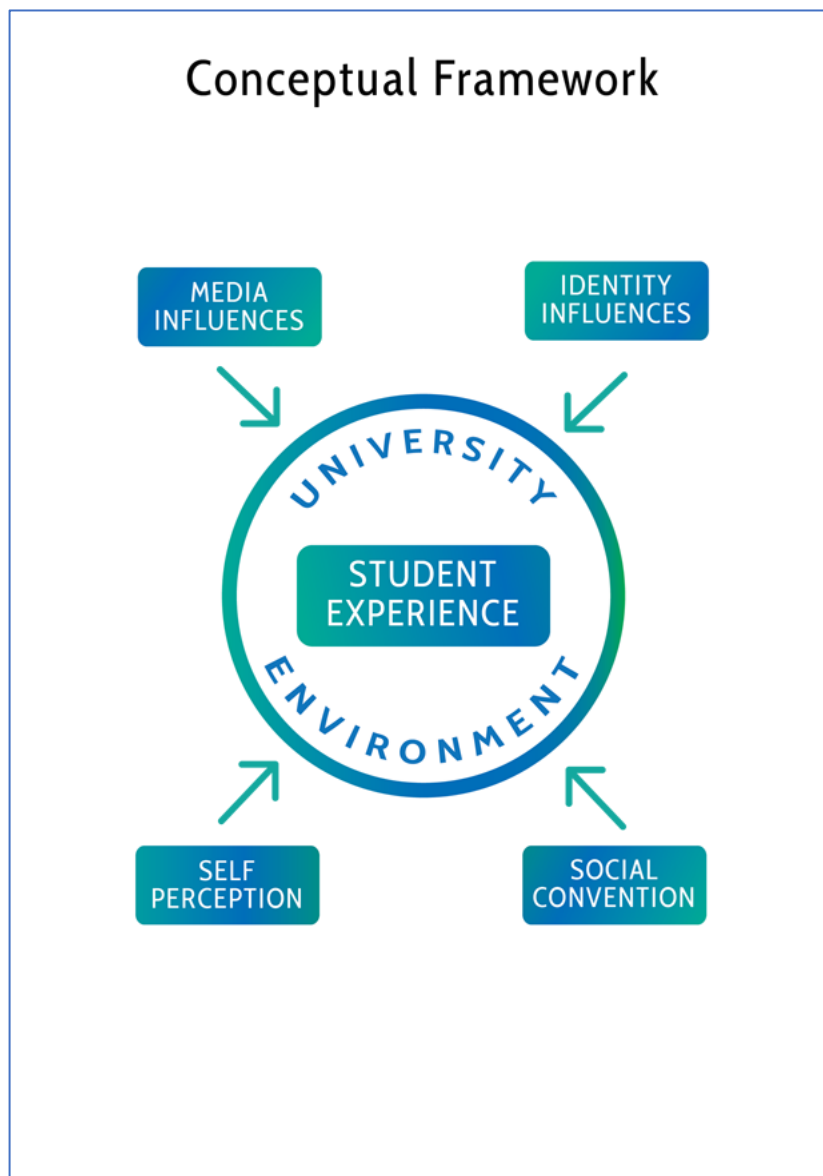
occurs when a person settles in one place and with one identity group. There is less evidence for this amongst young men in university, who often value the opportunity to live in an unfamiliar environment with new sociocultural challenges and successes. On a broader scale, Jameson (Giri et al. 2001) notes the phenomenological impact of minorities, themselves representative of intersecting identities and inequalities, are crucial to creating, “...*the transnational character of contemporary culture*” (Ridgway 2004:22). In this lens of viewing intersectionality, we can identify related benefits of removing barriers to equality, such as achieving routes into social mobility, a concept often prized most by those whose societal standing presents significant barriers to achieving it (Jayakumar 2018).

2.12 Suicide prevention as public health or as social change?

The methodological standpoint, including the conceptual framework, epistemology and methods, were developed in the context of the two major schools of thought used to categorise suicide risk. Carey (2018) presented the subjectivity of the theme in an international broadsheet newspaper article, calling the national suicide rate in the U.S. “stubborn”, noting it as, “...*an intractable public health crisis that has been unfolding in slow motion for a generation.*” The article is significant because it places responsibility for suicide prevention firmly within the public health sphere, an area more commonly associated with behaviour change strategies to improve health outcomes such as smoking cessation. Of note is the familiarity of LGBT people with public health interventions and frameworks. The health risks so common in the community have been studied and tracked almost since the social acceptance of the demographic as a distinct group; its members are accustomed to messages about smoking, drug use, alcohol use and sexual behaviour.

I created the conceptual framework (Image 2) for the study to be adaptable and fluid, reflecting the multitude of theoretical influences at play. Based on the principles of Wolf’s (2008) conceptual framework to combine multiple theories and models, as well as the nature of Engel’s biopsychosocial model, the framework centralises student narrative through their socioecological experiences, encapsulated within the university environment.

Image 2: Conceptual framework



In the model, four key domains influence the university environment, which students experience through their own social lens and sphere. This incorporates, to varying degrees, the connected theoretical bases of the study. Four concepts or ideologies, based on the known risk factors for male student suicidality, and young male suicidality more broadly, contribute equally to the student experience in this framework. The research interviews will establish the place and importance of each.

Methodology to understand the social place and impact of suicide prevention is historically controversial and without a conclusive, reliable base. This is regardless of the sphere or lens of the research and spans the failure of clinical research, including randomised

control trials, to find common ground and controllable or predictable variables in prevention strategies.⁴⁰ Despite a broad spectrum of strategies, including a shift into public health, suicides amongst young adults between 15 and 24 years have tripled since the 1950s. In the U.S. in 2017 it was the second leading cause of death, when 6200 young people died by suicide (Burrell 2017; United Health Foundation 2018.)

A similar lack of evidence results from studies framed in sociological norms, including those based on therapeutic interventions⁴¹. The authors recommend a population-based methodology that is cross-cutting across philosophical standpoints and that draws together theories of health with those of sociology. The breadth and interdisciplinary nature of research to date provided fertile ground for methodological planning. The lack of an established, well-evidenced strategy that has demonstrably reduced risk meant there was limited structural basis for my discussions with participants, emphasising the need to allow them to lead the discussion with their views and experiences.

Suicide is traditionally understood as a sociological problem, resulting from isolation and a lack of access to social care or support (McCance-Katz 2019). Spencer-Thomas (2017) predicated the shift of suicide to the public health lens with a positive view because such research and programmes are typically interdisciplinary in nature, enabling the input of academics and professionals from multiple specialties. Acknowledging the input of mental health services into suicide prevention, Spencer-Thomas frames suicide as a social justice issue aligned with other high risks experienced by the LGBTQ community and demanding a new approach to prevention by advocating a change in systemic practice. Such a call to action joins a steady stream of voices that places suicide prevention in a social justice lens. Button (2016) delineates this broad categorisation and suggests prevention needs a political focus to succeed⁴².

Criticism of suicide prevention work is longitudinal, persistent, and profound. Such work tends to highlight the lack of impact in reducing suicide rates year-on-year. Knox et al (2004) sharply criticizes early public health-based efforts to reduce morbidity and mortality, noting attempts to replicate techniques used to reduce coronary heart disease has had limited effects

⁴⁰ Studies focused on chemical intervention, such as changing anti-depressant medication, have found highly variable results. One study on the use of clozapine therapy (Meltzer 2001) found a positive impact on harm reduction whilst another found the therapy increased the risk of suicide completion (Sernyak et al 2001).

⁴¹ The first national research-based suicide prevention campaign took place in Finland from 1992 to 1996 (Beskow et al 1999) and although research found positive outcomes, problems with methodological reliability mean the study is not considered generalisable (Knox et al 2004).

⁴² There is precedent for links between political shifts and changes in government and suicidality. Blakely & Collings (2002) and Barton (2018) track political and government-framed social crises to higher rates of suicide attempts and related deaths.

in suicide reduction. At the close of this project, in late 2019, it was notable that the U.S. research community remained in the same position they did at its inception in 2013, as discussed by Raloff (2019):

“A disturbing number of teens and young adults question whether life is worth living. The good news: Resources are available to help them get through tough times.”

The availability of prevention resources as ‘good news’ is not necessarily helpful or accurate, as this project discovered. Additionally, many of those resources have been available for some time, with Raloff noting incremental increases in suicidality.

Goldsmith et al. (2002) support the need for a more holistic methodology in preventing suicide, advocating for an approach that considers subjective and social factors contemporaneously with the biological and clinical nuances of public health research. This paper calls for a more rigorous and robust “epidemiology of suicide” to address the methodological challenges of identifying successful prevention strategies. The lack of sustained progress to date may be indicative of the deficiencies highlighted by Goldsmith but it should also be a call to apply a fluid, multi-specialty model that can adapt to the interdisciplinary nature of suicide risk. Engel’s (1977) biopsychosocial model of health and illness is an exemplar of a model that encompasses multiple influences on health outcomes and can reflect changing attitudes and behaviours. The model maintains relevance decades after its inception because it can simultaneously guide practitioners and educators as a philosophy (Borrell-Carrió et al. 2004).

Importantly, Borrell-Carrió identify the model’s application in research to understand subjective experience while presenting itself as a tool to be used by health professionals. Such an approach would include seven pillars of practice, reflecting a need for self-awareness of the professional, empathetic curiosity and developing skills in informed intuition. Lehman et al. (2017) propose an adaptation of Engel’s model that reconfigures the approach to a health problem by viewing it as a dynamic system. By applying contemporary ecological and transactional models, the researchers identify an opportunity for the model to reflect, and address, the multiple streams of evidence and philosophy in suicide causality. Such structured approaches, particularly those based on existing proven models, is not obvious in the health intervention programmes under consideration in this study. However, we must consider that even evidence-based campaigns with clear evidence underpinning design and evaluation, have failed to yield long term, substantive success.

The lack of consensus on effective suicide prevention strategies and the considerable disagreement on the positioning of the problem in the education setting⁴³ place this project in an interdisciplinary setting with multiple overlapping concepts. This study reflects the diversity of the environment in which suicide risk manifests itself, the higher education setting, and tools of intervention that span media, the digital social sphere and health promotion.

2.13 Summary

Heteronormativity and the embedded role and concepts of masculinity are deeply entrenched in the western patriarchy and, by extension, in the university system. The clichéd, formulaic vision of the model American student has persisted as the White jock who excels at sports and whose academic studies are secondary. While the stereotype is harmful to non-White, non-straight and other students outside of the mould, Dee (2013) notes it is equally as harmful to those pigeon-holed in the stereotype. They found the label of ‘dumb jock’ inhibits sports students’ performance in their academic studies and manifests itself as a cycle from which students are unlikely to recover, a finding resoundingly confirmed during student interviews presented later in this paper.

The pedestal on which the archetypal, straight, high-performing sports student is placed is a harbinger of the difficulties they encounter when exploring their identity and philosophies. The perpetuation of stereotypes from peers, the university administration, or wider social and media environments, adds pressure to them, normalises underperformance and embeds an unequal field of opportunity for other students. Addressing the placement of university jocks in the social landscape of changing heteronormativity is complex but the groundwork for understanding changing attitudes amongst young men is well-developed and increasingly a focal point of research.

If stereotypes are self-fulfilling prophecies, a concept of relevance to all the themes discussed in this chapter, then solutions must address the ‘stereotype threat’ (McGlashen & Feltz 2013; Dzaferagic 2016; Madon et al. 2018) that permeates through the entire student community. LGBT students and those from other minorities are accustomed to navigating, challenging, or accommodating harmful ideology on a daily basis. As the permanency of the structures that dictate fixed masculine ideology decomposes and young (White, straight) men

⁴³ Knox et al (2004) claim suicide amongst young people is decreasing, citing the WISQARS database. This is antithetical to most national surveillance data and monitoring organisations, who go to great lengths to depict the severity of the crisis. This is reflected in a continual news cycle that cites reliable sources, including a June 2018 research piece in *The New York Times*, which noted suicide rates had risen every year in almost every state for the past 19 years (Carey 2018).

begin to dismantle the hegemonic masculinity on which their security and future success is predicated, structures must be in place to harness the changes to establish more inclusive, protective environments for everyone in the education system⁴⁴.

Our final paradox may be more difficult to understand and address. We rely on a multitude of media sources to promote equality, drive visibility, and normalise our diversity. We also need this media to loudly and unapologetically publicise suicides when they occur to raise awareness and ensure non-profit specialist organisations can continue to fund their work and research. However, a significant knowledge base that paradoxically links such coverage to greater suicide risks presents an uncomfortable question about the nature of prevention strategies.

⁴⁴ On a personal note, injecting an education system built on long-established social and cultural norms is extremely difficult. As a senior lecturer at a university that provided students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds with higher education opportunities, facilitating change was almost insurmountable. The social climate amongst my core student group was such that a majority of voices in a sexual health class believed AIDS to be a religious punishment for 'deviant' sexual behaviour and an overwhelming number of female students believed rape to be entirely the fault of the victim. This may not be typical, but the experiences are demonstrative of the orthodoxy and authority of norms based on constructed beliefs.

Chapter 3

Methodology

“If you ask someone what ‘research’ means, they may well tell you that it involves ‘finding things out’.”
Silverman (2014:3)

3.1 Introduction

The aims of this study, focused on suicide risk, ideation, and prevention, are intentionally broad and set in the overarching context of male university students’ experiences and relationships. There are several interconnected themes within the exploratory sphere, including concepts of masculine identity and the role of digital media in suicide prevention work.

Broad approaches to social exploration are part of the toolkit of qualitative researchers, whose philosophy is underpinned by curiosity rather than statistical data (Barbour 2013). Greenhalgh et al. (1998) established a foundation for their sensibilities, noting those who ponder tend to establish broad research questions. Daher et al (2017) furthered this by including concepts of experience, meaning, and social phenomena in the assembly of qualitative studies. This process works well with topics that appear, on the surface, to be incongruent with each other such as in this study. In this context, suicide surveillance statistics have remained relatively static for over a decade whilst concepts of masculine and sexual identity ebb and flow with socio-political development and influence.

The nature of this research means that theory is being built inductively by applying the narrative of each participant to existing structures, resulting in a fusion of contemporary theories of identity and suicidality with what is known socially about the university environment. Although the theories that form the basis of the topics of social exploration are well established, the work seeks to interrogate these within the subjectivist epistemology of the researcher. (Punch 2005) notes this approach predicates contribution to social learning. The results of the study are descriptive, which enables us to place them critically in the suppositions and frameworks of theoretical basis for the research.

There is no basis for deducing absolute certainty from the results, nor for the application of the meaning of the outcomes to be applied as a standardisation or generalisation to a specific population group or sociogeographic setting. In terms of identifying socially constructed meaning, this is not necessarily a problem. As Hammersley (1992) found, there are means of interrogating narratives to extract meaningful and powerful

evidence. Similarly, Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) note that while individual qualitative interviews and narratives stand as individually distinct case studies, adhering to the extant literature and acceptance that rich qualitative data is less objective than large-scale hypothesis-testing, the researcher can accept the absence of a generalisable theory. This is an appealing standpoint. Several years of teaching and research in the university setting demonstrated the diversity and individuality students use to define and empower themselves. The student narratives in this project bear witness in the same way, with the potential for meaning-building and new constructed frameworks outside of the objective requirements of a replicable, generalisable model.

The point of such research then is twofold. Rich narrative detail has transferability that will enable other researchers to adapt the design to their own methodology. While the researcher structured the outline of the interviews, these were led primarily by student participants, who shaped their narratives within their own cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Along with credibility, dependability, confirmability, reflexivity, newness, relevance, and trueness, Korstjens and Moser (2018) note transferability as one of the key quality criteria for qualitative work. Using a ‘thick description’ strategy, the researchers advocate ensuring context is clearly described so that behaviours and experiences can be meaningfully interpreted by other researchers.

Secondly, the research has representational qualities in relation to the framing and conveyance of each participant’s idiosyncratic qualities. Representation in qualitative research frequently focuses on the diverse lives, experiences and characteristics of the participants but typically small sample sizes mean that authentic representation occurs over multiple studies in the genre (Allmark 2004). In this sense, van Schalkwyk and Gertina’s (2010) work to position students when discussing their dialogic selves without a predetermined structure results in diverse representation unrestricted by more formal autobiographical methods.

3.2 Philosophical basis

“Imagine a world without homosexual men. Consider the landscape of life in America without our participation and talents. Conjure a mental image of our nation, our cities, our neighborhoods devoid of the activity of gay men and the influence of gay male culture.”

Rofes (1996:1)

The research uses a qualitative methodology, by means of individual semi-structured interviews and experiential explorations situated in the desire to understand, explore, and

agitate human constructs. Lather (1986), Guba and Lincoln (1994), Lincoln and Guba (2000), and Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) emphasise the placement of the researcher's paradigmatic disposition and beliefs as central to the chosen methodology. Daher et al. (2017) acknowledge the importance of a qualitative philosophy in research that seeks to understand the world and the social structures within it. However, they note a lack of critical reviews to help researchers understand the concepts of experience and meaning, which results in a lack of analytical depth.

This is challenged as a bias towards quantitative research, which provides objective, dependable data. Barbour (2013) states qualitative methods provide explanations of experience and misconceptions of the philosophical basis are exacerbated by the inherent limitations of the method. Ultimately, the resolution of tensions in the validity and rigour of the method are addressed by Silverman (2014:427), "*The worst thing that contemporary qualitative research can imply is that, in this postmodern age, anything goes. The trick is to produce intelligent disciplined work on the very edge of the abyss.*"

Silverman's reference to an 'abyss' has two connotations in this work. The first is in relation to the broad, unpredictable findings from the application of the methodology. The second is in relation to the abyss young men typically feel during existential development, such as that which takes place in the university environment. Lander and Nahon (2010) suggest this occurs from a natural search for a meaningful life, which is impacted by trauma that occurs during sociological development. Cheever's literary works from post-war America established a contemporary understanding of the abyss gay men feel, caught between societal expectations and erotic needs⁴⁵. Advancing the premise of the word to elucidate change, confusion or the unpredictable, Kavka (1995) extends its philosophical meaning to incorporate concepts of male hysteria, a problematic form of masculinity that results from an unwillingness to situate sexuality and philosophy in a single discourse. Contemporary media leads the popular narrative in placing concepts of masculinity in a context of agenda-setting, with the visualisation of an abyss used to discuss a crisis in identity.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ I refer to the work of Eric Rofes in the literature review. He spent years advocating for the rights of gay men and the wider community. Rofes was unapologetically pro-sex, offering a rare voice of reason during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, balancing the paradoxical abyss gay men found themselves in between unmoderated eroticism and the threat of a fatal disease.

⁴⁶ 'Masculinity', 'crisis' and 'abyss' (or an equivalency) appear frequently in the American mainstream press. Recent examples of elaborate narratives include 'How men at New Folsom Prison reckon with toxic masculinity' in the *Los Angeles Times* (2017) and, 'Men at Work: Is there a cure for toxic masculinity?' in *Harper's Magazine* (2019). Such publications provide continuous mainstream narrative framed within an engaging, if predictable, agenda discourse.

Reflecting the broad theoretical base of this paper, including Lander and Nahon's (2010) focus on psychology, Stanford University maintains a contemporaneous database of works on suicide in philosophy and other disciplines. This neatly places the topic in a multidisciplinary context, within fields of morality, psychology, psychiatry, theology and criminality in addition to philosophy. The overarching recurring theme is that of perception and how we can understand suicidality through each individual's lens of their own philosophy and values. This underpins the methods used in the project, centring the narrative of each individual in the discourse.

Mark Henick, a suicide survivor, spoke openly about his experiences and philosophical understanding at a social science conference in 2013⁴⁷. He made his presentation public and I use this content and the act of openness frequently as a discussion tool with students. His experiential insight can provide important context to the philosophical basis of suicidality; *"My perception was collapsing. It was squeezing out that instinctual hope that everybody has inside them."* Henick is polished, smartly presented and measured in tone and pace. He is also White, Canadian and gay. I have found this confuses students. They hold unconscious stereotypes about the 'types' of people who attempt suicide and Henick does not fit this mould.

Henick's narrative is particularly challenging for male students who find it difficult to assign a gradation of masculinity because of the disarmingly intimate account of his experiences. Initially, I resolved this conflict by assuming male students were intolerant of the topic and subject in the same way they typically behave when asked about their own feelings and depression (Warren 1983). I was wrong. By giving the students time and a safe space to speak, I found their initially dissociative responses were less to do with fragile masculinity and more to do with their experiences of suicide.

Across three classes of 120 students, more than a third had experience of suicide. After watching Henick's presentation, three students disclosed they had previously attempted to take their own lives. Five students said family members had taken their own lives and several more said friends had died by suicide at some time since school. My initial disconnect with understanding the group was not totally incorrect. There were no White men in the group of students, and many said they found it difficult to apply their usual empathy and sense of care to a White man experiencing suicidality because of the overbearing existence of White male privilege. This proved a challenging discussion for all of us and solidified my interest in the topic as a researcher. It also added to a growing suspicion I had held relatively quietly: White

⁴⁷ The full presentation, 'Why We Choose Suicide', took place during the September 2013 TEDx conference in Toronto and is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1QoyTmeAYw>

men are missed from health promotion interventions because privilege and obstructive masculinity are seen as barriers to communication and understanding.

Undertaking HIV prevention work in London I found infection rates were rising in young White men, but government funding was available only for men of other ethnicities. Interviewing people living with drug dependency to help prepare a new needle exchange programme highlighted how adrift White men were because structured support was mistargeted. In the gay community, I saw the more affluent young White men spiralling with drug abuse but left out of targeted health outreach education. These were unpopular observations because U.K. local authorities typically see population groups as mutually exclusive and focus on one at a time. Straight White men are seen as particularly low priority for intervention resources because they have better access to services. The overarching viewpoint, however, is that despite all outward appearances to the contrary, men are not always okay and often need help. These observations helped to build my interest in methodology that interrogates lived experiences.

Identifying similarities between past research and the theoretical and philosophical basis for this research highlighted a clear need to avoid predefined concepts of hierarchical constructs in the participant sample. That is, there was a possibility some student responses would be suppressed by their perceived social hierarchy and their perception of the questions, research objectives and their perception of me as the researcher (Catterson et al. 2017). In my keenness to avoid such situational suppression, I intentionally created a research environment of low hierarchy aligned with non-representational theory. Andrews et al. (2014) provide a roadmap for this approach in the broad spectra of education and health, noting diversity and participant openness can be realised through examining the concepts of wellbeing and affect amongst participants, both of which are significant here.

Boyd's (2020) conceptualisation of non-representational theory in social and cultural studies helps to define the situating of this work, "*In non-representational theory, the world is not static – it takes place.*" Building on Thrift's (2008) claim that the theory is built on what happens in people's lives and the social movements inherently present, Boyd's findings that the de-centredness of agency and affect in each person's understanding of their own life is to be celebrated. As affect is so difficult to define (McCormack 2008; Anderson 2014; Boyd 2020), non-representational theory enables phenomenological studies to embrace the abstract, diverse nature of studies exploring life experiences in a manner than enables us to use individual meaning to understand wider social experience and structures.

Within the broader notion of qualitative methodology, the IPA methods and non-representational theoretical basis guide the implications for the research. At the macro level, it furthers Brun's (1997) work of the early 1980s that identified exponential increases in doctoral research in qualitative philosophies that close gaps in theory to explain pressing sociological problems. Concomitant with the research themes, further implications lie in questions of identity-based life experiences and how gender and sexual expression influence these (Lefkowich 2019) as well as in engaging with people in the highest suicide risk group as an act of prevention (Sisti and Joffe 2020), in addition to exploration.

3.3 Research purposes

"Can suicide really be a choice, if it's the only choice available?"
Henick (2013)

Gay male students have a significantly higher risk of suicide ideation and attempt, resulting from factors such as structural exclusion, bullying, and problematic social cohesion. Following a series of suicides in the U.S., multiple media-driven prevention campaigns were launched to raise awareness of the acute vulnerability of gay students despite an increase in legislative equality⁴⁸.

This project considers the dynamics and role of the media in critical elements of the functionality of suicide prevention campaigns. Journalistic response to the suicide of Tyler Clementi, a Rutgers University student whose suicide⁴⁹ polarised global media to the issue of homophobia and led to the creation of digital media campaigns to support the construction of new, safe, campus social environments, and to provide a blueprint to help gay students build more supportive relationships with each other and with allies.

While the media element is important, the exploration revolves primarily around the narratives of individual students, regardless of whether or not they have existing awareness of the campaigns. This places the overall purpose within individual experiences and, although the research questions are predetermined, evidence towards a resolution for each is likely to differ widely between each individual and institution.

⁴⁸ See Ellis and Cheskiewicz (2017) for a pilot study on the overlap between suicide prevention campaigns and student perception of legislative changes designed to protect them, in the U.S. and the U.K. In this study 60% of students said that legislation such as the Defense of Marriage Act (1996) and the Equality Act (2010) had a positive impact on their lives at university or as LGBT-identified people but the study found persistent levels of bullying and harassment alongside low levels of recognition of intervention campaigns.

⁴⁹ The press and media, including mainstream platforms and smaller LGBT sources, centred Clementi as the most prominent of five teenagers who died by suicide in September 2010. All five were men who had experienced homophobic bullying prior to their death. See McKinley (2010) and Tresniowski (2010).

3.4 Research Questions

In March 2014, I presented a paper at the Tenth International Conference on Technology, Knowledge and Society; “Globalizing an American Problem: Using Technology to Create a Powerful New Virtual Community to Address Suicide Ideation and Attempt amongst Gay Male Adolescents.” The paper sought to facilitate a fertile ground for discussion based on the following questions:

- Gay-straight alliances are becoming more prolific in U.S. education institutions – how do we measure efficacy?
- Is the focus on strong leadership or allied support from heterosexual peers indicative of the emergence of a substantive new model of suicide prevention?
- Social power constructs – the media above transcends global geopolitical boundaries. Can this be used as a more powerful suicide prevention or education tool than social policy?
- Virtual environments are fluid – can gay students reconceptualise their safety and development in the physical world?

I explored such questions in a pilot research project that was the basis for this thesis. In Ellis and Cheskiewicz (2017), I discuss the acceptability of interrogating attitudes towards suicide prevention and the tensions between male identities from discussions with university students. Rather than form an inclusive part of my thesis plan, the paper was intended to generate early discussions and (re)positioning of the exploration as well as identify any significant conceptual problems. It also established the substantive, directive course for this paper.

There are core academic publications that consider the media influence on gay student suicide and exclusion, some in relation to specific events. Hatzenbuehler’s 2011 paper in *Pediatrics* found the constructed features of a ‘social environment’ are more important in identifying suicide risk than individual-level factors. This paper suggests that my relativist ontological grounding may not sufficiently capture the meaning behind the media as an element of the social environment and that a degree of critical realism should be considered.

In *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* (2002), Ott and Aoki published a frame analysis of the media coverage of the murder of a gay university student in Wyoming. This paper is of particular interest as it synthesises material from the international, mainstream media with that of writing and opinion in the gay print media. This juxtaposition is an area of focus in my

research as I am interested in the influence and dominance generated by media sources to direct public opinion and behaviour, particularly amongst gay university students.

Epistemologically, the research is situated in the constructivist paradigm; from the subjective interpretation that bullying of gay students occurs as a result of homophobic environmental constructs. Bullying is directly linked to increased suicide risk. For the media study and interpretation element of the project, the contextual areas of exploration are:

- The influence of the news media on:
 - Resilience against bullying of gay university students.
 - Negative health outcomes for gay university students (including suicidality).
 - The impact of representation of gay 'issues' in the media on university social environments – before and after the suicide of Tyler Clementi.
 - Critical differences between U.K. media and U.S. media in relation to gay student health outcomes.

It became clear that, methodologically, exploring these areas would require a large-scale, longitudinal media mapping exercise with core media publications as case studies. For example, Ott and Aoki's paper focused on *TIME* and *The Advocate*, both newsmagazines. Answering my early questions on a broader scale would need comparisons between the national press and geographically strategic media, such as local newspapers and special interest magazines. While this would explore the extent of the mediatization of gay representation, it would require significant time and resource. As such, I abandoned the plan early in the scoping stage and have stored my preliminary work for future research.

In place of a formal, large-scale media review, I collected local print media from each university I visited. In each case I selected the university's own student newspaper and purchased a copy of at least two newspapers printed in the city. Through this, I hoped to contribute to the construction of a tool of phenomenological inquiry. I sought to triangulate the meaning assigned to gay student experience by the press and the student social environment, as well as understand the construction of meaning by the media in specific cases of relevance, such as suicides. This informed discourse with students as a contextualising factor to help me understand how their own perception of news media impacted their experiences of socialization and safety.

3.5 Research design in practice

3.5.1 Introduction

Situated in a constructivist paradigm and in a relativist ontology, the research explores, phenomenologically, the perception of the impact of GSAs and the acceptability of digital media interventions from the perspective of students situated in the target social environments of such work.

Preparation for the research took place from a fluid, flexible standpoint in keeping with the interdisciplinary nature of the topics and concepts. Reflexivity is a practice inherently associated with qualitative projects (Gilgun 2008, Probst 2015) and particularly in relation to IPA, enables the researcher to create a plausible explanation for participants' accounts without being swayed by assumptions (Clancy 2013). The process requires personal insight and probing to identify internal biases and pre-existing assumptions that may influence interpretation of the results.

Reflexivity is part of the conceptual framework design and considers Holmes' (2010) view that social researchers need to emotionalize their reflexive practices to better understand the emotional lives and experiences of participants. Jackson et al (2013) furthers this discourse, applying the concept of emotional reflexivity to researching topics with potential to cause distress. They frame this within the secondary analysis stage of social research, in which researchers are required to re-process the conversations they had during the interview stage. The framework is primarily aimed at researchers working with victims of abuse, although it provides a useful strategy for handling other sensitive topics, in this case suicidality and marginalisation.

3.5.2 Terminology and identity

Fee (2000) identified a precedent for terminology in studies where sexual identity and narrative are central to the research question. Through a phenomenological study of the non-sexual friendships between men with different identities, it was found they identified readily as 'gay' or 'straight', not as 'heterosexual' or 'homosexual'. Both sets of men generally acknowledged that concepts of masculinity were commonly associated with established notions of heterosexuality and heterosexism. This relationship led them to deem the use of 'heterosexual' as too scientific to be relative to their lives. The study found 'gay' and 'straight' are more aligned with self-defined sexualities and behaviour than the clinically focused 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual'. National agencies involved in health surveillance routinely use the less scientific terms for sexual identity, including the U.K. National Health Service,

Office for National Statistics, and the CDC⁵⁰. As this study is based on concepts of sociosexual identity, non-clinical terminology is embedded, and participants are encouraged to define their sexual identity.

Participants were given a triage form⁵¹ that captured self-identifying information, including gender and sexual identity. This form was anonymised and coded to match the participant's interview recording. While pre-set demographic terms were included, students were able to choose their own terminology for gender and sexual identities. The triage form included a question about ethnic identity. This was included for contextual purposes and to identify if there were similarities between responses from students with similar identities. This question did not give multiple options and students were required to write their ethnicity.

3.5.3 Quantitative data

No new quantitative data collection was planned for the project. Existing statistical surveillance data from the CDC and The Trevor Project⁵² were gathered for context during the planning stage. This data identified areas of suicide prevalence and risk, including trends over time. The CDC defines their surveillance approach as a strategy to improve health and reduce mortality and morbidity, although evidence for this in suicide prevention was uneven. The CDC is a government agency, and The Trevor Project is a non-governmental organisation (NGO), important distinctions when considering data reliability and collection methods.

While both organisations have long track records of evidence-based data collection and publication⁵³, there are some notable considerations that must be applied to validity. In 2014, the Data and Surveillance Task Force of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention (NAASP) (Ikeda et al. 2014), reviewed the CDC's suicide surveillance monitoring alongside 27 other national data collection systems. The task force identified a number of tensions and problems with data reliability, including inconsistent classification and recording in equivocal

⁵⁰ To demonstrate context, refer to the following examples of national agencies using this terminology in public information. Each agency routinely uses the terms discussed in health promotion and analysis and in data surveillance and epidemiological contexts:

NHS: 'Health services failing gay and bisexual men' <https://www.nhs.uk/news/medical-practice/health-services-failing-gay-and-bisexual-men/>

ONS: 'Sexual identity' <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/sexuality>

CDC: 'Gay and Bisexual Men's Health' <https://www.cdc.gov/msmhealth/index.htm>

⁵¹ See Appendix.

⁵² See the quantitative data section in the results chapter.

⁵³ Suicide surveillance data archived by the CDC is available dating back to 1968.

cases, significant delays in recording due to investigative processes and a lack of capacity in the recording system to correctly record suicide as a cause of death.

Such criticism is not unusual amongst national reporting systems⁵⁴ and is reflected in typically low levels of confidence in the data amongst members of the population group (Kowitt et al 2017). However, they remain of key importance to researchers as they,

“...can be used to estimate the magnitude of a problem, identify groups at higher risk of having poorer outcomes, examine relationships between risk factors and outcomes, develop interventions and with continued monitoring assess the effectiveness of the interventions to modify the complications or outcomes”

(Soucie 2012:4).

The NAASP study recommended seven overarching improvements to suicide morbidity and mortality data surveillance. They reflect the lack of confidence amongst participants in this study and the factors Soucie notes as critically important. The authors advocate for the addition of sexual orientation and gender identity in surveillance data and to introduce the mandatory reporting of nonfatal suicide attempts to the state health department. That such data are not already collected was surprising. Tortajada (2016) notes that the traditional perception of NGOs as impartial with the purpose of improving health outcomes through influencing public policy has shifted in recent years as organisations look inwards to protect their existence. The author equates NGOs with political groups and cites numerous examples of organisations falsifying data to create a false image of effectiveness.

Tortajada’s criticisms are wide-ranging and based on evidence from reliable sources but do not specifically name The Trevor Project, only NGOs and non-profit organisations in typology, not specificity. Although The Trevor Project’s campaign work has been subject to criticism from sociological perspectives (Goltz 2012), there is no published criticism of the organisations’ data reliability, research methods or operational credibility.

Student perception of data quality based on the publishing organisation was broached during the interview and broader engagement process and closely matched the findings discussed here, reflecting some distrust of CDC data⁵⁵ and full trust of The Trevor Project

⁵⁴ The CDC uses an adapted version of the World Health Organisation International Classification of Disease (ICD) to categorise mortality, including specifics relating to suicide. While the ICD has the capacity and flexibility to accurately capture and track death by suicide, including specific causality (such as a gunshot or overdose), criticism from the NAASP centers on the failure of health authorities to accurately report this at the point of certification of death, which means the data tracked using the ICD is unreliable.

⁵⁵ See results/discussion section. This seemed to be related more to the government’s anti-LGBT policies, which had resulted in several CDC departments closing, as opposed to inherent distrust of the CDC itself.

data. In the early 2000s I did some acceptability testing of some HIV prevention media with focus groups. The findings then underscored Tortajada's work: participants distrusted the messages when they were branded with a government agency logo. When the same message was branded with the non-profit agency we worked with, their trust was unwavering.

3.5.4 Digital media

The second aspect of the project focuses on media-based intervention campaigns and the various models of protection and inclusivity they promote or represent. There is a new reliance on digital, socially driven media to construct communication pathways between gay and straight students as a tool for building positive, supportive friendships. Such resources are increasingly delivered with openly⁵⁶ straight men as 'gatekeepers'⁵⁷ and have been redistributed internationally with particular exposure in countries with problematic equal rights policies, such as Moldova and Russia.

While such countries have track records of systemic, state-sanctioned homophobia, students in the U.S. experience similar structures in some states. This includes 28 states without statutory prohibition against LGBT discrimination and only 19 states in which service providers are prohibited from discriminating against LGBT people in matters of employment, housing, and public services (Human Rights Watch 2018).

This project seeks to understand the dynamics of journalism that led to a student's suicide becoming the foundation of a new movement towards inclusion. It seeks to gauge the efficacy of media-based campaigns that utilise the guidance and leadership of straight males as effective channels of suicide prevention for gay males. National youth surveys in the U.S. have identified the benefits of GSAs in the college system as preventative techniques for gay student suicidality. They may also address the phenomenological concern regarding the construction of meaning. In this instance, the importance of relationships across definitions of sexual identity could be explored in college campuses within a timeline context – before and after the implementation of a GSA, for example.

3.5.5 Campaigns – inclusion and identity

In the planning stage of this project, three key suicide prevention media campaigns were prominent in the public domain; Straight But Not Narrow, Give a Damn! and It Gets Better.

⁵⁶ The term 'openly' refers to people who self-identify in their personal, professional and public lives. Its use here is in line with the GLAAD Media (2019) definitions, generally accepted as a benchmark but more commonly applied to people with LGBT identities.

⁵⁷ See the literature review chapter for a detailed discussion of the gatekeeper concept.

Each had two key characteristics important to the topics of the study; they featured straight men as gatekeepers at the forefront of the message and they explicitly targeted LGBT inclusion. My pilot project tested acceptability and awareness of the campaigns amongst university students in the U.S. and the U.K.⁵⁸. The results presented varying levels of both⁵⁹. Importantly, each campaign stimulated debate and discussion about the place of non-LGBT participants in prevention work targeting the community. Students were particularly interested in the role of straight White men, which helped to shape the course of this research, introducing concepts of masculinity and the paradigmatic situating of Gagnon and Simon's sexual scripts theory (Wiederman 2015; Pham 2016).

It Gets Better was replaced in the transition from the pilot study with a public service announcement (PSA), fronted by Daniel Radcliffe⁶⁰, for The Trevor Project. In the PSA, Radcliffe directs young LGBT people who are struggling with mental health issues to contact the project's suicide prevention support hotline. Table 1 summarises the three study campaigns; Table 1a adds the fourth, Sport Allies, based on discussions about sports.

Table 1 media campaigns

Campaign/ Organisation	Theme	Spokesperson/ Significance
"Straight But Not Narrow"	Understanding and acceptance of gay men by straight men	<i>Josh Hutcherson</i> Celebrity/actor, white straight male
"Give A Damn"	Impact of homophobia on LGBT individuals	Celebrity-led; multiple individuals from various demographics. Participants clearly state their sexual identity
"The Trevor Project"	Suicide prevention for LGBT young people	<i>Daniel Radcliffe</i> Celebrity/actor, White straight male.

Table 1a media campaigns

Campaign/ Organisation	Theme	Spokesperson/ Significance
"Sport Allies/ University of Warwick"	Reduce homophobia in sport	Warwick Rowers 2017 team. All White males, undisclosed sexual identity but narrative suggestive of all straight men.

⁵⁸ See Ellis & Cheskiewicz 2016.

⁵⁹ The pilot project found a 57% average awareness rates amongst the campaigns, ranging from 19% for Give A Damn! to 88% for It Gets Better. In discussion about straight gatekeepers or spokesmen, 76% of students said it was "extremely important" to have an LGBTQ-identifying spokesperson for such campaigns.

⁶⁰ The PSA was consistent with discussions considering gay-straight relationships. Radcliffe is openly straight although is renowned for his outspokenness in favour of equal rights for the LGBTQ community. Interestingly, only 7% of students said they would have preferred a gay spokesperson for The Trevor Project's PSA and no students said they would prefer a gay spokesperson for Straight But Not Narrow.

Each campaign aims to promote integration and acceptance amongst young LGBT people into a more equivocal, accepting social and educational environment. The techniques and representation differ in each, although visuals are consistently polished, high quality, and professionally produced. Their basis is highly constructivist and there has been little large-scale discussion of their efficacy or impact.

3.6 Digital media as an intervention tool

The intervention tools are situated centrally in the key aims and questions of the project and are used to understand and explore student perception of suicidality and the perceived importance of male relationships. Key areas of exploration are:

- The ability of digital media campaigns to reduce suicidality
- The strategic elements of heterosexual students as gatekeepers of inclusion
- The processes involved in encouraging gay and straight students to form co-constructed social environments
- The influence of ‘straight leadership’ (as opposed to ‘gay leadership’⁶¹). Macoukji (2014), Wilson et al. (2017) and Barrantes and Eaton (2018) identify links between sexual identity, both actual and perceived, and leadership credibility and agency.

As part of the interview process, I showed the campaign videos to participants, played back-to-back. This encouraged each individual to consider a visual analysis of the campaigns, which enabled a degree of content analysis in the context of visual sociology. The videos use a format more common to health promotion intervention, such as those that require a lifestyle-related behaviour change although the subject relates more to sociological and structural changes than to individual behaviour.

Research on visual methods in social and health research indicates messages framed in gain-making contexts are more successful than those depicting losses to health or status (Tuong et al. 2012). Each campaign includes an element of loss-framing, but the overarching message is of positivity and the gains to be made from improving relationships and social understanding. As a phenomenological tool, the video element is used to evaluate messaging

⁶¹ Precedent for the use of these terms as descriptive narrative and as concepts can be found more commonly in the corporate business world, which are periodically debated in sector press outlets. Refer to <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeswomanfiles/2014/11/20/openly-gay-leadership-sets-important-tone-at-the-top-but-theres-still-work-to-do/#72a250fd5241> and <https://www.ft.com/content/f42dbba8-48ba-11e8-8c77-f51caedcde6> for examples.

and to understand the perceptions of recipients in constructing their definition of a positive impact.

Epistemological focus must be grounded within accepted and emerging definitions of sexual identities. A critical element in phenomenological understanding of the media interventions is the role of straight males as leaders and gatekeepers, in effect as ‘protectors’ of gay students. This poses an interesting juxtaposition: the social environment identified as a cause of gay student suicidality is typically led or influenced by straight males with homophobic feelings. Yet, the digital media campaigns invert this relationship, intentionally and explicitly placing straight males as spokespeople and gatekeepers to improve the social environment for gay male students. This provides a framework from which to explore the construction of meaning for gay male students at risk of suicidality, particularly in relation to understanding the constructivism used or generated by community leaders in their selection of straight males as figureheads in suicide prevention efforts.

3.7 Researcher’s beliefs

“There’s no enunciation without positionality. You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all.”

(Hall 1990: 18)

One of the primary functions of IPA is to understand lived experience and subsequently develop structure, theory and modelling. It is accepted that the researcher is the “*primary analytical instrument*” (Fade 2004:648), which presents an inherent risk of bias. While I was acutely aware of the risk, I explained to each participant that I was the only researcher on the project and was open and transparent about my research interests. Rice and Ezzy (2000) believe social qualitative research is always political and moral and researchers should be aware of the impact of their questions and integrate them into research ethics. Sampling was intentionally biased (Bernard 2013) in that initial contact was made with faculty or student advisors of GSAs or organised LGBT and allies group, who would be more likely to speak openly about issues around sexual identity and heteronormativity.

In a philosophical discussion of whether qualitative researchers are born or made, Barbour (2013) distils the need for the researcher to acknowledge their own beliefs and identify the ways in which these may frame the research, using a reflexive stance to ensure our

assumptions are tied closely to our disciplinary background and life experiences rather than dictating the specific outcomes. This was an exercise I engaged with on a repeated, reflexive basis during the planning, interview and analysis stages of the research. My guiding principle was that while I hold various assumptions about suicidality amongst young men and key influences, the research was not about proving or disproving my own thoughts and theories. I discuss my life experiences elsewhere in this paper and acknowledge their potential influencing factors along with my qualitative public health disciplinary background. The methodological design enabled me to ensure each participant was the centre of the discussion and that my own standpoint did not direct their narrative.

3.7.1 Positionality

This research was situated firmly within the lives and acceptability of those participating and each student set the pace and tone of the interview to the extent that Hand (2003) considers the interviewer neutral. While a stance of bias-avoidance is fundamental, Wimpenny and Gass (2000) note that qualitative philosophies are generated by the theoretical stance of researchers and ethical considerations need to reflect this. This proved to be a valid consideration as many participants positioned the interview as an exchange and wanted to know about my own experiences. Past experiences working with communities of social interest highlighted the need to provide participants with a framework that encouraged a wide degree of freedom in their responses. That is, allow participants to speak their minds to their fullest extent.

Ellis and Berger (2001) explore the meaning and place of the researcher in qualitative work, particularly the question of their influence or bias during interviews. They trace the movement to acknowledge that social inquiry can never be value-free to the 1980s and posit collaborative exercises that evolve based on the dynamic of the interviewer and the participant (Briggs 1986; Kvale 1996). While this adheres more closely to the principles of IPA, it also requires consideration of the “double subjectivity” identified by Lewis and Meredith (1988), referring to the reciprocity of the relationship between the two people in the interview. This concept was interesting to ponder during the interview process as many students were keen to make sure I understood their subjective perspectives, noting they did not want to attempt to speak on behalf of their peers.

To the extent that I identify as a man and place myself in a subsection of the LGBTQ community⁶², I am aligned with a sample of the participants. My positionality with men who

⁶² I consider my position to be a ‘member’ of the gay male community and an ally of the lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender, and queer communities. A personal belief is that I cannot fully understand the life experiences of

identify as bisexual, straight, transgender or queer is more tenuous and situates me more akin to Levy's (2013) 'outsider looking in' discourse. This is on a continuum (Mercer 2007; Holmes 2020) as I can position myself to varying degrees with research participants depending on the extent of my understanding of their identity. This is further complicated in the context of Rosaldo's (1989; 1993) concept of the researcher as the researched. To the extent I am positioned with the gay men in the study, this concept applies although only to those who are White and non-religious since those markers also form my identity and positionality.

The positionality continuum enables us to point to various degrees to which we can position ourselves, or be aligned, with the experiences and beliefs of participant lives and narratives. Grace et al. (2006) extend this description for studies with LGBTQ people and notes researchers need to consider their dispositions and affiliations, particularly in relation to their heteronormative assumptions, if their place as researcher is to be legitimate. This presents a challenge as I acknowledge my existence in a heteronormative society but have not fully considered its impact on my worldview. This is not necessarily a problem. Fremlova (2018) provides a framework within which researchers can be reflexive, which is a founding principle of positionality, when they are not part of the specific identity under scrutiny. For example, they introduce the concept of 'critical whiteness' to discuss how, as a White person, they can meaningfully engage with non-White participants.

A useful framework in the research toolkit, Stewart (2017) cautions this is not a free pass to forget about the orthodoxy of closed-society paradigms so common amongst white, cis male researchers. Crucially Stewart believes this to be most normalised amongst straight male researchers, although Greene (2014) and Grimaldi et al. (2015) note that any experience of inequitable living contributes to a more reflexive positionality. Fischer (2015) discusses their own experiences of positionality in researching with marginalised people and notes expressing allyship was important in finding a position with participants with whom common ground was lacking.

Such strategies helped me substantially in building relationships with participants whose identities were different from my own, such as African American, Latino, bisexual, queer, or transgender men. Nelson (2020) explores the insider/outside tension experienced by LGBTQ researchers in establishing connections with others in different identities of the overarching community. In many ways, my feelings of allyship were more profound with the straight men I interviewed. I discuss elsewhere why this might be the case, but it was an

'LBTQ' people but I can understand their challenges, successes, and losses as a member of the broader community.

important reflection that I had to consider as I had a greater understanding of the straight male experience than I did of the bisexual, transgender, or queer male experience. There is also an ethical consideration here. In the tension between ethics and epistemology, whether theorising in this paper is one or the other (Stone 2018).

This is underpinned by Montmarquet's (1987) largely unresolved question of whether the risks of research with vulnerable groups can be justified on epistemological or ethical grounds. Shaw et al. (2019) posits that both can be achieved, and researchers can manage the tension through effective articulation and management of emotion, both their own and that of research participants. I discuss more on this in the ethics section, including the contingency plans I had in place for supporting people if they became distressed, which include consideration of Dickson-Swift et al.'s (2007) positionality on researchers becoming desensitised to upsetting topics. This approach sits in synchronicity with Nelson's (2020) acceptance of shifting identities and allegiances during qualitative fieldwork, which reflects my fluid, reflexive approach to engaging with people about their life experiences.

Ultimately, I took the stance of inquisitive researcher. I answered questions openly and let the participants steer the discussion. My positionality is an ongoing ethical and philosophical point of reflection that will continue to develop. The most important aspect of engagement was that I adopted Nelson's "euphoria of connection"; translationally that I was glad to have people interested in the topic to the extent they would speak with me.

3.7.2 Disclosures

The participant information sheet⁶³ provided some basic information about me, such as institutional affiliation. It also included details on the topic of the research. I followed Hammersley's (1992) guidance in giving enough information to keep conversations going and to address their curiosity without pre-loading the briefing with information about me that could risk misperceptions and bias. To some extent, transparency with the participant may help to alleviate unintentional directing or 'stage managing' of the discussion. When the participant feels more comfortable with the topic, they are more likely to speak openly and not feel disempowered by perceived hierarchy with the researcher (Bristow & Esper 1988; Bergen 1993; Hertz 1995). This is a less orthodox method of conducting interviews and further qualitative work suggests researchers should share stories interactively during an interview to help the participant become comfortable with being a narrator (Myerhoff 1992; Knapik 2006;

⁶³ See Appendix.

O'Sullivan 2015). This proved to be a useful strategy in instances where students were initially nervous and some unorthodox story-sharing helped them to relax and build a rapport.

A fundamental truth of qualitative interviews, the “*indissoluble interrelationship between interpreter and interpretation*” (Thomas and James 2006:782), requires us to consider the endless interpretative truths that come from such research. In the course of this project I practised active reflexivity, adhering to Elliott’s (2005) and O’Sullivan’s (2015) encouragement to consider my own place in the research and relationship with each participant. In each interview, after I introduced the project and answered any questions, I let the participant set the tone, pace and depth of discussion. I did this to enable each student to shape their own discourse and identity and to help me understand the differences and similarities in our experiences and worldviews. This was part of my reflexivity; to interpret each individual’s narrative in the way they were presenting it whilst passively facilitating the session to reduce the perception of interpretive authority that could diminish the depth of the narrative (Chase 2005; Eisenhart 2006; Genishi & Glupczynski 2006).

In practice, participants varied greatly in their level of comfort and length of time it took to build a rapport. I did not measure this but noted some commonalities. Younger students, particularly freshmen, were more nervous about the interaction and tended to approach it formally to start with, whereas more mature students or those at a more advanced stage of their studies were more curious and interactive with the process. There were also similarities in the approach of participants between universities. These are discussed in the results section but are worth noting here because they indicate the different levels of reflexivity, which I applied to help participants engage fully whilst respecting the need for them to express themselves without influence.

3.8 Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

3.8.1 Introduction

The theoretical basis of IPA originated in 1927 (Husserl 1970; Javornicky 2018) when Husserl engaged philosophically in analysing his own life experience. Suspending preconceptions taken for granted in understanding our own lived experiences, Husserl approached a new form of perception, on its own terms, and with the purpose of self-insight itself underpinned by an idiographic philosophy (Love et al. 2020). In line with later phenomenological thought, IPA researchers find the systematic examination of behaviour, perception and experience enables them to step outside of the world they take for granted (Smith et al. 2009; Wagstaff et al. 2014).

Heidegger (1962; Spinelli 1989), another twentieth century philosopher, furthered the concept of individuality of thought and being in early iterations of IPA philosophical grounding. By questioning the ontological nature of existence, Heidegger posits that because humans live within existing systems of meaning, they are unable to establish fully unique or independent relationships with the external world. This philosophical perspective suggests that humans exist within establishes systems of meaning and are therefore always ‘persons-in-context’.

This does not necessarily limit our ability to understand life experiences but does require us to consider that the significance and meaning individuals apply to experiences and circumstances are enmeshed in predetermined elements of the world. Applied to this work, such philosophical assumptions suggest students who experience suicidality are irreconciled to their environment or to other contributing factors that pose serious challenges. Considering the being of straight men vs gay men therefore suggests personal differentials are already in existence in the external world and those who challenge such inter-relationships as problematic have misinterpreted the temporal element of Heidegger’s existence (Spinelli 1989).

In more recent times, IPA has evolved into an emerging concept of health psychology, the social cognition paradigm and critical realism (Smith 1999; Fade 2004). The overall focus in both the theoretical basis and the methodological framework is on human experience and the importance of understanding each person’s life perspective (Fade 2004), insofar as the IPA framework requires reflexive techniques to be able to engage meaningfully with participant narratives (Caelli 2001; Fade 2004).

At its core, IPA philosophy is diverse and made of component parts that are not readily reconciled with each other (Wagstaff et al. 2014). Viewed from a phenomenological standpoint eschewed by philosophers, namely Husserl and Heidegger in the twentieth century, IPA can make sense of individual experience. From a cultural diversity perspective, it can analyse understanding in arenas such as marketing and shopping behaviour (Wilson 2011) and in language studies it helps to develop alternative ontological perspectives on cognition (Barnard and Burns 2012; Wagstaff et al. 2014). Such breadth of philosophical bases and methodological opportunities enables research to take place outside of accepted conventions and to work flexibly within varying preferences and abilities (Wagstaff et al. 2014).

3.8.2 IPA conceptualisation

Phillips (2014), building on Smith and Osborn's (2003) concept of using IPA analysis to identify and explore divergences and convergences in participant accounts, concluded we can focus on emerging stories and themes instead of looking for 'the truth'. This sits well within the lived experience portfolio of methods and philosophies of interpretive sociology and because it does not proclaim to represent a unified, rigid theoretical framework (Javornicky 2018), it can be applied across academic disciplines (Tuffour 2017).

IPA enables the researcher to explore how participants make sense of their own lives and experiences (Fade 2004; Smith et al. 2009; Cooper et al. 2012; Smith & Osborn 2015) from their own perspective (Conrad 1987). Smith and Osborn (2015) identify the links between IPA and hermeneutics and note the connections between this and the goal of sense-making in IPA studies. Crucially the authors recognise IPA consists of a double hermeneutic, in which the researcher aims to understand participants, who are in the process of understanding their experiences. The authors note this relies on participants' effective use of cognitive and linguistic connections to be able to process and explain their experiences, which is complicated by the need of the researcher to demonstrate subject knowledge and interpretative understanding of each participant's social and cultural experiential context.

Using common epistemological definitions and placements of reflexivity, the concept of exploring cause and effect relationships with interviewees was an integral part of the interview strategy. Fade (2004) argues that some contemporary interpretations of IPA result in a mutual exclusivity of interpretative and phenomenological concepts that cannot be combined in a way that ensures research validity. This is a key conflict of the research framework but neglects both the scope for theoretical development inherent in IPA and the broader sociological drive for theory and concept-building (Saunders et al. 2015).

The method has precedent in the use of studies relating to sexual identity (Flowers et al. 1997; Flowers & Buston 2001). IPA methodology is less concerned with objective descriptions of experience, a factor important to this study of individual perception and experience. Phenomenology is connected with the nature of lived experience, which is closely aligned with the research question and objectives. As this dissertation is also concerned with the *group* cultural experience of GSA membership, there is significant overlap with ethnographic frameworks.

The suitability of IPA in asking questions about novel, unexplored or complex social processes also means there is no requirement for research to be based on pre-existing hypotheses (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2012; Smith and Osborn 2015). Consequently, IPA is a

suitable methodological framework for the exploration of experiences and perceptions in this study underpinned by a theoretical foundation in phenomenology (Eatough & Smith 2008). Existing studies that use IPA focus on participant interpretation of life experiences such as identity during migration (Timotijevic & Breakwell 2000) and the social impact of hepatitis C infection (Dunne & Quayle 2001). While neither topic is directly related to this study, they set a commonality in research that seeks to understand reaction, perception, meaning and interpretation.

Public perception of a university student is not of someone considered to be marginalised or invisibilised simply by their education status, they are in fact usually considered to be privileged (Trowler et al. 2019). However, the Association of American Colleges and Universities have documented the growth of inequality in the higher education setting, which they found at least equal to the inequity seen in American society (Scobey 2016). Noting that the majority of undergraduate students are ‘nontraditional’⁶⁴, the association cites inequalities in gender, race and income as significant factors that impact on student experience. Sims and Barnett (2015) found such marginalising factors have a profound impact on students, effectively silencing their voices and reducing their post-graduation academic and economic achievements. This is synonymous with Gale and Mills’ (2015) finding that simply creating a place for nontraditional students is not the same as fostering space for them, noting students who are not White and/or not from wealthy families are immediately disadvantaged. Such work presents the scenario that individual identities amongst student groups lead to marginalisation within constructed social groups in the same manner as outside of the university environment.

We can reasonably consider these students, whether individually or as part of a statistical risk group, to be vulnerable simply by their membership of the age group at greatest suicide risk. A useful starting point, this is an overly simplistic categorisation, and each student has varying degrees of vulnerability and risk, based on CDC markers as well as more personal, experiential issues. IPA’s purpose, to engage in interpretative sociological discussion, means it is an appropriate tool for working with vulnerable people. Precedent exists for its use in understanding the experiences of vulnerable young children in care, young people who bully

⁶⁴ ‘Nontraditional students’ can be considered either as a definitive term or as a concept. The U.S.-based National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) considers around 73% of undergraduate students to be nontraditional according to their framework of six categories, such as students who work whilst studying for financial reasons or those without a high school diploma (NCES 2015; MacDonald 2018). Conceptually, Daiva (2017) delineates the term into unconventional nontraditional students and conventional nontraditional students, applying the term to a vast swathe of students, such as veterans, those living with a disability, people with care needs, and people living in poverty.

others, older people living with dementia and people coping with public adversity in their personal lives (Goodall 2014; Tapson 2014; Bradding 2015; Mole et al. 2019).

Such diversity of topics provides us with a rich existing methodological knowledge base and toolkit to adapt IPA to our subject area. The range of preceding studies elucidates the flexibility of the methodology and its underlying philosophical flexibilities. Love et al. (2020) adapted the methodology in work to understand the idiographic accounts of drug users, including sensitive issues such as relapse and recovery. Their work helps to further the field and provides a clearer roadmap for working with more vulnerable individuals. This context can be expanded to include other hard-to-reach individuals (Rhodes 2000). This provided some reassurance of the research design capacity to cope with a diverse range of participants, including those who presented with a relatively high degree of vulnerability. The centring of the individual in the methods, and the overriding focus on lived experience without influence from the researcher, provides a methodological safety net for challenging discussions with individuals who feel othered or left out of their broader social environment (Brocki and Wearden 2006; Love et al. 2019).

3.9 Selection processes

Qualitative research is often typified with purposive sampling without a predetermined sample size (Vasileiou et al. 2018). As the study is interested in the subjective life experiences and stories of a defined group of people, selection processes focus on accessing interested individuals in a predefined environment. While some qualitative methodology suggests sampling should take place until the project is saturated, IPA methodologists point to relatively low numbers of participants, which is reflective of the population associated with the phenomena under study (Noon 2018). Similarly, Smith et al. (2009) note samples are contextualised by the nature of the study and its aims, which reduces potential participants. Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011) suggest a lack of clarity regarding sampling in IPA and commit to the general position of 'less is more'.

Subscribing to Noon's theoretical position, the project initially aimed to include eight participants. Interest in the subject matter and unexpected snowball sampling expanded this number as more students became aware of the project. Ultimately 29 participants representing seven universities participated. This was a significant increase and reflects the precedent for fluid changes during a project set by the theoretical perspective of Larkin et al. (2018), those multiple perspectives are a valuable use of research time to triangulate viewpoints within a defined group. La Fontaine et al. (2015) further this concept by expanding

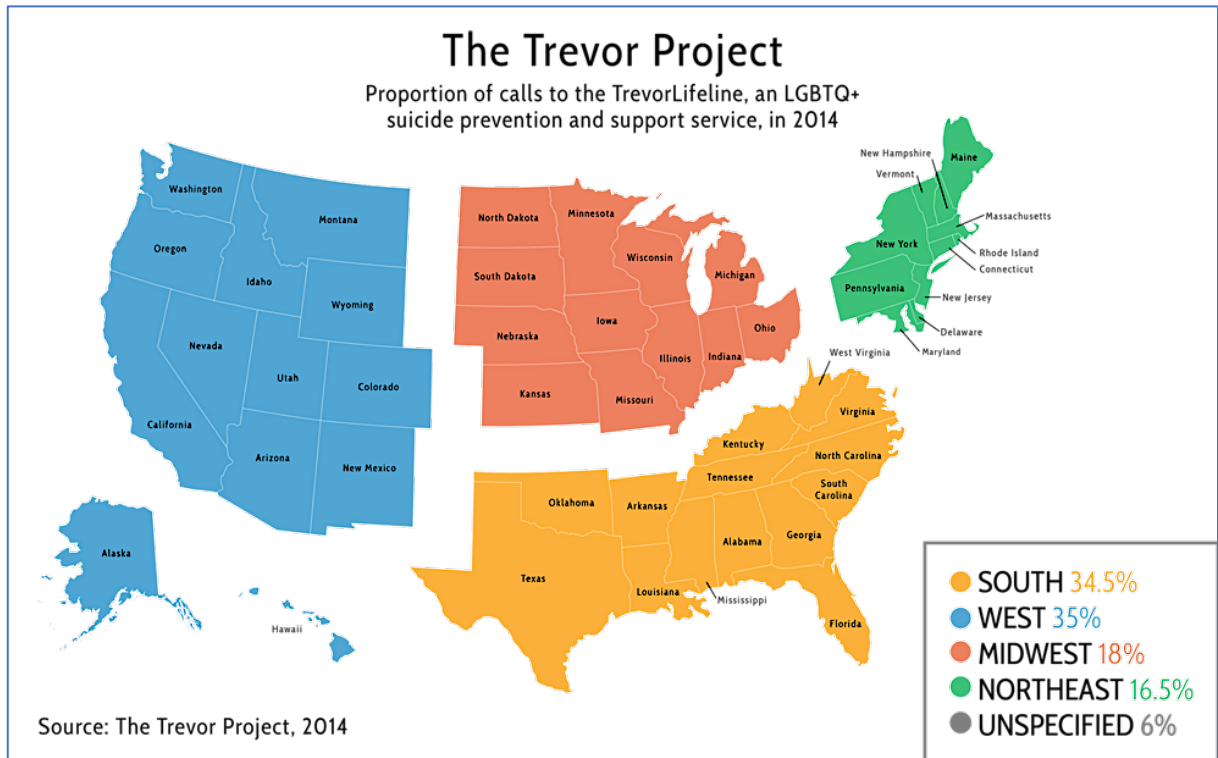
the conceptual framework used to define the target group, noting participants need not have experienced the phenomena under investigation to be a part of it. In this context, their findings advocate for the inclusion of students who have any conceptual understanding of suicide risk, negating the need to include only those with a history of suicidality or proximal experience.⁶⁵

3.10 Settings of the research – LGBTQ geographies

The Trevor Project maps the prevalence of calls to its LGBTQ suicide prevention support line and arranges these geographically in the north, Midwest, south and west. This provides a geographical structural setting for the project. Map 1 depicts the percentage of calls received in each region in 2014. This provided a geographic framework for the project and enabled regional comparison of experiences and contextualisation with social, environmental, and political factors at state level. The project is not intended to be representative of the LGBTQ, or male, experience nationally and individual narratives were more important than geographic spread to the building of a theoretical model. However, significant data exists from a variety of sources to guide us in understanding where LGBTQ people are physically situated and critical engagement with geographic trends can help to contextualise the results and outcomes.

⁶⁵ Larkin et al. (2018) propose a less constrictive approach to IPA methodology and explore the deconstruction of antecedents typically proposed by contemporary methodologists. Noting that small numbers of participants, in some cases only one or two, restrict the research's ability to explore complex issues and phenomena, the authors propose a deconstruction of the existing rigid concept in place of multiple perspectives, pluralistic ideography and research designs that can capture more voices whilst remaining epistemologically coherent.

Map 1: The Trevor Project (2014). Percentage of calls nationally to an LGBT suicide prevention emergency hotline, 2014.



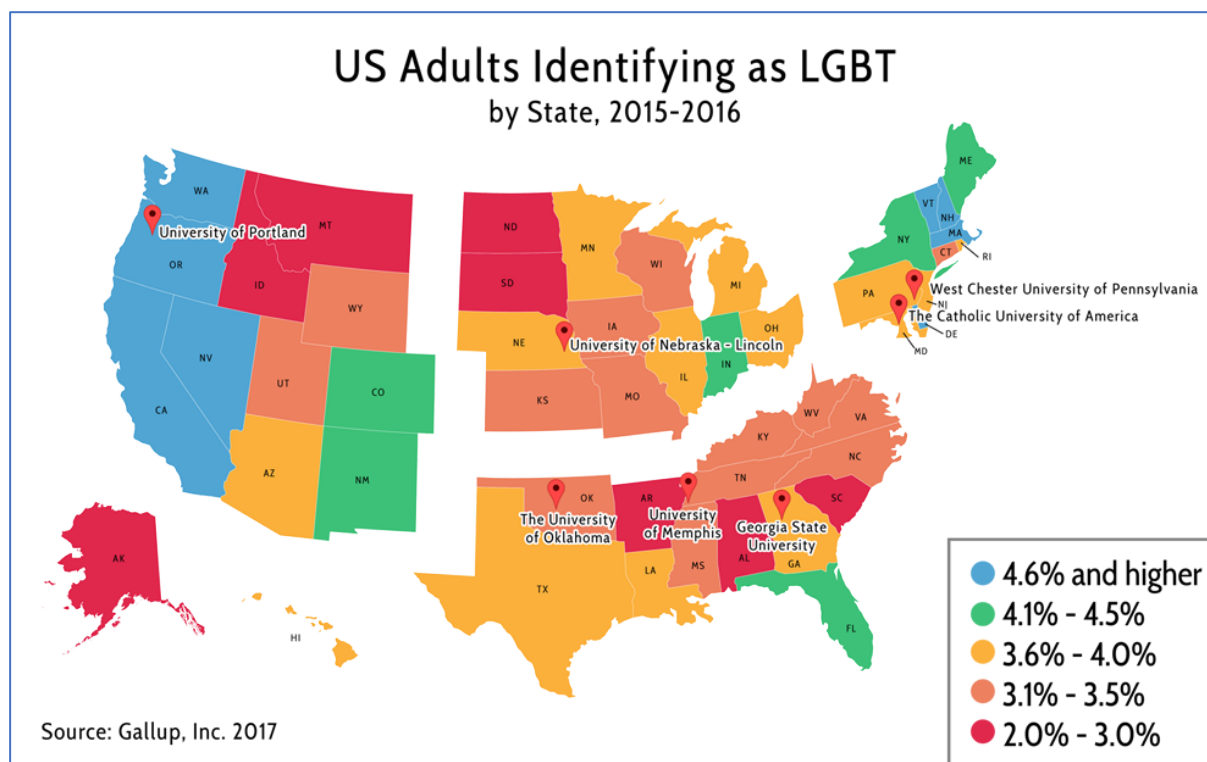
The Trevor Project’s data in Map 1 was a starting point to structure the geographic spread of the sample using existing data on LGBTQ identities in the sphere of the study topic. The map shows some degree of proportionality between the number of states in each region and the percentage of overall calls received, with both figures broadly aligned. In the absence of data to effectively and quantifiably measure LGBTQ demographics⁶⁶ and the myriad possible mental health measures, alternative data from organisations such as the Trevor Project act as a proxy for a comprehensive alternative.

The four-region organisation in the map matches that of the United States Census Bureau (2018) and is the regional structure commonly used when interpreting health or population data. This structure enables some contextual work such as with The Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law and the Movement Advancement Project estimation of LGBT people by region.

⁶⁶ Outside of government statistical surveillance and population measures, research funded at a federal level rarely references identity (Institute of Medicine (U.S.) 2011). This exacerbates the lack of data on LGBTQ geographies.

A 2017 Gallup, Inc. poll presented a rare insight into the population distribution of people who identify as LGBT. Map 2 shows these data merged with the regional boundaries on which this study was conducted and with the location of each university of participation. Each university was based in a state in which between 3.1% and 4.6% or higher of the population identified as LGBT in the Gallup poll⁶⁷.

Map 2: Gallup, Inc. (2017) Percentage of adults identifying as LGBT by state, 2015-2016. Overlayed with study regional separation and the study location of participants.



Map 3 provides additional context with LGBTQ population distribution data from the Movement Advancement Project considered with the urban/rural split of states. Three of the university sample sites are in majority urban states and four are in majority rural states. IPA methodology does not readily lend itself to an in-depth analysis of student experience in contrast with the Gallup and Movement Advancement Project data, but the availability of such material provides useful context when considering student lived experience.

⁶⁷ As this paper was in the final stages of production, Gallup issued an update to the 2017 data, noting an increase in the number of people identifying as LGBT, to 5.6% overall (Jones 2021).

Adult LGBTQ Population Distribution 2010-2015

Source: Movement Advancement Project, 2018

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it was not important for students to live in overtly or predefined gay-friendly settings, it was important that research was not taking place in settings known to exclude LGBTQ people⁶⁸.

A manual search of HEIs in these categories with an existing GSA or similar⁶⁹, such as an LGBT or inclusion alliance, resulted in over 100 potential institutions. Institutions that offered programmes of study primarily online through distance learning, religious institutions,⁷⁰ and those with no documented update to the GSA contact webpage in the previous 12 months were excluded. The faculty advisor or named lead for the remaining institutions was contacted with the project brief and asked for permission to approach students.

After the first phase of recruitment in April 2017, a second phase was carried out in October 2017 to accommodate the additional interest generated through the sampling approach. Table 2 provides an overview of the sample sites and Map 4 depicts student location overlayed with the Trevor Project's regional depiction of demands on its helpline service.

⁶⁸ There is no official list of universities that formally exclude LGBTQ students but testimonies from past students and excerpts from the speeches of university leaders contribute to narrative compilations of universities to be avoided by minority students and their allies (Fullerton 2017; Sobel 2017). These lists are updated sporadically and the most recent versions available were checked when campuses were identified to check for duplication. I also checked the most up to date versions available at the point of publication (2021) to identify any significant changes; none were found.

⁶⁹ I identify several different sources in this paper to find GSAs and equivalent institutions. However, each has limitations and the only national repository that appears to be regularly updated and somewhat complete applies only to high schools. I therefore carried out a manual search for GSAs at each university by using their own student website.

⁷⁰ Religious institutions were excluded only if admissions policies indicated they accepted students only from that faith.

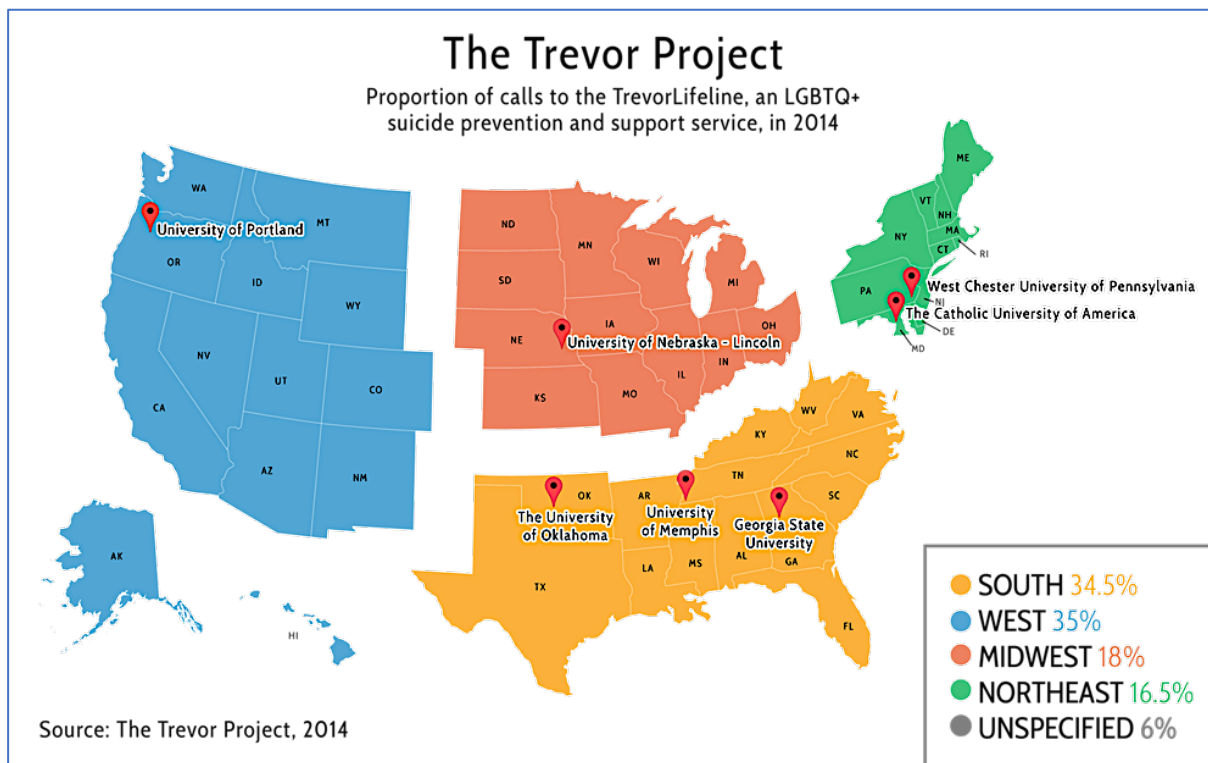
Table 2: Universities: sample locations, demographics, and campus climate

Region ¹	University city	Carnegie (Basic) classification ²	Student interviews	Campus climate ³	Student population (2017) ⁴
North	West Chester University of Pennsylvania West Chester, PA	Master's Colleges and Universities: <i>Larger programs</i>	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Center for Trans and Queer Advocacy – student affairs organisation Inclusive fraternity Women's and Gender Studies⁵ academic programme Annual LGBT events LGBTQ+ library resources 	17,306
	Catholic University of America Washington D.C.	Doctoral Universities: <i>High research activity</i>	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Long-standing rejection of LGBT groups. Students launched a petition to force the administration to consider an allies group 	6,023
South	Georgia State University Atlanta, GA	Doctoral Universities: <i>Very High research activity</i>	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity – student affairs organisation. Inclusive fraternity. Annual LGBT events. LGBTQ+ library resources. 	32,816
	University of Memphis Memphis, TN	Doctoral Universities: <i>High research activity</i>	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stonewall Tigers Gender & Sexuality Alliance – student affairs organisation. SafeZone Ally programme. Annual LGBT events. 	21,521
	University of Oklahoma Oklahoma City, OK	Doctoral Universities: <i>Very high research activity</i>	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender and Equality Center. LGBTQ+ Aspiring Ally programme. LGBTQ Student Alliance. Specialist LGBT equality organisations in journalism and science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects. 	28,527
West	University of Portland Portland, OR	Master's Colleges and Universities: <i>Medium programs</i>	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender and Sexuality Partnership – student club. Diversity Center. 	4,396
Midwest	University of Nebraska Lincoln, NE	Doctoral Universities: <i>Very high research activity</i>	14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> LGBTQA+ Center. Spectrum UNL – LGBTQA+ social club. TRANSform – trans advocacy group. Specialist LGBT equality organisations in psychology and science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects. Annual LGBT events. LGBTQ+ library resources. SafeSpace Ally programme. 	26,079

Table 2 footnotes:

- 1) Region relates to the geographic boundaries noted by the Trevor Project in 2014, see Image 1.
- 2) The Carnegie system uses seven classifications to indicate institutional profile and uses factors such as undergraduate and postgraduate course balance and residential status of students. The Basic classification was used to ensure the institution was not a highly specialised or religious school, both of which alter the student environment and relative suicide risks.
- 3) The campus climate summary was compiled after initial recruitment. I carried out a preliminary search of the resources available to students in advance of the visit and whilst on campus. Key findings are in this column for context and comparison with the student narratives. The Campus Pride Index is a publicly available benchmarking tool for students, researchers, and those planning to work in a specific area, to check the LGBTQ+ policies, standards, and protections of a specific university and campus. Although a useful tool for those wishing to seek out safe spaces, the index is opt-in and voluntary and is therefore not fully representative of the national campus environment.
- 4) Student population data were collection for contextual purposes and to identify if students reported different experiences between universities of different sizes.

Map 4: The Trevor Project (2014) regional lineation with each student site located.



Interviews were carried out on a one-to-one basis, except for one interview in Memphis. Two participants asked if they could be interviewed together, citing pre-interview nerves about their first ever participation in a research project. This resulted in rich data as both participants had different identities and backgrounds. Despite their initial nerves, both participants were engaged and enthusiastic and the interview lasted over 2 hours. Without the philosophical basis of a one-to-one interview or the minimum number of participants for a small focus group, generally described as five, carrying out interviews with between two and four participants presents key challenges (Bolderston 2012).

Wilson et al. (2016) investigated the methodological and philosophical nature of ‘paired depth interviews’, which they cited as useful when discussing the same phenomenon with two participants at the same time (Arksey 1996). I used their guidance as a framework for this interview, particularly the introduction of critical dialectical pluralism as a research philosophy and Roulston’s (2010) exploration of transformative concepts of interviewing. This triangulation ensured the narratives of both participants had equal importance and that I adopted the role of facilitator in addition to interviewer (Onwuegbuzie & Frels 2013).

The location for the interview was set by each participant. In some cases, the faculty contact provided a private meeting room for us to use but in most cases the student chose somewhere they felt comfortable. Locations included coffee shops, study rooms in libraries, parks, and hotel meeting rooms. It was important students felt relaxed and comfortable to facilitate a useful discussion and I intentionally asked them to choose somewhere with which they were happy. One institution would allow interviews only on site in a pre-booked room and with evidence I held liability insurance of \$1,000,000 for harm to students or the facility, which I arranged locally. Two interviews took place with recent graduates, both of whom wished to participate as alumni. These interviews took place outside of the university setting using the same semi-structured interview instrument, with some adaptation to their current status.

My ethics clearance covered interviews with students and the responsibilities I held in relation to their wellbeing and interaction, not practically in relation to the physical environment. However, I recognised the potential risks of interviewing in diverse settings and employed the same risk management strategies regardless of the location. For example, for students who wished to be interviewed in a public environment, I made sure I could adapt the plan to arrange emotional assistance if needed. Kuyper et al. (2012) considered the potential harm of involving young people in research about sensitive, potentially traumatic research. Their findings indicated that while young people with experience of psychological trauma required more support during and after interviews, they were more likely to report the experience as positive and cathartic.

3.10.1 Critical engagement with geography

The geography of student participation was established initially by the search strategy and subsequently by the engagement of faculty contacts and students. While each region was represented by students from at least one university, the vast range of states, cultures, and communities means climates of inclusivity for LGBTQ students are uneven. The Campus Pride Index provides a framework to critically consider the locations in which students engaged with the discussion. The index is a tool to help prospective students identify institutions and specific campuses that offer active equality and inclusion strategies for LGBTQ students. These are wide ranging and include inclusive policies, staff training and support for diverse student learning and clubs. The index is the only tool of its kind and relies on students or staff to nominate their campus, meaning it is useful to an extent but cannot provide a robust, objective critique of every HEI in the country.

There are some interesting geographic and cultural insights to be found in the index, which demand some thought on the coexistence of LGBTQ students with university administrations that are staunchly against equality and inclusion. For example, the Catholic University of America is listed on the index's 'Worst List', a list of the colleges and universities considered the most anti-LGBT nationally, spotlighting active discrimination. Yet in 2017, a group of students at the institution implemented a petition to have GSAs recognised and to try and force the administration to implement more inclusive policies. The university formally recognised an LGBT student group in the 1990s until it was banned in 2002 and the administration adopted a harsher stance to protect its Roman Catholic doctrine⁷¹.

The index presents some interesting counterpoints to reporting in other sources. For example, it awards Lehigh University in Bethlehem, PA., with the maximum five stars on its equality rating and a respectable three out of five stars on the sports equality index. However, *The Advocate* ranks the same university as 14th on its list of 20 campuses most hostile to LGBT students in the U.S. (Sobel 2017). The difference in ratings reflects the variety of ways in which relative friendliness towards LGBT students is measured. For example, on the Campus Pride Index, Lehigh University scores highly because of how it integrates LGBTQ students into all elements of policy and educational delivery. The Advocate ranks the university poorly following the failure of the administration to respond appropriately to an anti-gay hate crime in 2015⁷².

Campus Pride Sports Index is an extension of the main index that focuses on equality and inclusion in campus sports. Once interviews were secured at each university⁷³, I searched for the institute in both the Campus Pride Index and the Campus Pride Sports Index. The index considers eight LGBTQ-friendly 'report cards', ranging from policy inclusion and student life to health and campus safety and scores are based on national benchmarks. While the index offers a useful platform to compare how well institutions embed LGBTQ-inclusive policies, engagement is voluntary, which dilutes the capacity of the tool to compare standards across all sites. None of the universities I visited were represented in the Campus Pride Sports

⁷¹ Such contextual dualities in religious universities demands further exploration and would make an interesting subsequent study. One participant in this study completed their undergraduate studies at the Catholic University of America and their experiences are reflected in this paper. See Riley (2017) for more information on the site's history with LGBT students.

⁷² Local media reported a university student suffered a head injury after being violently attacked in a hate crime executed by three men who were on campus but were not known to the university. The university's Pride Centre for Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity was oddly silent on the incident although campus police identified a banner displayed on a student house with homophobic language and requested it be removed (Lehman 2015).

⁷³ The Index is 'based' at the University of Delaware. The university is scored 4.5 out of 5 on the Campus Pride Index equality rating, with the maximum score for LGBTQ student life and LGBTQ campus safety. The university does not feature on the Campus Sports Index.

Index. Two sites were listed on the Campus Pride Index: the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and West Chester University of Pennsylvania. The former was rated four stars out of five on the scored report card and the latter was rated 3.5 out of five, commendable ratings.

The two indexes provide an interesting assessment of LGBTQ campus climate but do not substitute the visceral, almost indescribable *feeling* of a campus, city, or other environment. Garvey et al. (2017) articulate this as the “warmth or chilliness” of the campus; subjective by nature and difficult to define. In each locale I tried to use this subjective framework to understand the criticality in which students live their lives, both as a man and as a gay man. I stayed in each location for between 48 hours and seven days. While this was not long enough to understand the geographic landscape for young men or the LGBTQ community, in each place I visited local businesses to eat, drink, sleep, shop, and use administration services. In this context, some passing observations can be made. Each location except for West Chester, PA., had a gay bar. In Memphis, the gay bars I visited were unfriendly and cliquey. In Lincoln, NE., the gay bar was clearly a cultural and community centre and patrons were warmly welcoming. Portland, OR. and Atlanta., GA., have large, well-established gay scenes and LGBTQ visibility was prolific and visible. These were narrow, subjective views but enabled an initial ‘feel’ for the LGBTQ climate. The differences in how students experienced life in these two cities was remarkable, reflecting the different political, religious, and cultural structures at play.

3.10.2 Mapping hate crimes

Aside from the Campus Pride Index, national surveillance data provide important context to the LGBTQ experience, population concentration, and legal and civil protections. To better understand and contextualise the narratives from each location⁷⁴, I looked for information on gay life in each place through a basic internet search. Each locale had at least one LGBTQ advocacy group, at least one politically slanted group and at least one LGBTQ rights group connected to a university⁷⁵. External to such considerations, outside of the CDC WISQARS data presented in chapter 4, measures of life in specific areas for gay men are lacking. Exploring reported hate crimes is a supplemental opportunity to understand the existential lives of young gay men, particularly in the context of longitudinal data that directly links

⁷⁴ Except for the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. While a student from this institution participated, the interview did not take place on the university campus, and I did not visit that state.

⁷⁵ On a personal comparative level, it was interesting that the online LGBTQ community search I would complete for leisure trips in Europe would highlight bars, clubs, and social events. When carried out for U.S. cities, the same search typically directed me to political and rights-based organisations.

suicide risk in this population group with hate crimes in their local area (Paul et al. 2002; Duncan & Hatzenbuehler 2014; CDC 2016).

The U.S. has two national quantitative data sources that enable scrutiny of hate crimes. The first considered in this paper is the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Uniform Crime Reporting Program (UCR), reported by the United States Department of Justice (DOJ). In 2017, the UCR attributed 15.9% of the 7175 hate crimes reported nationally to a sexual orientation bias motive⁷⁶. Interestingly, the data analysis reporting category for hate crimes at university or college campuses is not publicised in the searchable summary sections of the DOJ pages. Of the 1130 sexual orientation-attributed hate crimes reported in 2017, 8.2% (92.6) took place on school, college, or university campuses. For each state in which participants studied, I reviewed the 2017 hate crime data, presented in Table 3⁷⁷.

Table 3: Federal Bureau of Investigation (2017). Hate crime data.

Region	State	Number of hate crimes	Attributed to sexual orientation, %	Reported on a university or college campus	Reported in the city in which the study university was located, %
North	Washington, D.C.	193	30%	0	100%
	Pennsylvania	78	8%	0	0%
South	Tennessee	136	15%	0	2%
	Georgia	28	14%	0	7%
	Oklahoma	37	27%	0	0%
West	Oregon	146	16%	1	13%
Midwest	Nebraska	45	9%	0	7%

I reviewed the sexual orientation hate crime data for each state in which I carried out interviews. I also checked for disclosures by the host universities and by each city. This is an inexact methodology as students may have lived outside of the local area and may or may not have engaged with local authorities. However, in combination with the measures noted above, the approach provides an additional layer of critical context.

More thorough scrutiny of these data would compare the rates of hate crimes with state populations and data on law enforcement practices and prosecution trends. For our purposes, the data provides useful contextual thought to the critical geographical element of the study. The data do not take account of reporting bias or subjectivities in the locale, which might explain some of the more unusual elements of the data. For example, Oklahoma and

⁷⁶ This equated to 1130 hate crimes law enforcement documented as motivated by the victim's sexual orientation.

⁷⁷ Viewed with Table 2, which presents my analysis of the campus climate at each university, the overview of hate crimes presents an opportunity for future exploration.

Nebraska are Republican-controlled states and students voiced considerable experiences of homophobia and victimisation. However, reported hate crimes are substantially lower than in Oregon and Washington D.C., more liberal states. This demands further analysis, but key reporting concepts point to how hate crimes are framed socially and the strength of local advocacy groups.

McVeigh et al. (2003) suggests wide variances in hate crime data⁷⁸, despite the existence of support groups, result from political influences that act to dilute the impact of community work. They find that political entities view hate crime reports as stemming from powerful social movements and in states where political leaders do not subscribe to the pursuance of equality and protections for LGBTQ people, they work to dissuade the use of reporting mechanisms.

Comparing McVeigh et al.'s findings with more recent analysis represents a theme found during the literature accumulated for this study, that there is little change in findings, policy, or action over the past 20 years. Scheuerman et al. (2020), writing 17 years after McVeigh's team, present the same understanding and reasoning of hate crime reporting, despite the development of more accessible and responsive FBI reporting and surveillance systems. This more recent work adds that citizens who live in states with greater urbanisation, balanced political elites and more robust social activist-led community organisations are more likely to report hate crimes. This suggests the data in Table 3 may be far from reliable since it does not account for any of these factors, yet the overwhelming impact hate crimes have on victims suggest those able to act must do so, regardless of the idiosyncrasies of harvesting useful data.

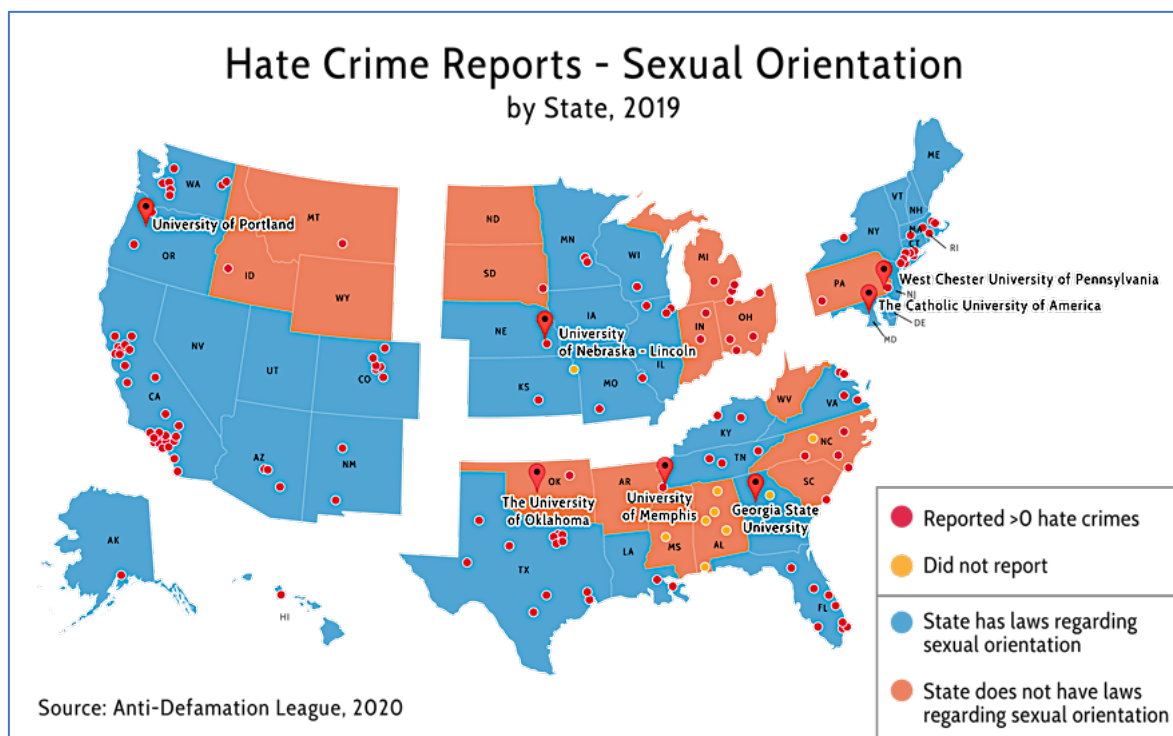
Pezzella et al. (2019) criticises the UCR data, comparing the annual average of 8,770 hate crimes reported between 2004 – 2012 with the annual average of 269,000 hate crimes reported in the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). Noting a range of issues that prevent accurate reporting of hate crimes, including misperceptions of policy empathy or willingness to assist, the writers call for greater community protections against hate crimes and victimisation; both of which are consistently reflected in the results of this study. However, while the two data sets represent large differences in hate crime frequencies, the data

⁷⁸ The FBI (2021:1) notes they provide this data for use by anyone with an interest in it, including researchers, scholars, policymakers, and the media. They do so with a formal caveat: data quality is only as reliable as the agency submitting it to the UCR, *"In a given year more than 18,000 agencies could voluntarily contribute data to the FBI, and most agencies make a good faith effort to comply with established guidelines. However, because of understaffing, underfunding, implementation of a new records management system, or a number of other reasons, some agencies cannot provide data for publication. Since crime is a sociological phenomenon influenced by a variety of factors, the FBI discourages ranking the agencies and using the data as a measurement of law enforcement effectiveness."* This provides important context to the sociological application of hate crime data used in this chapter.

collection strategies for both are very different. The FBI's UCR data relies on police documenting hate crimes whereas the NCVS relies on victims self-reporting their experiences through a national representation of sample addresses. NCVS data are tracked and presented by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) (2017; 2021) in map format, enabling scrutiny in a geographical context.

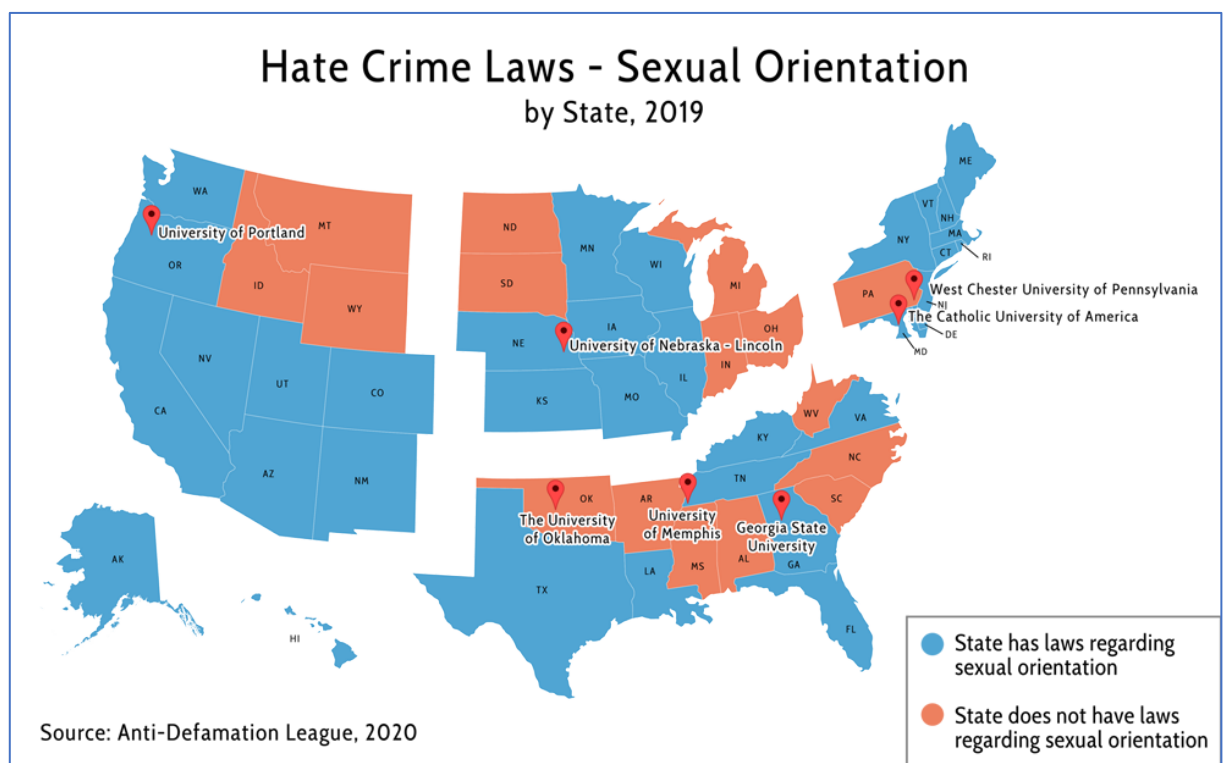
I accessed self-reported 2019 hate crime data from ADL at state level and merged this with state laws on hate crimes, the regional lineation used throughout this study and the location of each university (Map 5). Pennsylvania and Oklahoma lacked laws protecting people from hate crimes based on sexual identity yet both recorded hate crimes in the UCR system. All universities were in proximity to a town or city that reported at least one hate crime based on sexual orientation.

Map 5: Anti-Defamation League (2020). Hate Crime Reports – Sexual Orientation by State, 2019. *Overlayed with study regional separation and the study location of participants.*



Map 6 presents the study universities against the ADL's tracking of hate crime laws by state, specifically laws that protect gay people from victimisation. Two of the seven states, Pennsylvania, and Oklahoma did not have anti hate crime laws in place to protect LGBT citizens. The IPA methodology does not lend itself to broadscale comparison of student experiences and suicidality based on these data and they therefore cannot be representative of the national picture. However, there was little differentiation between student views based on their geography; most students felt hate crime laws were good to have but of little effect when not utilised meaningfully. There was also little positive recognition of students about their university's state legislative protections even when these had improved or showed signs of development.

Map 6: Anti-Defamation League (2020). Hate Crime Laws – Sexual Orientation by State, 2019. *Overlayed with study regional separation and the study location of participants.*



Hate crimes are clearly linked to increased rates of suicidality. In LGBTQ communities, simply existing in an environment in which hate crimes occur is shown to elevate suicide risk, even for those who do not directly experience a crime (Cramer et al. 2018). For young LGBTQ people, the importance and meaning of neighbourhood is

amplified and community-level interventions and protections become even more critical (Duncan & Hatzenbuehler 2014). Hate crimes are just one measure of wider environmental contributory factors to risk and some participants wished to discuss these. It is not the only measure however and it is important to consider wider geographic and neighbourhood level implications.

As I had limited time in each location, my measure of the environment for students, young men, and LGBTQ people was personal and subjective. It was based on my perceptions while exploring each town or city, meeting people in coffee shops, bars, hotels, and restaurants. I also built a picture of the environment while on each campus through a ‘sense check’ whilst walking around. I looked for markers such as advertising for LGBTQ-friendly groups, presence of the rainbow flag⁷⁹, and the presence of straight ally⁸⁰ indicators. This was ostensibly reflective of Niedt’s (2021) concept of assessing multi-modal public texts to understand the (subjective) queerness of a given space.

There are myriad indicators of a neighbourhood or community supportive of its LGBTQ residents, or at least that operates on principles of equity. The most pervasive, most commented on by queer history scholars, and the environment in which I personally feel most comfortable is the gay bar. Howe (2001) considers the gay bar and its patrons from an anthropological perspective, noting the meaning of time and place becomes mythologised in communities amongst which safe spaces are crucial to their sense of belonging and safety. Despite some outlying scholarly discussion of gay bars as misogynistic, white-centric, unequal spaces for the privileged (Brown et al. 2014), the *existence* of a neighbourhood gay bar suggests a safe space.

In this spirit I searched for gay bars in each location I visited, or commercial gay spaces as a proxy, such as coffee shops and bookstores. Every city had at least one dedicated gay bar, except for West Chester, PA, where the nearest gay bar was 16 miles away. Interestingly, the pro-inclusion, gay-friendly feelings amongst participants in this town matched the enthusiasm

⁷⁹ Bitterman (2021) considers the presence of the rainbow flag or reapplication of the motif in non-queer spaces including the potential for ‘rainbow-washing’ by organisations wishing to appear gay friendly by erroneously displaying rainbow flags without due reason. Ultimately however, the paper concludes the visibility of rainbow flags is generally considered positively by LGBTQ people and a visible indicator of equality and inclusion.

⁸⁰ Straight allies are increasingly added to the LGBTQ designation as an additional, somewhat disparate, identity group. They are crucial to the success of GSAs (Fretner and Elafros 2015) and most the straight students interviewed for this paper considered themselves to be allies. Similarities and comparisons between straight allies and gatekeepers remain somewhat unclear although a key difference is that allies tend to be vocally proactive in driving LGBTQ equal rights whereas the gatekeeper role is more subtle, embedded, and situational. Exploration of the divide would make an interesting addendum to this paper, particularly to find out how those who have adopted the respective roles define them using Levy’s (2013) conceptualisation of researcher positionality as a framework.

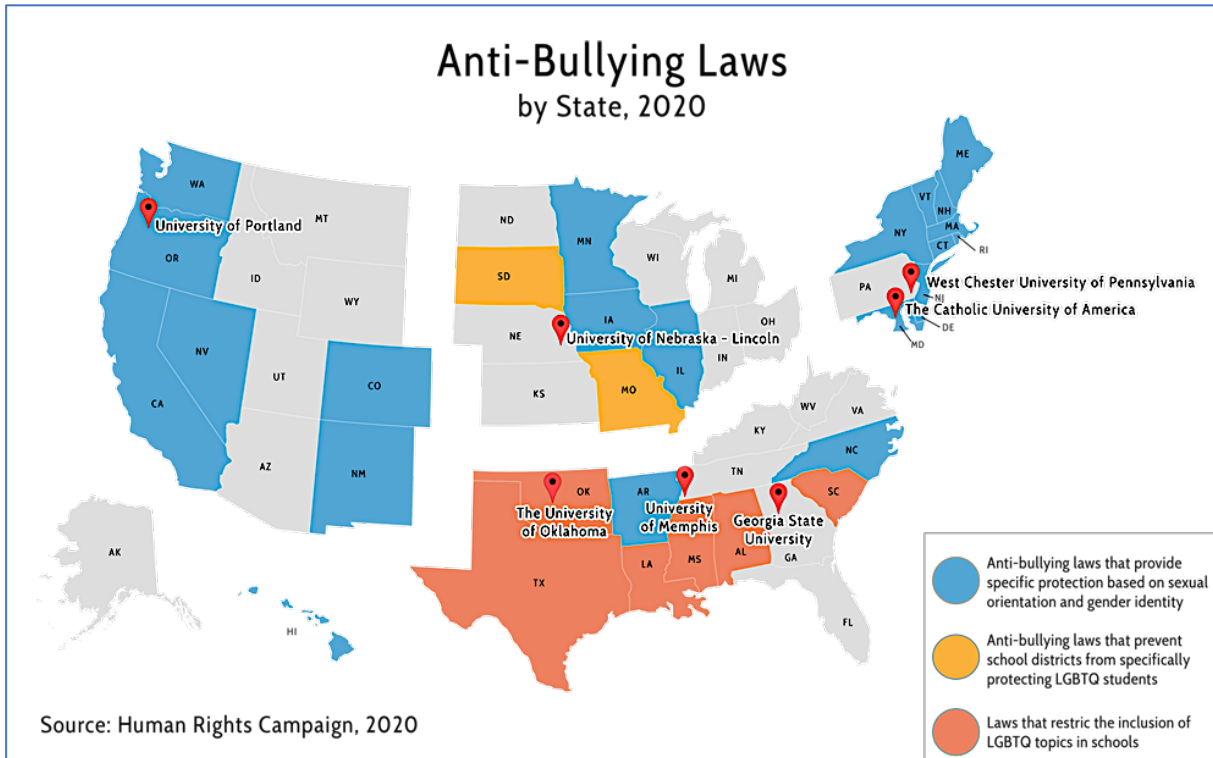
of those in much larger cities with several gay bars and other gay-centric or overtly inclusive businesses. Despite the lack of gay-exclusive businesses and services, this finding supports Ghaziani's (2021) narrative that 'gayborhoods' are essential for LGBTQ people to thrive. The definition, optics, and concept of neighbourhood structure differs between people and communities but should be centred on how LGBTQ people feel about living there, why they choose to stay there, and the equity of civil protections afforded them.

None of the locations I visited were visibly hostile to the LGBTQ community, although cultural tensions were clear in Atlanta, GA., where a student white supremacy group was advertising a march. Using Ghaziani's (2021) analytic gaze, this felt uncomfortable and wrong. I asked each participant in this study about the posters. They conceded the advertising group was a regular presence and the university administration discouraged them but did not stop them. Of note, participants felt the presence of such divisive groups was offensive but not insurmountable and viewed their existence as a part of the socioenvironmental ecosystem. In Memphis I noticed a poster for a straight pride⁸¹ event although I interpreted this as reflecting the burgeoning movement of social confusion rather than as an act of overt hostility. University environments in Lincoln, NE., and Portland, OR., were demonstrably welcoming to LGBTQ students. Posters advertising events, both social and academic, were prolific and it appeared equality messaging was well embedded.

To add depth to my subjective assessment of each location and the overview of hate crime data, I explored legislative measures relevant to factors linked to suicide risk. While this took place after student interviews, data are from the same political environment and can be used to understand socio-environmental context. The HRC tracks anti-bullying laws at state level and includes laws that actively prevent certain institutions, including education centres, from protecting LGBTQ people. Bullying in educational settings is demonstrably connected to increased suicide risk and understanding legal protections, or lack thereof, can help to understand the spheres in which young gay residents exist. Map 7 shows the HRC tracking data from 2020 in the regional lineation of the study. Only Oregon and Washington, D.C. specific anti-bullying protections for people based on sexual identity. Oklahoma had laws restricting LGBTQ curricula items and the remaining states in the study had no anti-bullying laws.

⁸¹ The concept of 'straight pride' was a growing antithetical social phenomenon during this project. It was coined by social majorities who felt affronted by gay pride parades and events because they felt they detracted from their social standing and reduced their privilege (Blumenfeld 2020). The only major city to (reluctantly) allow planning for such an event was Boston, MA. in August 2019. The event led to over 30 arrests for violence and was condemned by the city's mayor, national and international news media, and by straight men who felt the concept was offensive and politicised (Ellis 2019).

Map 7: Human Rights Campaign (2020). Anti-Bullying Laws by State, 2020.
Overlaid with study regional separation and the study location of participants.



HRC also tracks education non-discrimination laws in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity in schools. In 2020 only New Mexico and Wisconsin had such non-discrimination laws and there are no laws in the U.S. that prevent discrimination against LGBTQ people specifically in universities.⁸² This is an astonishing gap in vital protections for students at risk of harm and, combined with the variances in anti-bullying laws, highlights the broad lack of substantive, structured protections in place for vulnerable students. There was little expectation amongst students in this study that these factors would improve in the future.

⁸² Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits discrimination based on sex in education. The Trump administration refused to agree that LGBTQ students were included in this based on their identity. A proposed amendment, the Student Non-Discrimination Act would explicitly bar discrimination based on LGBTQ identity in high schools, paving the way for more embedded equality as students progress to higher education. Attempts to pass this amendment was overturned by Republican senators in 2011 and 2018 (Rudolph 2011; Bailey 2018).

3.11 Contexts of place

Institutions were selected for an initial approach based on the criteria previously outlined. Once I had established contact and secured dates to be on site, I spent time researching the institution itself. I included factors such as whether the university was a commuter school in a city centre or based in a more rural area where students lived on campus. I also looked into the provision for LGBT students on site, such as whether formal social or support groups were present and whether there was a theme in the local press about known suicide-related incidents. This was a contextual activity and helped to prepare for the climate or reception I might encounter on site.

Before I began the recorded interview, I spoke with my contact to find out if there were any ongoing incidents or problems of which I should be aware. I also asked how they felt about the general climate for LGBT students and the university environment and support systems for male students. This helped me to establish a more holistic picture of the local culture and to prepare to adapt the interview process to be probing and sensitive. Adapting Pelzang and Hutchinson's (2018) concepts of cultural sensitivity in qualitative research to a U.S.-centric environment, I approached each task with the level of structured sensitivity deployed by Dempsey et al (2016) in research that has the potential to cause anxiety.

This was important for two key reasons. The first was that suicide is regularly covered in the U.S. press, but this is rarely sensitive or clearly contextualised outside of the broadsheet media. As such I had no way of knowing in advance of each interview what the participant's previous exposure to the topic were. Secondly, my interviews were scheduled with people in the highest demographic group of risk for suicide ideation and attempt, which mean it was possible I would encounter participants who had suicidal thoughts or attempts themselves, or who knew friends or peers who had. This was a prudent strategy as most participants had experiences of supporting someone in their university with suicide ideation.

On one day of interviews, my faculty contact spoke with me to explain a fraternity brother had taken his own life overnight. My interview participants were close friends of his and some of them lived in the same fraternity house. With this in mind their faculty advisor had given them the option to cancel their interview with me, in the interest of sensitivity and the university's duty of care. However, each student maintained their decision to participate, expressing the importance of research in the field to contribute to a future reduction in suicides. I established an urgent referral pathway with the faculty senior team, which meant I could secure rapid help for students if they felt emotional as a result of the combination of the research topic and the death of their friend. This framed the significance of structuring

methodological planning on local context with the ability to adapt quickly to unexpected circumstances.

3.12 Participants

Participants identified as a man or a transgender man and disclosed their sexual identity. From an ethical point of view in the American cultural landscape, using “man” instead of “male” reflects the placement of the study in the broader discussions of masculinity, identity and intersectionality. Tseng (2008) places “man” on a gender-defining spectrum influenced by complex psychosocial self-perceptions. This means identifying as a man or a woman incorporates broader meanings and concepts of self-identities. As the aims are concerned with experience and individuality in the university environment, it was important to be led by students in their identities and not to predetermine restrictive criteria. I hoped this would result in richly diverse narratives. Many of the discussions were based on the self, led by students who were actively exploring their identity, some for the first time and some as part of long-term discovery.

There were no age restrictions on participants, although the minimum age by default for entry to an undergraduate degree programme is 18 years old. Students could be enrolled on any programme of study and at any stage of study. One participant was a recent graduate and interviewed as alumni, the result of snowball sampling and unexpected interest in the project⁸³.

While institutions with GSAs or LGBT student groups were targeted for recruitment, students did not need to be a member of such groups. During site visits, the majority of members of GSAs or LGBT groups were women or transgender women and it was unusual to speak with men who had joined the groups. Students provided some personal and demographic information about themselves, summarised in Table 4.

⁸³ In addition, I interviewed a student I met during the course of a conference. He had recently graduated from the Catholic University of America, which would have been excluded from selection because of its overt anti-LGBT inclusion policy. However, the student had continued his studies to Masters level and was keen to add his voice. The interview focused on his undergraduate experiences.

Table 4: Student demographics

Student demographics

Student	Gender identity	Sexual identity	Grew up in	Place of study	Stage of study	Ethnicity	Age
M1	Man	Gay	Urban	Away from home	3 PhD	Indian	29
M2	Man	Gay	Military	Away from home	4 UG	White	23
M3	Transgender	Gay	Rural	Away from home	2 UG	Caucasian	19
M4	Man	Gay	Urban	Away from home	2 PhD	White	26
M5	Man	Straight	Military	Home city	4 UG	Caucasian	23
M6	Man	Gay	Urban	Away from home	3 UG	Mexican	21
M7	Man	Gay/Bi/Queer	Urban	Home city	2 PhD	Caucasian	36
M8	Man	Straight	Urban	Away from home	1 PhD	Latin American	29
M9	Man	Gay	Urban	Away from home	3 PG	White	26
S1	Man	Gay	Rural	Away from home	3 UG	White	19
S2	Man	gay	Rural	Away from home	1 UG	White	25
S3	Man	Bi	Rural	Away from home	2 UG	White	19
S4	Man	Queer	Rural	Away from home	2 UG	Caucasian	19
S5	Man	Gay	Urban	Away from home	2 UG	White, American	20
S6	Man	Bi	Rural	Away from home	2 UG	Caucasian/White	19
S1A	Transgender	Queer	Suburban	Away from home	1 UG	Hispanic	19
S2A	Man	Gay	Urban and rural	Away from home	3 UG	Black/Filipino	21
S3A	Man	Gay	Urban	Home city	4 UG	White	21
S4A	Man	Gay	Urban	Home city	1 PG	White	37
S5A	Man	Gay	Urban	Away from home	1 UG	African American	18
N1	Man	Straight	Rural	Away from home	4 UG	Caucasian	21
N2	Man	Straight	Suburban	Away from home	3 UG	White	21
N3	Trans man	Straight	Urban	Away from home	1 UG	White	21
N4	Trans man	Straight	Rural	Away from home	3 UG	White - Italian/Irish	20
N5	Man	Gay	Rural	Away from home	3 UG	Puerto Rican	21
W1	Man	Gay	Rural	Away from home	2 UG	White	19
W2	Man	Gay	Urban	Away from home	1 UG	White	19
S2A	Man	Straight	Rural	Away from home	Alumni	White	23
N1A	Man	Gay	Urban	Away from home	2 PG	Arab	36

3.13 The Student Voices

“You better make them care about what you think. It had better be quirky or perverse or thoughtful enough so that you hit some chord in them. Otherwise, it doesn’t work.”

Nora Ephron (2016: 1).

Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and two hours, with over 40 hours of audio recorded. Students ranged in age from 19 to 37 and represented a range of stages of study, from first year freshman to third year doctoral studies and an alumnus. The alumnus had graduated six months prior to the interview and provided a very useful retrospective on his time at university. Most students had grown up in either a rural or urban environment and two students were members of military families and had moved around a lot. We discussed this during the interviews and both students felt moving between countries and cities had been beneficial to their perspectives on life. One man was straight and one was gay, which provided an interesting dialectic between their points of view.

While I provided pre-determined check boxes for students to identify their gender and sexual identities, some individuals preferred to define this in their own way. Of the four

students who identified as transgender, two defined themselves as trans men and two defined themselves as transgender. Students described their sexual identity with confidence and discussed their understanding of fluidity and sexual preferences outside of prescribed definitions. Bisexual and straight men in particular approached sexual identity with an open mind in relation to experiential development and experimentation. One student described their sexual identity as gay/bi/queer and said this reflected their feelings on partnerships, love, sex, and lifestyle. Students had a range of ethnic identities, which added richly to their narratives. Students from outside of the U.S. were able to provide a unique perspective on heteronormativity and suicidality by comparing different cultural norms.

Using Bernard's (2013) silent, echo, 'uh-huh' and 'tell me more' probing techniques, participants were encouraged to build on their own narratives without interference or leading questions. During research projects for organisations funded to support highly vulnerable individuals, I developed a relaxed approach to interviews that placed the participant at the centre of the discussion. This work helped me prepare for unpredictable reactions and unexpected responses; developed during interviews such as one memorable instance where someone struggling with recovery from heroin addiction told me they were doing their level best to spread their hepatitis infection to 'friends' against whom they had an axe to grind. I didn't expect any such disclosures for this project, but previous experiences meant I was well prepared.

3.14 Process of selection

I approached participant recruitment with universities that fit the selection criteria broadly, in keeping with the IPA methodology and semi-structured interview method. It was a requirement of the initial screening process that universities had an LGBT society or club, a GSA or equivalent. There were no restrictions on age, race, ethnicity, stage of study or subject speciality. This reflected the broad suicide surveillance data, which indicated elevated risks in the typical student age group. As U.S. data is unreliable in relation to individual identities, the decision to include men of any identity aimed to capture more detail about who experienced the greatest risk and whether participants had insight into this, in the context of their social standing and identity.

I initially contacted the named faculty advisor or student lead for the LGBT group or equivalent, using the contact information publicly available on the institution's website. I

approached them with an introductory e-mail outlining my project,⁸⁴ including confirmation of my ethics clearance and some background information on the project. I explained why I had chosen to approach them and how I had obtained their contact information. As a preliminary exploration of their interest, I included an evidence base, explained the project succinctly, and asked them to reply if they were interested in learning more.

This approach meant I initially contacted institutions within the screening criteria without any knowledge of their students or internal structures, which enabled me to aim towards a broad sample range in terms of student background. When I received a response, I worked with each individual to provide more information and establish a recruitment plan for participants. Each individual approached this differently and I adapted to their preferences whilst ensuring I remained within the limitations of the ethics clearance.

This process was labour-intensive and required significant resource to plan logistics that required substantial amounts of travel. Video-link interviews could have saved time and cost and some contacts said they would be prepared to arrange such sessions. However, a key focus of the study was to build connections with participants, to be able to engage with their narratives as they emerged. While video-based interviews become commonplace in the professional world, Meyrowitz's (1994) adaptation of medium theorists and Short et al.'s (1976) social presence theory indicate participants feel greater subjectivity in their thought processes and experience reduced ability to verbalise a narrative when being interviewed remotely. While there is substantive counter-research to promote the use of remote video-based interviews, this primarily relates to geography and the reduced onus on the researcher to travel. The subject matter and criticality of working reflexively with participants within my own research philosophy were overriding factors in electing to engage with participants on a face-to-face basis.

Changes to planned attendance whilst travelling and late replies from target universities resulted in a recruitment strategy that meant some participants were recruited opportunistically at short notice with the help of a local gatekeeper. In Lincoln, NE., I attended the campus with only one confirmed interview. I met with my initial contact to present the project in more detail and with the benefits of in-person communication. This led to a total of 14 interviews and two separate visits, a significant contribution and invaluable new relationship.

⁸⁴ See Appendix for example documents

3.15 Ethics, informed consent, and permissions

The differences between ethics in professional fieldwork and ethics in academic inquiry are marked and remembering the differences between the two has often been a personal challenge. My first foray into public health was in the field of sexual health working with outreach teams in London, approaching sex workers to offer healthcare and counselling. Later, I would help with HIV testing in gay clubs and saunas at 3am on Saturdays, surrounded by people heavily under the influence of alcohol and recreational drugs. Only when entering the world of academia sometime later did I consider the ethical ramifications of my previous work.

Endorsed by the health authority, there was little need to consider ethics; the envisioned good from our work was enough for the organisation. This early work emboldened me to engage with hard-to-reach communities and for my undergraduate degree I interviewed young men at high risk of HIV infection about the intricacies of their sex lives. Ethics is crucially important, and I understand its purpose and value, but my research philosophy is that it should guide us with some sense of propriety and safety to the people with whom we need to engage without acting as a barrier. Without this, we would never have access to people who can answer tough or uncomfortable questions.

There are four components to the ethics structure of this paper; pre-interview planning, methodological tools, data management, and data analysis. Hand (2003) considers the tension between the necessity for interviewer neutrality in some aspects of participant engagement (Kvale 1996; 2007) with the need for subjective reflexivity if participant narratives are to be fully explored (Northway 2000). Wimpenny and Gass (2000) add to qualitative philosophies that interview questions come from the researcher themselves; therefore, inherently placed within the pre-existing concepts of the individual. Oakley (1981) and Porter (1993) see this as far from an ethical problem. Indeed, they present this as an opportunity for interviews to leave behind sanitised objectivity and instead fully, socially engage with the research process. Rabionet (2011) finds all such considerations to be interchangeable whilst maintaining effective ethical processes and ultimately worthwhile when we discover the interesting stories people have to tell.

The IPA methodology front-and-centres participant narratives, guiding ethical boundaries that foster the elicitation of personal narratives. Levy (2013) suggests muting discourse and concern about researcher identity in lieu of greater focus on the voice of the participant, a strategy of importance when engaging with vulnerable people. A potential risk of this approach is retraumatisation (Shaw et al. 2019; Nelson 2020) caused by discussions. I

acknowledge such risk in my approach to ethical practice although participants were not selected on the basis of previous suicide attempts, reducing the likelihood of negative impact. An extended risk existed that most LGBTQ students will have experienced negative life events or prejudice based on their identity⁸⁵ and so discussions on such topics needed to be sensitively facilitated.

Ethically, gay men are a high-risk population group with which to engage. The assumption that gay men who are comfortable with their sexual identity and who live in urban environments have better mental health and lower emotional risk (Aldrich 2004) is not borne out by research that suggests long-standing trauma is too embedded to be so simply dismissed (Pachankis et al. 2015). This does not diminish the wider traumas university students in general face and instead directs researchers to prepare, ethically, for the broadest possible impact of interviewing students.

There is research abound on using gatekeepers⁸⁶ in education research and this typically focuses on the ethical questions of involving children or young people in research they may not fully understand and to which they cannot meaningfully consent. While I initially contacted faculty for access to students, their role was not to act as gatekeepers in the sense of Homan (2002)⁸⁷, in that participants would be a minimum of 18 years old, and I was led by each contact in terms of their level of involvement. I was led by the paradigmatic analysis of McAreavey and Das (2013) in the management of gatekeeper ethics, meaning I followed the ethical guidance of each campus and based my approach on their interpretation of my research. Pragmatically, McAreavey and Das depict the most appropriate solution to challenges of access and engagement as that which the gatekeeper and researcher come to themselves in the context of ethics as a fluid, ongoing concern rather than a singular bureaucratic act.

An interesting consideration for this study is that the straight male participants were, in many cases, acting as gatekeepers without realising it. None of the straight participants demonstrated any form of homophobia or condoned anti-LGBTQ sentiment and they

⁸⁵ This is a critical assumption made throughout this paper, that almost without exception LGBTQ people have experienced prejudice, marginalisation, victimisation, and other limiting factors at some point in their lives.

⁸⁶ There is an important distinction to be made here between the gatekeepers referred to in the campaign analysis and literature review, and the initial point of contact in each university. Gatekeepers such as Daniel Radcliffe and Josh Hutcherson speak on behalf of community members; research/faculty gatekeepers facilitated conversation and access rather than speaking on behalf of participants.

⁸⁷ Homan (2002) provides a central overview of this topic and considers the role of teachers or faculty as gatekeepers to students. Such research also seeks to reconcile the benefits obtained from socio-educational research through student observations with the potential risks of engaging students without full disclosure of the purposes.

uniformly, sometimes compassionately, understood they could provide a protective factor in the lives of their gay peers. This suggested the gatekeeper role can be assumed and positional rather than deliberate and constructed and may not always need extensive ethical consideration.

Each faculty member varied greatly in this sense, which provided some interesting context for the culture and atmosphere of the campus. In the same measure of how grateful I was that so many faculty welcomed me, there were some that reacted with hostility. A university in Chicago, IL., responded to my initial e-mail with a warning that they were “too successful in social research” to need to rely on unfunded, unsolicited approaches to further any conceivable research field. One faculty member at a university in Shreveport, LA., gladly passed on my e-mail to the student lead of their LGBTQ group, which was not received well. A redacted copy of their response in the Appendix is included to demonstrate the breadth of response to the research topic and methods. In deference to good ethical practice, I did not try to persuade either respondent.

Within the philosophical basis of ethics application, I was also guided and bound by my home university’s requirements. I obtained ethics clearance in advance of any contact with universities or participants and was approved in September 2016 for a period of two years.⁸⁸ This was initially a complex exercise as I did not know which university sites I would be able to attend and only that I would be travelling around the U.S. by myself. I am an experienced traveller and this was an attractive prospect but needed to be safely and structurally included in a formal ethics process. This was achieved with the help of my supervisors, with whom I maintained contact with regards to travel plans and the multiple changes that took place during the interview process.

I included a copy of my ethics clearance when I contacted each university, aware that ethical standards between the U.K. and U.S. have as many differences as they do commonalities. Each university that participated accepted my project ethics clearance without the need to achieve their local equivalent, Institutional Review Board (IRB) clearance. They were also satisfied with the process for informed consent. I secured this once, at the beginning of the interview process as a tool to assure participants they would not be deceived or coerced. In qualitative research, some researchers are dubious about the value of informed consent: “*Consent is a propositional attitude, so intransitive: complete, wholly specific consent is an illusion*” (O’Neill 2003:1).

⁸⁸ See Appendix.

Essentially, consent is in place to give participants control over how much information they offer and Gourna et al. (2016) suggest researchers employ a ‘hint of paternalism’ that allows them to make ongoing decisions and judgements of ethics and further consent during the interview process. This approach worked well and where students offered personal information, I checked they were happy to share it. Data was stored and saved in line with the university data management plan and participants were aware their data and transcripts would be held securely on systems outside of the U.S.

3.16 Access, entry, right to withdraw

The particulars of access to each university were determined by the main contact at each. Each university had its own rules relating to this; some required me to take out private insurance to be on site while others were less rigid as long as I met students only on university property. Others had no restrictions at all. This information was established at an early stage and I ensured plans to meet students met local requirements and my ethics clearance. The participant information sheet provided participants with instructions on how they could withdraw consent at any time, including before, during and after their interview. I explained this verbally at the beginning of each interview as part of the informed consent discussion and participants agreed to this before signing the agreement and before recording started.

3.17 Confidentiality and data use

‘Consent’ in the study meant that students gave their permission to our interview being digitally recorded and to additional notes being taken of my observations during the discussion. Participants also consented to the transcription of their narrative and storage of this in Newcastle University data systems as well as use of their interviews in any future publications. Consent was given on the requirement that transcriptions and analyses would be redacted and stored on encrypted university systems for 10 years before being destroyed.

A confidentiality agreement was established with each participant as part of the consent and ethics agreement. This included the requirement for the content of our discussion to remain confidential between us. This was particularly important given the subject matter and personal nature of the discussions that might take place.

3.18 Data collection

Perceptions of sociosexual life on campus as well as the lived experiences and oral narratives of male students were explored using the objectives as an exploratory framework.

Phenomenological accounts of suicide ideation awareness were collected through discussions that explored individual lived experience (Reid et al 2005) through a simple two-stage process, each with an evidence base.

Each student was shown a promotional video clip from the three digital media campaigns in Table 1. This strategy was used to demonstrate the application of straight male gatekeepers and to gauge how students felt about the concept. During the initial interviews, it became clear participants associated definitions of masculinity with sports and the perceptual influence this has on heteronormative assumptions of masculinity. Following the interviews at the first university in West Chester, PA., a fourth video clip was added to each interview to provide a benchmark for discussion on the intersection between suicide risk, inclusivity, and male relationships in the context of sports (Table 1a).

Like the suicide prevention campaigns in Table 1, the sports example from the Sport Allies campaign utilises straight male spokesmen to catalyse discussions of inclusion. Ruddock (2001) notes one of the fundamental tenets of IPA is that the researcher has the ability to change theories or assumptions during data collection, which was appropriate in this case as the interviews were designed to be participant-led.

Short observational frameworks (SOFs) are common practice in health research where the activity, communication, and interaction of those being observed are of importance (Brooker et al 2011; Tong et al 2012; University of Bradford 2016). Such frameworks establish the quality of the observation itself alongside the critically unbiased observational process of the researcher as more important than the size of the group. During the planning stage of the interviews, group observations were changed to individual observations. This was in response to the availability of students and was considered appropriate in light of recent student suicides at two universities. To ensure participant reactions were captured with the revised approach, an adapted SOF was used during each one-to-one interview. This avoided interference in participant response and enabled summary observations of non-verbal responses to be captured. The AudioNote software used to record interviews included a digital notepad that I used to write observational notes while the participant was watching the videos and to record any final points in the informal discussion after recording stopped.

Aspers (2009) and Skea (2016) consider the relationship between observations and interviews in phenomenological research, particularly the premise that the two methods should be used in parallel to obtain a rich understanding of lived experience. Both perspectives were used during data collection as participants varied widely between their openness, narrative experiences and response to the videos. The decision to expand on the

video selection was taken following a notable trend amongst students to discuss sports as part of their discourse.

One-to-one interviews took place using a semi-structured script⁸⁹ that sought to elicit feelings, opinion, and experiential narrative of campus experience in the context of masculinity frameworks and sexual identity. The interview script was based on Smith and Osborn's (2015) IPA methodology, in which a semi-structured approach is the exemplar instrument for the method. Guide questions adhered to the four dominant sexual scripts of young men (Mutchler 2000) and sexual scripts theory (Laumann & Gagnon 1995; Wiederman 2015; Pham 2016), which enabled experiential qualitative data to be obtained within a framework of sexual identity. Sexual activity was not a key component of the interviews, but related theories have significant relevance to discussions of male identity and masculinity, particularly in challenges of heteronormativity (Masters et al. 2013). Wiederman (2015) established the continued relevance of sexual scripts theory by identifying its adaptability and reflexivity in studies that are interested in self-expression and self-identity. This is of particular use when discussing the scripts men use to explore, define, and explain their sexual identity.

Wilson and Plummer's (2014) concept of masculinity provides a framework from which to consider the context of individual narratives and provided useful insight into initial themes as well as the approach and disposition of students. Participants were asked to discuss if they felt relationships between gay and straight men were changing and what their experiences of this had been. Along with the ecological context of their university, this enabled the establishment of a benchmark perspective to identify if the presence of a GSA influences perception and development of male relationships and facilitation of suicide prevention.

Flowers et al (1997) established an early framework of interview questions for studies that use IPA focused on health, particularly psychological health and behaviour. This study was of key importance in establishing a theoretical understanding of sexual decision-making specific to the phenomena of unprotected sex during the post-1980s AIDS crisis. The researchers used questions designed to, *"...highlight the utility of incorporating the perspective of gay men in addressing a theoretical understanding of sexual decision making"* (Flowers et al. 1997:73). The strategy provides interesting consideration of the use of IPA in exploring health experiences not routinely included in contemporary health and psychological models. For example, the researchers note a conspicuous lack of theory on gay men's sexual health despite the use of

⁸⁹ See Appendix

prevailing health models with the ability to address inherent risks. Similarly, stand-alone research on young men and suicide, university students and suicide and GSAs is readily available and often reflected in health models without a consistent theoretical underpinning.

One to one interviews sit comfortably as a method in my own experience as a researcher, academic, and health professional and I use the technique routinely outside of the formal research sphere. The subject matter of relationships between men of different identities and their relationships to suicide risk, mental health and life experiences are of personal and professional interest and are topics I explore casually in my daily life. I am curious about the representation of gay men in mainstream media, particularly in the news media and advertising, and drive open discussions in my social circle about issues relating to men's health and sexual identity. This topic has personal and sentimental history in my own development, which is a factor in my continued research interest. The bullying and victimisation of gay men by straight men, often stereotypically situated in the sports sphere, is something I am acutely aware of but something with which I have limited personal experience⁹⁰.

My personal relationships with straight men have been defined differently and included an interest in understanding each other's experiences. Such relationships have happened spontaneously or organically, often occurring through work situations or contact in social or commercial areas. Such encounters contribute to a thread of anecdotes that are unquantifiable scientifically but provide important social context to the study and to my theoretical positioning. My experiences also contextualise the concept of straight allies in the study, referring to men who identify as straight but align themselves along ethical or equal rights lines with friends and colleagues from the LGBT community.

The "fear of homosexuality" that often manifests itself in the psyche of straight men (Garfield 2016) when they enter into friendships or non-sexual intimacy with gay men, is often a topic of discussion in my social groups. While a feature of our mutual interest, it rarely dominates conversations or feelings and has not directed the trajectory of a relationship. LaSala (2015) identifies mutual benefits for men of different identities engaged in such relationships. For straight men, these offer new insights into masculinity and diversity and for gay men they offer the opportunity to heal the deeply ingrained homophobia most of us experience growing up. While more research demonstrates the benefits of fewer socially

⁹⁰ Violence against gay men is well documented and data are available from a wide range of sources, including police hate crime information and empirical studies. LaSala (2015) traces a U.S.-centric social shift in the conceptualisation of straight-gay male relationships to the mid 20th century, with the advent of a new gay identity, which enabled the deconstruction of identity constructs away from the purely sexual, to enable the exploration of new sociobehavioural links.

constructed restrictions between men of different sexual identities, Dean (2013) found the social reduction in overt homophobia displayed by straight men to be disingenuous and reflective only of changes in social standards and not indicative of reductions in homophobia. These are matters of interest to me, my friends, and associates, and the methodology for the study reflects such personal context.

The IPA methodology is a good match for research aligned with my theoretical standing and areas of interest. Alase (2017) notes researchers with close links and interests in the topic of exploration use IPA to achieve a ‘quadruple advantage’ that incorporates a fast bonding between interviewer and participant based on a process of deliberation of their lived experience. The purposive sampling approach means participants are likely to have an interest in the subject matter, particularly as they have considered a briefing sheet detailing the nature of the project prior to committing. While this adds to the evidential justification for IPA methodology, it also provides a pathway for coherently incorporating personal interest and experience into the qualitative field.

3.19 Methodological flexibility – sports and politics

A key feature of an IPA-grounded, semi-structured interview method is the fluidity it provides the researcher in being able to respond quickly to trends as interviews accumulate. At the centre of the philosophical basis of IPA is the need to extract, interpret and understand individuals’ experiences from their own definitions and narratives. Halldorsdottir (2000:47) espouses phenomenology as both a philosophy and a methodology that focuses on the worlds of participants and how they create and share meaning as a profoundly important element of living. This interpretation incorporates the standard component parts of IPA methodology in the cyclical process of, “...*silence, reflection, identification, selection, interpretation, construction, and verification.*”

Within interpretivist and constructivist phenomenology, a commitment to understanding the world view of the participating individual is critically important. Consequently, flexibility to deconstruct the methodological tools in an IPA study is essential and enables the researcher to maintain an inquisitive stance. Such an approach also enables the research to be experiential in nature, a key element required for useful analysis (Pringle et al 2011). Encapsulating this fluid structure is the need for the researcher to be reflexive throughout, to enable them to make sense of the information given (Clancy 2013).

I incorporated these concepts into the research design, specifically adopting a semi-structured interview protocol with a restrained approach to prompts. This enabled me to

practice reflexivity during each interview, identifying themes and trends as I built a greater number of participants. The first five participants openly discussed their feelings about the media campaigns and the importance they placed on sexual identity in their social lives and in the context of suicide prevention. This was expected based on the structured elements of the interview and the planned discussion of the media campaigns. Each student included politics and sports in their discourse as central influencing factors in how they felt about the importance of their identity at university, as men and as factors in suicide prevention strategies.

“I think that queer people shy away from sports like they scare us. And not because we don’t like to play sports. I think some of us would be really good. I think I would have been a great athlete.”

Student in the North region, gay man.

This presented an opportunity to expand the use of audio-visual media tools as part of the research process, to elicit feelings and experiential discourse based on each individual’s perceptions of the place of sport in their identity and more broadly in the place of suicide prevention and mental health.

The field of LGBT people in sports is an emerging, distinct area of research in its own right and I did not have the resources or capacity to duplicate the project plan to consider sports as a separate concept. Instead, I used an inclusion campaign, based in the U.K., aimed at increasing the number of gay men in sports as a strategy to reduce homophobia and the barriers gay men commonly face in accessing team sports. While the campaign is U.K.-centric, the visual presentation and principles closely match the campaigns I was already using, namely the positioning of straight White men as gatekeepers to reducing stigma and improving cohesion.

The premise of the campaign uses Warwick University student rowers in the work of Sport Allies, a non-profit organisation aimed at fostering better relationships between men of different sexual identities to reduce homophobia and encourage more gay and bisexual men to participate in team sports. In each subsequent interview, I showed participants a recent campaign video of the Warwick Rowers and used this as a basis to discuss the place of sports through the lenses of identity and suicide prevention. In all but two subsequent interviews (n=24) students discussed sports unprompted. In both cases I introduced the concept by showing the video and prompting for their thoughts and viewpoint.

I did not apply the same fluid methodological principles to attempt to incorporate politics into discussions of identity and suicide prevention. While the question of LGBT

visibility in politics is an established field of research, it did not substantively apply to the aims of this project and there are no programmes in place to try and further involve such groups in political activity. Similarly, politics is not an area associated with efforts to reduce suicide risk or improve mental health. Button (2016) builds on the sphere of social justice within which to contextualise a political responsibility for suicide prevention, noting the failure of political bodies to accept responsibility for the links between the pressures of human existence and suicide risk. The author therefore achieved a balance between the methodological needs of the IPA tool by supporting participants to discuss their political insights without incorporating additional audio-visual material or intentionally prompting further narrative.

3.20 Sampling

Smith et al. (1999), in the progression of IPA development, identified two key methods based on sample size. The theory-building approach is typically used to explore outcomes from reflexive discussions that combine both phenomenology and interpretative analysis in order to build or evolve explanations (Smith et al. 1999; Fade 2014) within a phenomenon. The overarching phenomenon under study is the changing manifestations of heteronormativity and the theory-building approach provides a precedent for a relatively large sample size for IPA. This enables explanations to be drawn from the interviews that contribute to understanding of meaning that can address the aim and outcomes. IPA promotes the combination, or ‘borrowing’ (Smith et al 1999), of components from other theories during the analysis process as a strategy to develop explanations and models. For example, borrowing concepts from grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998) enable analysis to focus on themes within phenomena and concepts generated by the research (Fade 2014).

IPA researchers typically use a small sample (Smith & Osborn 2015), which do not easily accommodate random selection. Instead a purposive sample is more appropriate as it enables the researcher to target a group of people with similar characteristics or social demographics. One of the hallmarks of IPA is that the interviewer has the freedom to modify the dialogue and narrative trajectory based on the participant’s initial responses (Smith & Osborn 2015).

With this in mind, the interview schedule was based on Smith and Osborn’s (2015) example of a four-stage sequential process that is concerned with broad topics, topic sequences and probes and prompts. This approach enabled a “gentle nudge” (Smith & Osborn 2015:61) from the interviewer to illicit as much unprompted experiential data as possible. The interview schedule therefore acted as a prompting device should the initial

introduction be insufficient to start a flow with the participant. In line with established IPA methodology, the interview schedule was not followed precisely or in a strict sequence. Instead topics and questions were introduced based on the level of interaction and depth of each response.

Initially incongruent with IPA's core tenet of a small, single-digit sample size, achieving a larger participant base met Korstjens and Moser's (2018) improved confirmability. This concept links larger samples sizes with rigour and reliability of outcomes, ensuring participant narratives are not a figment of the researcher's imagination. Vannini (2015:1) ruminates at length about the purpose of representational research and its relationship to researchers, *"There are days when the inevitable realization that our work is utterly inadequate at apprehending the intricate textures of the lifeworld subjects of our analysis and description strikes with its mightiest force. These are the days when researchers wish they had chosen an art career devoid of the pretensions of accurate representation."*

I felt Vannin's profundity was recognisable at many points during this research, but I also refused to believe the work would be fully non-representational. Doel's (2010) claim that representation is achieved through repetition, *"perpetual return of the same,"* is similarly discouraging and similarly dissociative from this research. While the methodology is repetitive, the broad cultural, sociological, and deeply personal narratives of the participants mean there is significant tension between the representational and *non*-representational aspects of this work. Ingold (2015) addresses this tension and suggests the 'verbal intercourse' of qualitative research is more about greeting and understanding than about representation or interrogation. Similarly, Lorimer (2005) notes such work must be seen as greater than its human and textual components, perhaps as part of a new intellectual landscape (Thrift 2008).

Transcribing took place at a semantic level, with a total of 29 interviews transcribed. Fade (2004) and Smith and Osborn (2015) identified thematic analysis as a useful tool for qualitative data obtained through IPA methods, particularly as it contributes significantly to Smith et al.'s (1999) theory-building approach. In this approach, the research findings seek to generate new theories and understanding as opposed to a case-study approach that seeks only to describe the life experience. Additional opportunistic, ethnographic discussions took place with people who asked to discuss the research and their input is discussed later in this paper.

3.21 Conceptual framework⁹¹

Nardi (1999), Plummer (1999), Anderson (2005; 2011; 2014), McCormack (2012), Dean (2013), and Ward (2015) contribute to a growing body of research literature focused on the relationships between straight and gay men. This includes relationships in the university environment and those formed through sports. Anderson (2005) asserts that university-based sports teams, and the hierarchical and social constructs within, are challenging American masculinity, particularly when it manifests itself as a cult.

That young gay men modify and write their social (sexual) scripts (Mutchler 2000) in response to positive experiences and perception of risk, adds credibility to Flowers et al.'s (1997) use of IPA to explore highly individualised meaning in their beliefs and behaviours, including when external factors problematise these (Fee 2000; Mutchler 2000). Although not always explicitly conceptualised as IPA, researchers in masculinities and male gay-straight relationships frequently associate various facets of the theoretical basis in their methods. Mutchler (2000) describes using two-hour interviews to develop a rapport with young male participants and therefore more easily elicit truthful responses based on personal experiences. Dean (2014) uses a similar approach with a range of men to discuss their experiences with hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Dean's transcripts note qualitatively rich, highly individualised narratives of men's perceptions and reflective interactions with the complexities of social constructs and norms. Such personal accounts are of critical importance to the study presented here and the significant established and growing literature base of existing studies indicates IPA is a valuable methodological concept.

Pleck et al.'s (1993) masculine ideology, developed in parallel with Connell's theory of masculinity (1995), remain of significant importance and provided critical insight into the concepts of multiple masculinities and marginalised masculinities. Despite the enduring significance of traditional definitions, more recent theories and developments suggest highly diversified identities, discovered through case studies, are of crucial importance in understanding individual experience (Wedgwood 2009). Laumann's concepts of indirect relationships and imagined communities (Friedland 2001) provide further depth to the core framework of this study.

Multiple research paradigms have elements in the topic. Mertens' (2010) value-driven conceptualisation of a transformative emancipatory paradigm builds on the goal of hearing marginalised groups and making them subjects not objects of research. Increasing rates of

⁹¹ Intersectionality is discussed in the literature review chapter

suicide amongst young people suggest an underlying marginalisation even if this is not realised and should be considered. The nature of IPA is based on subjectivity and constructed reality, which lends itself to an interpretative paradigm. The socially constructed reality shaped by cultural and social influences in a critical paradigm are of similar importance. Narratives and discussion led by participants expand on this multiplicity.

3.22 Research integrity

The issue of truth in qualitative research is a pervasive one, essentially placing the burden on the researcher to identify intentionally misleading or untruthful responses from respondents. While quantitative methods include exhaustive cross-checking to ensure the reliability of data, qualitative researchers have few similar options. This should not detract from the importance and credibility of phenomenological research and is an appealing phenomenon in its own right.

Thomas (1929) put to rest such concerns and appealed to the researcher to always keep participants at the centre of a project with the belief, “...*if people believe things to be real then they are real in their consequences.*” Eight decades after Thomas’ publication, researchers maintain the same principles (Alase 2017). This does not relieve us of our duties to carry out research that is principled and reflective of methodological standards, but it does suggest we should be less concerned with the intentions of each participant’s narrative and instead focus on their experiences as they understand them. In my work and research as an academic with health care undergraduates, I spoke often of the theoretical bases of suicide, framing this in typically Western understanding.

Despite the availability of robust datasets and surveillance, I found students typically held profound misconceptions about suicide risk, warning signs and intervention strategies. This was partly driven by the tabloid media’s inaccurate reporting but more crucially it reflected the complexity of lay perspectives and the extent of their misconceptions. I kept this in mind during each interview as a tactic to employ Barbour’s strategy of dispelling illogical or factually incorrect assumptions in relation to objective data. I carried this out by asking what each individual knew about suicide risk and rates in and whether they knew the source of their information. While this study is not concerned with the furthering of extant surveillance data, it places student identity and narrative front and centre and an overview of their understanding of current trends provides interesting context.

Reliability, validity, and generalisability are concepts more often associated with quantitative research (Noble & Smith 2015) and relate to the reliability and dependability of

the data. The typical lack of scientific rigour in qualitative design is a frequent target of criticism (Sandelowski 1986; Rolfe 2006; Carcary 2009), exacerbated by the subjectivity in the lens through which such research is judged. We must therefore seek validity through other means and measures, such as the integrity of the methods used to collect and analyse the data. This cannot match the depth of similar efforts used to measure quality in quantitative research and Lincoln and Guba (1985) offer criteria for assessing rigour through an alternative methodology where statistical measures are inapplicable.

The authors propose a qualitative alternative for each of the three concepts; validity, reliability, and generalisability, which will contribute to credibility for the work. ‘Truth value’ is the proposed alternative to validity and acknowledges the existence of multiple realities, the potential influence from the researcher’s own experiences and eschews the need to promote participants’ narratives accurately. This reflects closely the needs of this project to engage with students and understand their experiences and Lincoln and Guba’s interpretation of truth reflects Barbour’s standpoint, particularly in social research.

In lieu of reliability, this model places consistency⁹² and neutrality as central to a position of trustworthiness. A logistical progression from truth value, the concepts demand researcher transparency and an acknowledgement of the placement of the researcher’s philosophy during prolonged and complex engagements with participants. Thirdly, applicability replaces generalisability, which considers if the findings can be applied to other contexts. Even as a proposal, this concept is highly subjective because of the implications of context and the interpretation of the results from the researcher’s philosophical lens.

Clarkson (1989) regards clear context as critically important, grounded in the holistic basis of an interpretivist approach, as a starting point from which to both justify the study and consider how it can be placed in other environments. Walsham (2006:325) adds to this discussion of context by maintaining, “...*the researcher’s best tool for analysis is his or her own mind, supplemented by the minds of others when work and ideas are exposed to them.*” This presents an interesting paradigm: the need to apply the research to similar contexts elsewhere whilst embracing the uniqueness of each individual qualitative project. The methods used could be replicated in any higher education institution.

⁹² Part of the concept of ‘consistency’ in this method relates to the work processes of the researcher, including the need to maintain contemporaneous records of decisions made during the research. Carcary (2009) describes this as an audit trail, which they note can be used to identify elements of the research that could be replicated elsewhere. Much of the logistics of this project happened at short notice whilst travelling and so the audit trail relates to logistics of engagement with university staff and securing access to participants, details of which are included in the appendix.

The semi-structured interview approach along with the digital media element are not unique in their structure to any of the institutions involved and I designed the approach to be adaptable to circumstance, time, and resource. This does not mean the research could be carried out in the same way in an infinite number of institutions with the same results. Numerous factors would influence the findings in any given setting and as I am focused on individual experiences, it is unlikely large numbers of participants would describe exactly the same feelings and opinions. Instead, the principles of the approach could be replicated, provided future researchers acknowledge the implications of individuality, explained by Ticehurst and Veal (2000) as the need to recognise how broad interrelationships in any given situation influence the interview and the outcome.

Snape and Spencer (2003) further agitate this with the view that it is not possible to objectively interpret or analyse the social world and that meanings derived by the researcher are an intrinsic function or consequence of the specific circumstances and relationships at play. Overall this presents a complex setting that is conducive to the research at hand, to explore subjective meaning, experience and relationships. Recognising the importance of each individuals interpretation is a hallmark of this methodology, with a distinctiveness from the generalisability of quantitative methodology. Bannister (2005) situates this as a positive, noting the critical importance in social research of promoting the meaning of everyone's experience. This is particularly important in this research as I explore the individual, often personal, experiences of students in the context of subject matter that can be challenging.

The purpose of this research is not to produce generalisable results that represent any of the complex concepts explored. Instead, I am concerned with understanding the lived experiences and social constructs and realities of the participant students. The methodology focuses on obtaining rich narrative data from individuals rather than gathering large datasets that could be applied to suicide prevention policy or studies on male identity. Instead, it places an understanding of the viewpoints of a small number of individuals as a privilege for those exposed to the outcomes (Pringle et al. 2011). While this limits our ability to apply the findings more broadly to students at risk of suicide ideation, proponents of the method note that results can influence and contribute to theory regardless of the low generalizability (Pringle et al. 2011). This is one of a number of interesting agitations in the methodological constructs of phenomenology. Whilst there are implications and opportunities for policymakers, Hammersley (2003) notes that simply producing knowledge about a situation or phenomenon will not improve it.

To further complicate concepts of post-research impact, Carey (2010) notes that the same issues with interpretation experienced by the researcher applies in the same way to policymakers and readers, essentially finding they interpret outcomes with such variance that they are likely to make conclusions entirely contrary to the researcher's own analysis. Donmoyer (2012) suggests involving policymakers as a strategy to address this problem, something not often done in phenomenological studies. While I did not intend to include policymakers in the research study, a considerable number of academics, professionals, and laypeople engaged me in discussions about the subject matter.⁹³ None of these individuals disclosed themselves as policymakers but they were all critical of current U.S. policy in relation to suicide prevention and risk. Four individuals were university faculty members and had influence on policy in their institutions. The flexibility of my research design enabled me to include the voices of these individuals and they are reflected in the results section.

While they do not contribute to a more robust sense of generalisability, the discussions provide an important reinforcement of the feelings and perceptions of the student participants; namely that national suicide prevention policy is failing and that the interventions discussed, while useful talking points, have not contributed substantively to a reduction in risk. During the unplanned discussions, people expressed approval of this research and said they felt it was vital such work continues and is expanded. I asked about the conflict inherent in this type of research, in that it seeks rich individual narratives but cannot be easily applied to large-scale university populations. Their responses demonstrated an understanding of this and follows the philosophy of Torrance (2008), that researchers should not expect qualitative research to succinctly answer questions or drive the policy-making process, more that such work is an opportunity to explore and agitate.

Questions of generalisability are closely linked with the quality of representation in the methodology. In this sense I worked with Spiegelberg and Nijhoff's (1981; 1982) early findings on phenomenological process, which promotes an open mind in exploration in its broadest sense. Explicating this as a move away from being led by expectations or preconception, the researchers recommended a move away from simplicity and concluded, *"The genuine will to know calls for spirit of generosity rather than for that of economy, for reverence rather than for subjugation, for the lens rather than for the hammer"* (1982:680). The 'genuine will to know' is what drives my research interests and underpins my qualitative preferences. In the philosophy of Spiegelberg (1965; 1984) and Anderson (1991), the phenomena under scrutiny is of greater

⁹³ See the discussion chapter.

importance than methodology and considerations of the applicability of outcome measures to predictable milieux. As Pringle et al. (2011) find, this is a considerable positive result as it builds greater understanding, if not on a massive scale.

3.23 Data: quality, management, and analysis

“‘Truth’ is relative”
Barbour (2013)

Data was collected, stored, and saved in line with the Newcastle University Research Data Management Policy and Code of Good Practice. The plan is in place to protect Newcastle University from information security incidents that might have an adverse impact on its operations, reputation, and professional standing and to protect research participants from data breaches that could compromise anonymity. This aims to prevent data loss, including research and teaching data, and criminality.

I recorded interviews using AudioNote software, which encrypted data in real time to password protected local solid state and Cloud storage. After each interview, I transferred the recording to an external solid-state storage device, which was also password protected. Each participant was given a briefing sheet about how their data would be handled.⁹⁴ Participants were aware their interview recording would be transcribed and anonymised to U.K. Data Archive standards. Data was also copied to the Newcastle University research data storage system, as part of a plan to backup data and protect it from loss or corruption.

There were two circumstances in which interviews were not recorded using AudioNote. The first was for ad-hoc unplanned interviews or less formal discussions. These took place as a result of interest in the project and when people wanted the opportunity to speak about their experiences. In such circumstances, I obtained permission to make hand-written notes during our discussion, which was fully anonymised. One interview took place by phone. A Lutheran minister found out about my research from a contact at one of the universities I visited and asked if I would interview them. It was not possible to meet in person and so I carried out the interview using an app that digitally recorded and securely stored the conversation for download to the secure storage device. This was then transcribed along with the in-person recordings.

Interviews were transcribed using a combination of professional, paid transcription services and manual transcription. Professional transcription services had data security and

⁹⁴ See Appendix.

management processes in place that met the requirements of this project and students were given the opportunity to opt-out of their recordings being shared with such agencies at the end of each interview. No participant had a preference for how their interview was transcribed.

Atlas.ti was used to carry out data analysis. This is a software programme designed for qualitative research that incorporates all elements of a project, including the audio-visual data, interviews, transcripts, and the literature review. The software enables an analysis of the transcripts that incorporates the totality of the project, which more readily lends itself to identifying and linking themes and findings. I used a narrative analysis approach with open coding, followed by selective coding, to identify themes and narrative strands. Interviews ranged in duration from 45 minutes to two hours and there were over 40 hours of material to analyse. The findings are discussed later in this paper but there were two initial key findings that resonated unmistakably, both of which surprised me.

The first was the disconnect between straight men and gay men in relation to their social coexistence and relationships with each other. Straight men wanted closer relationships with gay peers, some of which extended to healing for the abuse they knew young gay men had suffered at the hands of other straight men. Gay men were much less likely to see this as a positive element, either for their own university life or in the broader context of suicide prevention. The second was the polarising nature of masculinity. While the theoretical basis for the study included elements of this, notably through sexual scripts theory, I had not considered the all-encompassing nature of this, which was threaded through almost every experience or story students discussed. More importantly, every individual saw masculinity on a scale of toxicity, from challenging to problematic.

Students ranged from minor disapproval of masculine concepts to a complex crisis of identity fuelled by the increasing propensity for masculinity to be framed in damaging toxicity. While many students talked about being comfortable with their sexual identities, not one saw masculinity as a positive element of this. Of crucial importance was that most students described articulate links between masculinity and suicidality. As an early finding this was alarming, because it meant the focus on LGBT suicide prevention, including the work to improve relationships between gay men and straight men, had missed a topic of greater substance to those at risk: the overarching place of masculinity. This helped to shape the more focused element of coding and analysis and I added masculinity as a contextual lens from which to understand each narrative.

3.24 Research purpose – reprise

Interviews were transcribed either manually using open-access software or through a professional transcription service that provided encrypted, secure data management processes. The transcripts were then stored in a project management space in Atlas.ti, which enabled me to code using an inductive, open process.

An important consideration of using qualitative analysis software is to maintain oversight and control of the data, rather than allowing the features of the software to dictate the analysis (Woolf & Silver 2017). Specifically, in relation to the Atlas.ti software, Friese (2014) cautions against using too many codes or excessively complex code families and links. Labelling such activity as leading to a “blind alley”, Friese (2014, 2017) notes that simpler coding enables clearer interpretation of narratives more useful when working with life stories.

Using the guide questions, I clustered the codes into concepts, which resulted in a master list of ten themes:⁹⁵

- Alliance; ally
- Diversity
- Gatekeeper
- Heteronormativity
- Identity; inclusion
- Masculinity; masculine
- Mental health
- Sport
- Straight
- Suicide

These were the most common themes and they applied to each participant, with multiple reoccurrences in each transcript. Some themes were identified with a lower frequency or in relation only to specific participants. For example, one participant had worked as a journalist during their undergraduate programme and discussed areas specific to this unique perspective. Another student had recently transferred between universities and their perception was limited for their current location, in which case we talked about both experiences. This interview would be interesting to analyse with a view to understanding how students’ compared experiences between different types of university.

⁹⁵ This followed the IPA analysis principles preferred by Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008), who advocate for a final ‘master’ set of themes with the research participants and the main project features in the centre.

3.25 The bottom line – doing the research

My methodology required me to travel extensively, to hope that people who could give me access to universities would see value in my work and to hope that once there, students would want to talk to me. Initially, I tried scoping interest six months before I planned to fly to the U.S. This was a time-consuming and fruitless exercise. Interest was minimal and the one faculty member, from a New York institution, who agreed to speak with me during my visit, stopped answering messages a few days before I arrived. I decided to adopt a bolder approach to securing interest and take the risk of approaching universities when I was already in the U.S. I suspected this would make the research seem less distant, both literally and in terms of execution. This turned out to be a worthwhile risk and I found people were much more likely to respond when I explained I was in the country and could attend their campus on specific dates.

Even with an improved approach to engagement, methodology was challenging to coordinate and manage logistically. Short-notice cancellations of university contacts and unexpected costs and drains on time required me to react to disruptions quickly. Portland, OR., required significant commitment to travel time and I arrived in the city to find the faculty advisor who had promised to liaise with students had not done anything and instead offered me a 30-minute slot with them to talk about their own work. While initially frustrating, this led to a serendipitous encounter that demonstrated the positive, unpredictable elements of international research. After the disappointing experience, I approached a faculty advisor at another local university, with just 24 hours' notice. They responded enthusiastically and arranged interviews, noting they were happy to make the effort because they recognised my home institutional affiliation: they had spent a year there as an undergraduate exchange student. They had an affinity for the local community and its reputation for a heady mix of drinking, partying and expansive countryside. Working reactively and opportunistically, I found an ally and friendly face 4,690 miles from home.

The Portland experience acted as a catalyst and I expanded my search more boldly, preparing to travel at very short notice if needed. Portland was a risk in itself because of its far northwest location and would require time and money to travel elsewhere. I approached two universities 48 hours before I had planned to leave Portland to the next location; one in Juneau, AK., and one in Lincoln, NE. I received friendly responses from both. In Juneau, faculty debated allowing me to attend but ultimately declined because of ongoing issues there with suicide risk and uncertainty about whether my research would negatively impact this. In Lincoln, the Director of an LGBTQA Resource Center responded and began what was to

become not only a productive research relationship but an important friendship. I am certain that placing trust in a stranger who cold calls you and asks to speak to their students is a risk of unknown quantity, but I am grateful that the Director recognised the potential benefits of the research and took a chance on me.

Notably, two universities were openly hostile to the recruitment strategy. A faculty member from a university in Chicago, IL sent a message outlining their policy to decline all requests without engaging with the purpose or content. The student chairperson of the LGBT organisation in a university in Shreveport, LA, responded to my approach with a sinister, threatening message.⁹⁶ Other universities embraced the ethos of the research. A faculty advisor in a university in Fargo, ND., communicated with me for five weeks to try and secure participants. We decided against a site visit due to local logistical challenges with the timing of the research alongside a major exam timetable.

A number of people wished to find out more about the research in the course of travel around the U.S. In each case I spoke with them informally, without recording, and outside of the project framework. Although such narratives are not part of the analysis, they provided critical context about the viewpoints of people on the topic and its position in the national psyche. I consider this in more depth in the results and discussion, but it is a finding worthy of inclusion in the methodological discussion because of the frequency and depth with which it occurred. In dozens of encounters and situations, I met people who wanted to know more about the research. Some of this stemmed from general curiosity but most discussions occurred because the person had experience of either suicidality or problematic masculinity.

One example helps to outline the reach of the research and how the topics filter through day to day life in surprising ways. I was staying in a hotel in Memphis and had finished all of my scheduled interviews when I received a message from a student who asked if they could take part at the last minute. They wanted to be interviewed with their friend, another student, and asked that this take place off-campus, preferably in my hotel somewhere quiet. The hotel had a lobby and coffee shop but these were busy and so I approached the front desk agent and asked if I could use a meeting room in the conference centre. They said the rooms are usually booked 24 hours in advance and cost around \$180 per hour. The agent noticed this wasn't good news and asked why I needed the room. When I said I was in town visiting a university for research and I needed space to interview two students, they asked what my research was about. On finding out, they made a phone call and secured me a beautiful

⁹⁶ See Appendix for a redacted copy of the student's response

meeting room for a couple of hours. They took me to it and said their best friend had died by suicide six months previously and they had been struggling to find ways to help. They hoped such an act of kindness would be one such way.

I undertook travel to be able to secure interviews, not to be economical with time and resources in planning. A rudimentary map of my route for both interview periods indicated I had travelled over 9,000 miles within the U.S. during the two interview periods and over 23,000 miles in total, including my travel from the U.K. I worked full time during this period, using the time difference to my advantage, thankful for fast hotel and in-flight Wi-Fi on U.S. domestic flights that enabled me to continue working. In this sense, research practicalities were as challenging as the methodological framework but were, in retrospect, absolutely worthwhile.

3.26 Summary

The qualitative methodology and IPA theoretical basis and instrument lent themselves to the topics of exploration and to the education environment. The semi-structured approach enabled confident students to emphatically and purposefully present their subjective experiences whilst enabling less confident or assured students to build on topic prompts to assemble their thoughts verbally. Although some criticism of the IPA theoretical standpoint indicates disagreements amongst researchers in relation to sample sizes, complexity of topics and epistemologically robust methodology, the analytical tool was adaptable and fluid to the study environment.

None of the challenges encountered were insurmountable and the assistance of those interested in the field of study was unexpected and extraordinary. Most importantly, the design and conceptual framework enabled me to move between institutions, adapting to local norms and rules of access, and deploy the methods equipped with the knowledge of previous interviews, which helped me to streamline the process. It is important to centre the methodology, findings, and outcomes firmly in the U.S. higher education system within local cultural norms in relation to masculinity and the 'being' of young men.

Chapter 4

Twenty-nine lives, stories, and experiences

*“Straight men, what’s the strangest thing you’ve been told not to do because ‘that’s gay’?”
“Some dude just called me a pussy for putting on sunscreen. Imagine thinking you’re tougher than the sun? The fucking sun.”*

LaConte (2020:1)

4.1 Introduction

Twenty-nine students participated in the research, talking candidly and openly with occasional thematic guidance from the semi-structured questionnaire prompt sheet. Students came from a range of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds and there was a mix of sexual identities while maintaining the “fairly homogeneous” characteristics needed for a phenomenological study (Noon 2018). The final interview count was more than three times higher than the planned total for an IPA-led study.

Snowball sampling resulted in the growth of the sample group and the addition of rich additional narratives, including from mature students and alumni. The topic generated a lot of interest and I made the decision to accept all of the additional requests to be involved. While this would reduce my ability to forensically apply an interrogative IPA analysis, it would provide more substantial depth to the range of student voices. I was also able to maintain the four-stage IPA process advocated by Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008), maintaining a focus on themes and the meanings of student experiences.

The research questions form a framework for the themes, which are organised in Biggerstaff and Thompson’s (2008) thematic structure, rather than by research question. To provide clarity, I respond to the research questions at the end of the discussion chapter, with links to the key themes identified. The purpose of this work was to hear the voices of students and to learn from them, not the other way around. In carrying out the research and, in writing it up, I adhered closely to Gilgun’s (2005) “grab” principle; that qualitative researchers must avoid third person writing that detracts focus from the participants. In this approach, participant voices are eminently more important than the researcher’s. This was an important perspective to maintain when the number of participants grew quickly.

4.2 Media campaign recognition

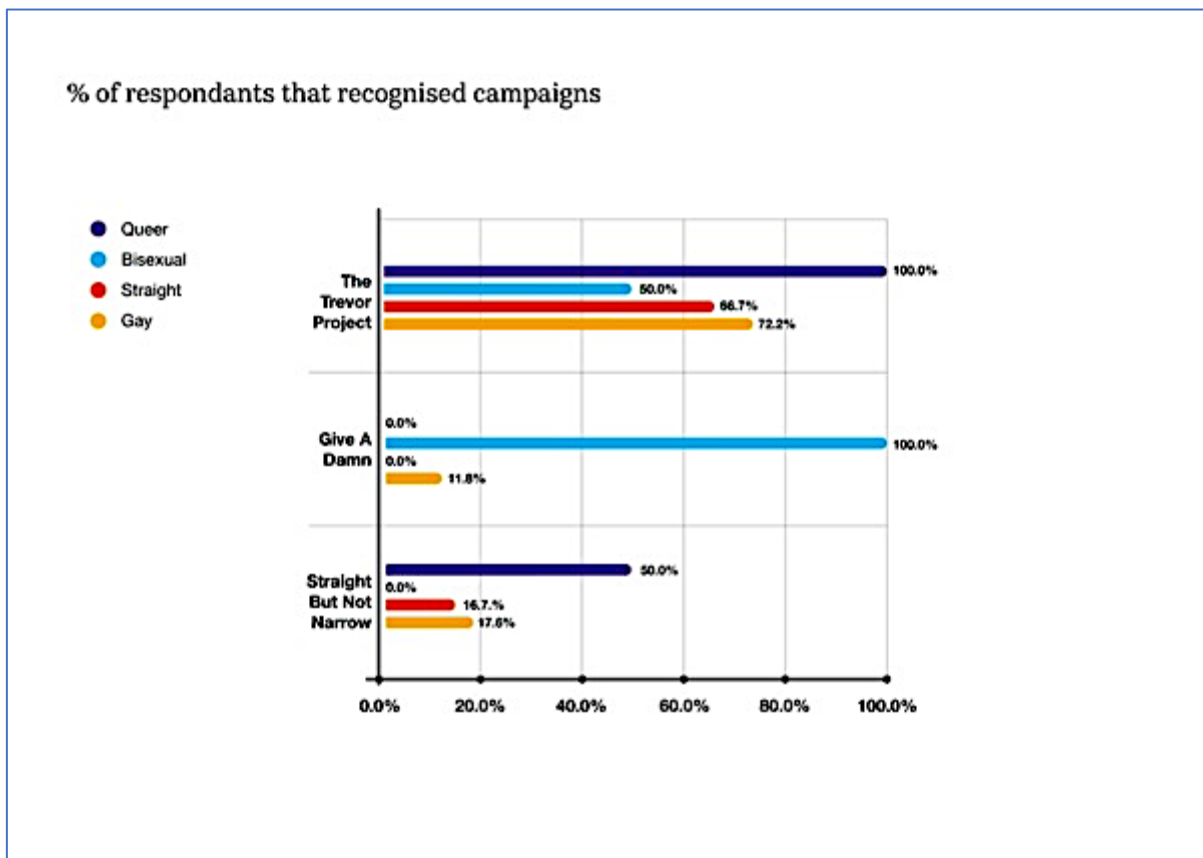
As part of the initial consent discussion, I utilised a triage process in which students were presented with the key image from each of the three media campaigns and asked to note if they recognised them. Table 5 presents the results organised by student identity.

Table 5 Campaign Recognition

Campaign recognition								
		Campaign						
		Straight but not narrow		Give a damn		The Trevor Project		Total responses
		n=		n=		n=		
Sexual Identity	Gay	3	17.6%	2	11.8%	13	72.2%	18
	Straight	1	16.7%	0	0.0%	4	66.7%	6
	Bisexual	0	0.0%	2	100.0%	1	50.0%	2
	Queer	1	50.0%	0	0.0%	3	100.0%	3

Recognition of The Trevor Project was greatest and 72% knew about the organisation. The recognition rate for Give A Damn! was 28% and for Straight But Not Narrow, 21% of students recognised the campaign. Recognition amongst gay men was higher than straight men, with 34% and 28% average recognition rates, respectively. The numbers of bisexual and queer men in the study were very low and so recognition rates are not readily quantifiable but provide context and perspective. Image 3 depicts this in graphical form.

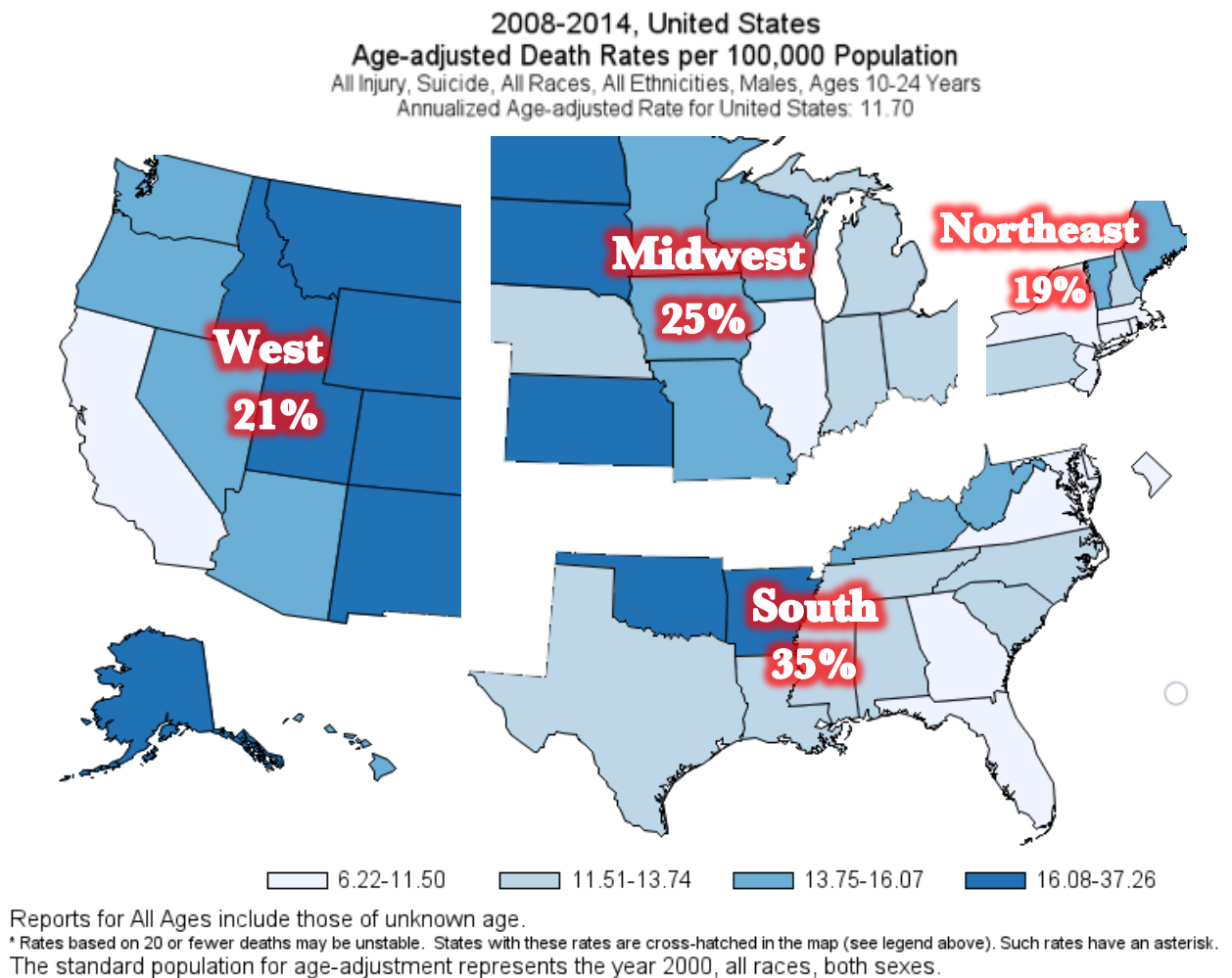
Image 3: Campaign recognition



4.3 Suicide mapping

Participant sampling was geographically based on The Trevor Project's 2014 analysis of the percentage of calls to their suicide prevention support line. Using CDC WISQARS software, I interrogated national suicide data for the standard measure of death rates, per 100,000 population, between 2008-2014. This placed the data as the most up to date available at the beginning of the project and interviews. Map 8 shows the annualised age-adjusted death rate by suicide, regardless of injury method, for males aged between 10 and 24 years old. The map is a hybrid and shows the regional percentages from The Trevor Project's 2014 helpline data transposed onto the CDC data, with each region separated for comparison.

Map 8 CDC (2016) Annualised age-adjusted death rate by suicide, regardless of injury method, for males aged between 10 and 24 years old, 2008-2014.



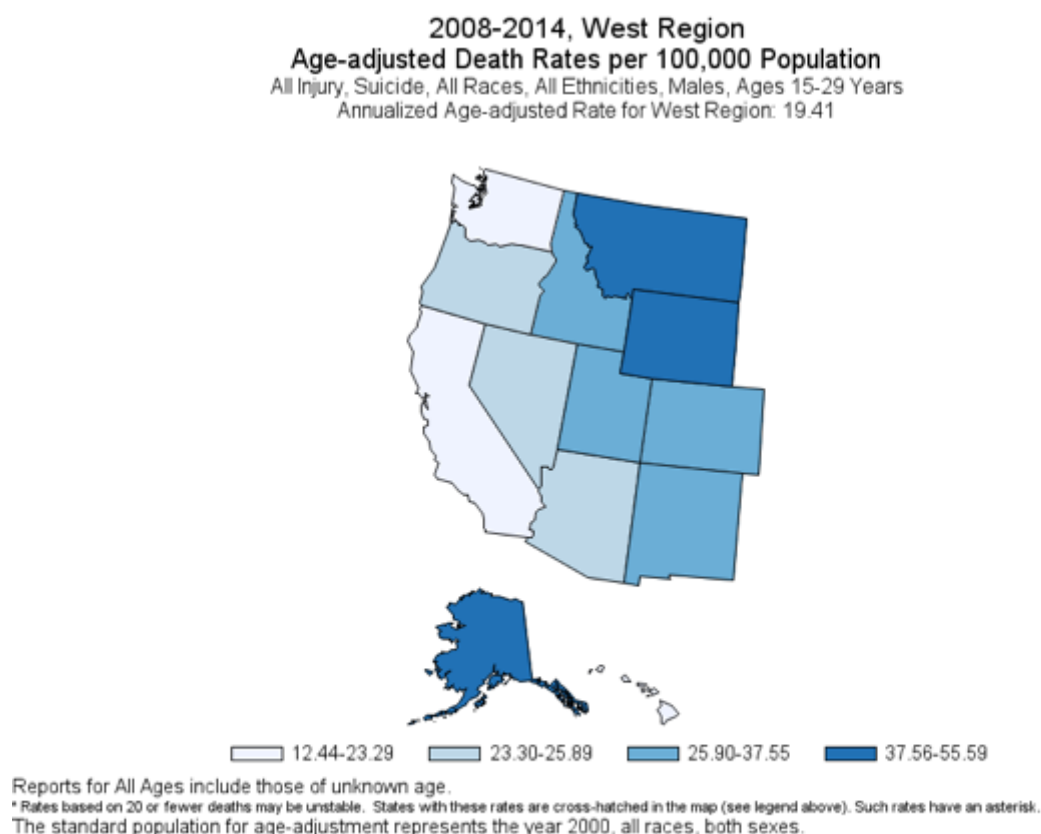
On first inspection there is some incongruence between the level of suicide-related demand we can deduce from The Trevor Project's regional percentages and the mortality rate shown by the surveillance data. For example, the South region has a disproportionate 35% share of calls but only two of the states are in the highest quartile of deaths, defined as a mortality rate between 16.08 and 37.26 per 100,000. The West region had the second lowest number of calls for suicide intervention, at 21% but has seven of the twelve states nationally with the highest mortality rate. Further analysis presents us with the possibility of a formative link between these disparities. Assuming a level of success⁹⁷ of suicide prevention through interaction with The Trevor Project's targeted service, a higher call rate correlates positively with a lower mortality rate. So, we can tentatively translate low rates of attempts to seek crisis

⁹⁷ Gould et al. (2013) assessed the impact of trained counsellors on a suicide intervention telephone service. They found callers reported feeling significantly less depressed, suicidal, and overwhelmed after the interaction.

help in the West region with the high mortality rates. Similarly, the high rates of help-seeking behaviour in the South region are compatible with lower overall mortality rates.

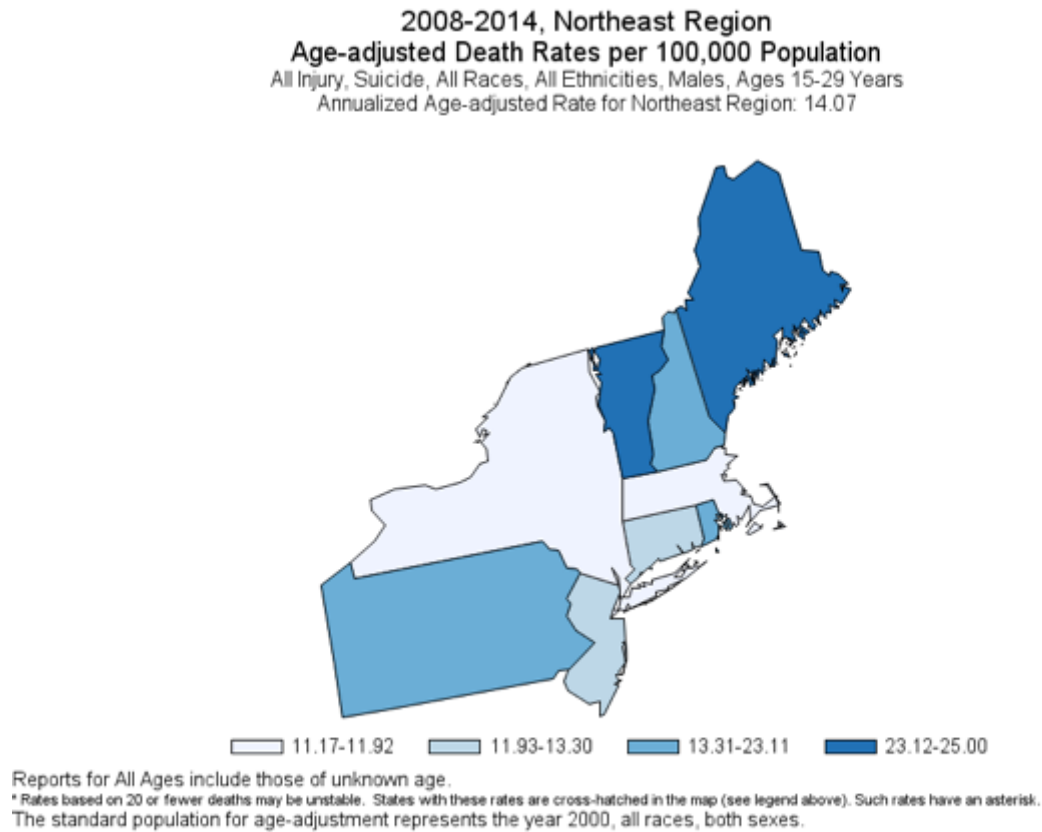
The Trevor Project provides services to young people under the age of 25. While this relates accurately to 21 out of the 29 participants, it presents a somewhat skewed version of the CDC data by excluding older students. I used the WISQARS database to prepare regional maps that included the suicide mortality rate amongst males aged 15 to 29, which incorporated all students in the higher-risk age groups and all of those in undergraduate study. Maps 9, 10, 11, and 12 present the annualised age-adjusted death rate by suicide, regardless of injury method for males.

Map 9 CDC (2016) Annualised age-adjusted death rate by suicide, regardless of injury method, for males aged between 15 and 29 years old, 2008-2014, West Region.



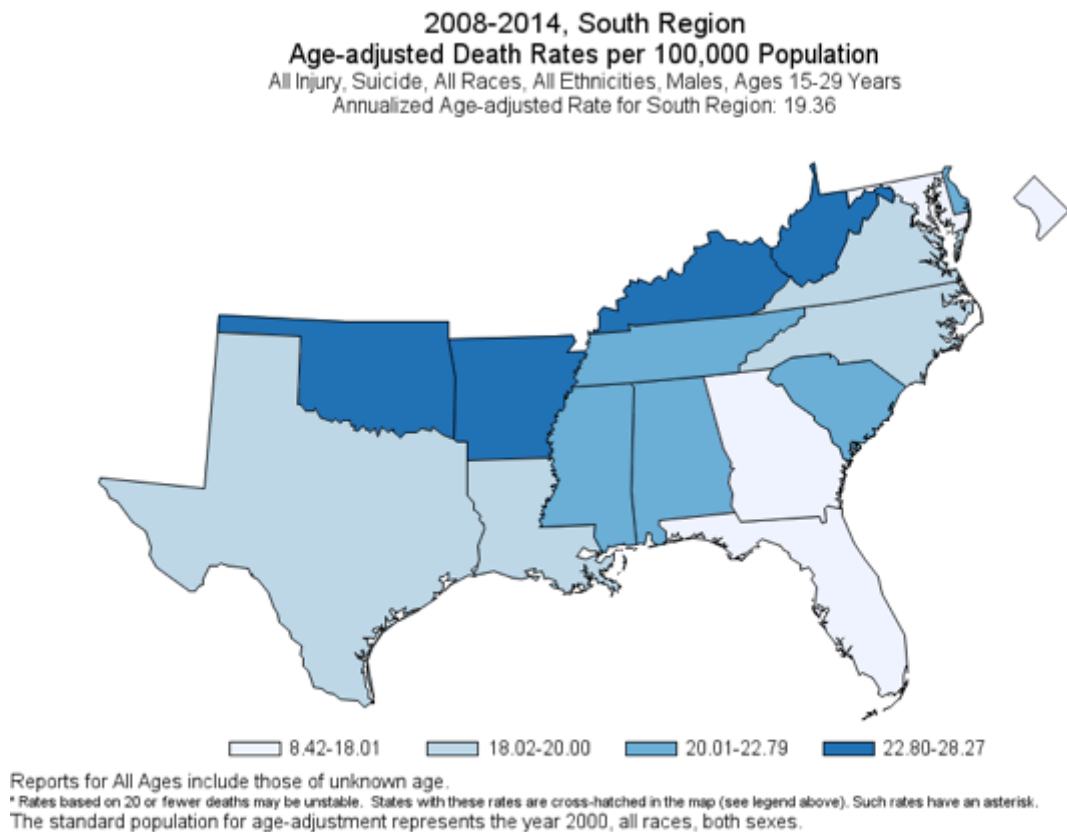
Produced by: the Statistics, Programming & Economics Branch, National Center for Injury Prevention & Control, CDC
 Data Sources: NCES National Vital Statistics System for numbers of deaths; US Census Bureau for population estimates.

Map 10 CDC (2016) Annualised age-adjusted death rate by suicide, regardless of injury method, for males aged between 15 and 29 years old, 2008-2014, Northeast Region.



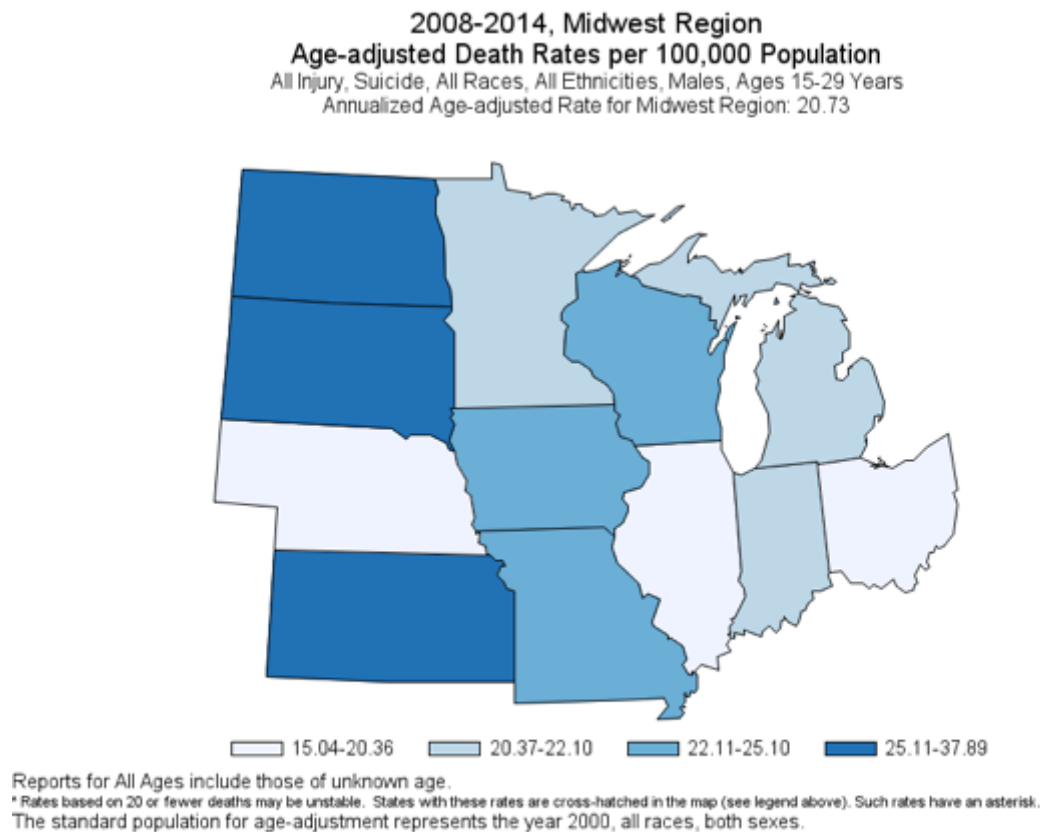
Produced by: the Statistics, Programming & Economics Branch, National Center for Injury Prevention & Control, CDC
Data Sources: NCES National Vital Statistics System for numbers of deaths; US Census Bureau for population estimates.

Map 11 CDC (2016) Annualised age-adjusted death rate by suicide, regardless of injury method, for males aged between 15 and 29 years old, 2008-2014, South Region.



Produced by: the Statistics, Programming & Economics Branch, National Center for Injury Prevention & Control, CDC
 Data Sources: NCES National Vital Statistics System for numbers of deaths; US Census Bureau for population estimates.

Map 12 CDC (2016) Annualised age-adjusted death rate by suicide, regardless of injury method, for males aged between 15 and 29 years old, 2008-2014, Midwest Region.



Produced by: the Statistics, Programming & Economics Branch, National Center for Injury Prevention & Control, CDC
 Data Sources: NCES National Vital Statistics System for numbers of deaths; US Census Bureau for population estimates.

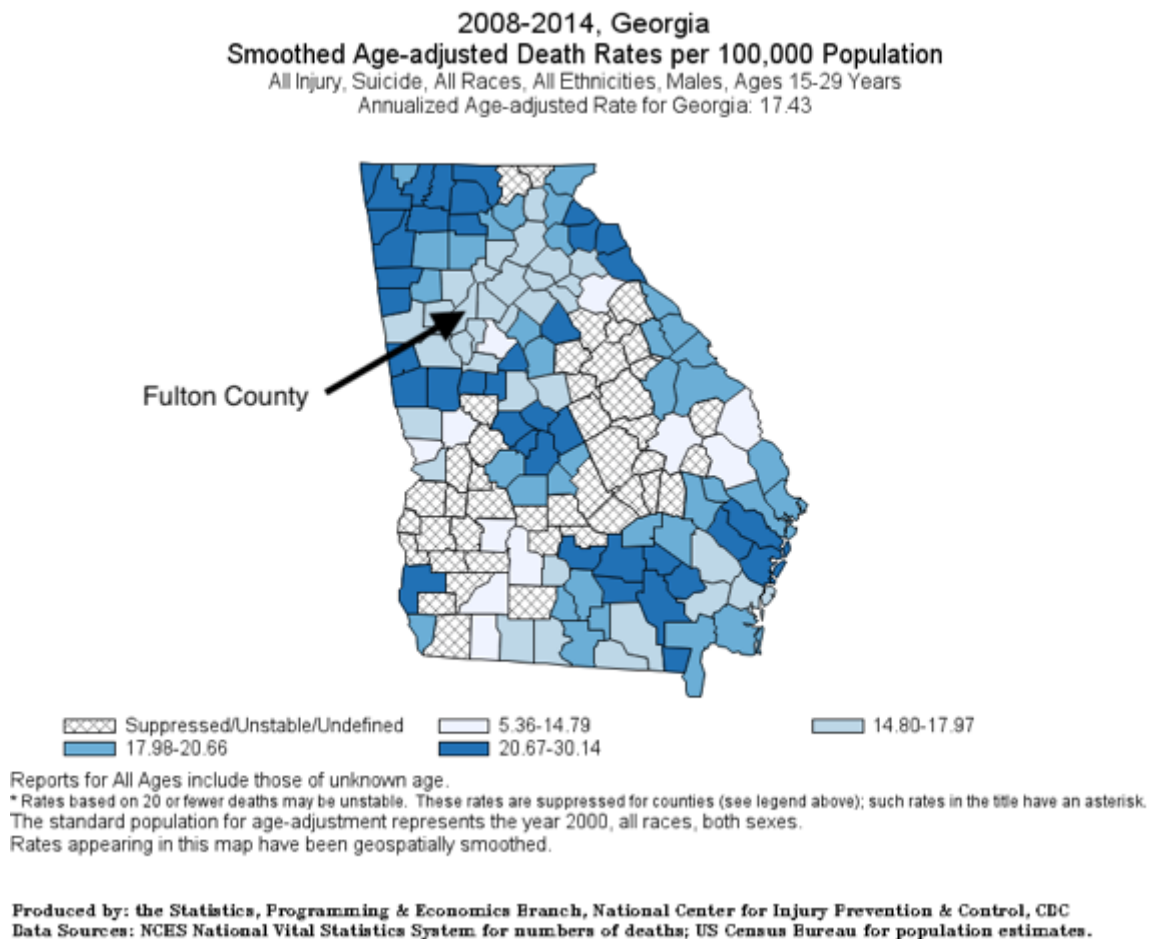
Prior to each interview, I established the state's position in the CDC's surveillance data in Map 8, for context. The quartile refers to the range of suicide deaths reported alongside the mortality rate per 100,000:

- Oregon: 2nd quartile: 23.30 – 25.89 (mortality rate per 100,000)
- Nebraska: 1st quartile: 15.04 – 20.36
- Oklahoma: 4th quartile: 22.80 – 28.27
- Tennessee: 3rd quartile: 20.01 – 22.79
- Georgia: 1st quartile: 8.42 – 18.01
- Pennsylvania: 3rd quartile: 13.31 - 23.11
- District of Columbia: 2nd quartile: 18.02 – 20.00

The data would benefit from exploration in another study with an epidemiological focus. While both the CDC and The Trevor Project data provided a useful backdrop and promoted some discussion about relative risk, there was little comparability with student narratives. Students in Georgia were critical of local suicide prevention measures and noted suicides were relatively frequent on their campus. From their perspective, suicide was a very high risk. This is matched with The Trevor Project's call data, which show elevated calls for help in that region but not by the CDC data, which show the lowest of four mortality percentiles. There are numerous influencing and confounding factors in this domain, and I make recommendations to better understand them in the concluding chapter.

To explore the Georgia data in more depth, I explored the suicide data at county level. Map 13 shows CDC population measures in Fulton County, the location of Atlanta and the university at which I spoke with students. At this level of detail, the county still shows relatively low death by suicide rates, in the second quartile with a range of 5.36 to 14.79 deaths per 100,000 population. Problems with data unreliability in epidemiological surveillance systems are discussed elsewhere in this paper, although that is likely to be only one element of a much broader, more complex explanation.

Map 13 CDC (2016) County-level age-adjusted death rate by suicide, regardless of injury method, for males aged between 15 and 29 years old, 2008-2014, Georgia.



4.4 Situating suicide

The semi-structured, fluid nature of the interviews meant information gathered from students was comparable thematically but not readily measurable. However, I did ask each student two specific questions during the interviews:

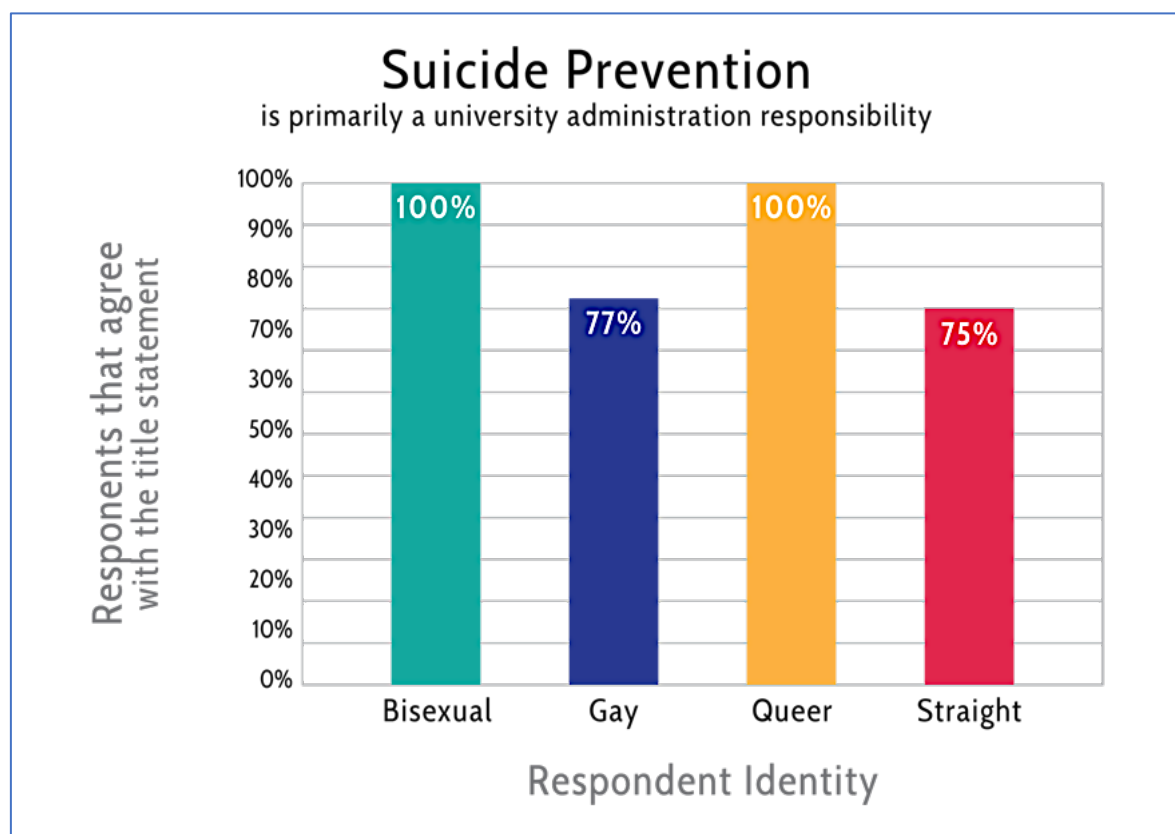
Is suicide prevention primarily the university's responsibility?⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Research on the responsibility of universities to prevent suicide is varied in philosophy and outcomes but generally centres on the legal domain rather than the ethical domain and the principle that universities are not in existence to act *in loco parentis*. There are examples from across the U.S. about court challenges initiated by the families of students who took their own lives whilst at university. The New England Board of Higher Education considered a court ruling that the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) had no legal responsibility over a student suicide in 2009. Rhetoric around that case was detached and lacked a human angle, with analyses noting

Which groups of students do you think are at the highest risk of suicidality?

Students responded to the first question with little variability and each individual said they felt the university held *some* degree of responsibility. Their answer was considered affirmative to this question if the student believed the university had the primary level of responsibility, even if they said other factors were also at play. All students agreed university administrations had some responsibility even if they did not feel this was an area of primacy. The students who did not agree the university had primary responsibility instead placed this varyingly between students, whom they said should have tools for resilience, and broader society for creating a hostile developmental environment. Image 4 depicts these results.

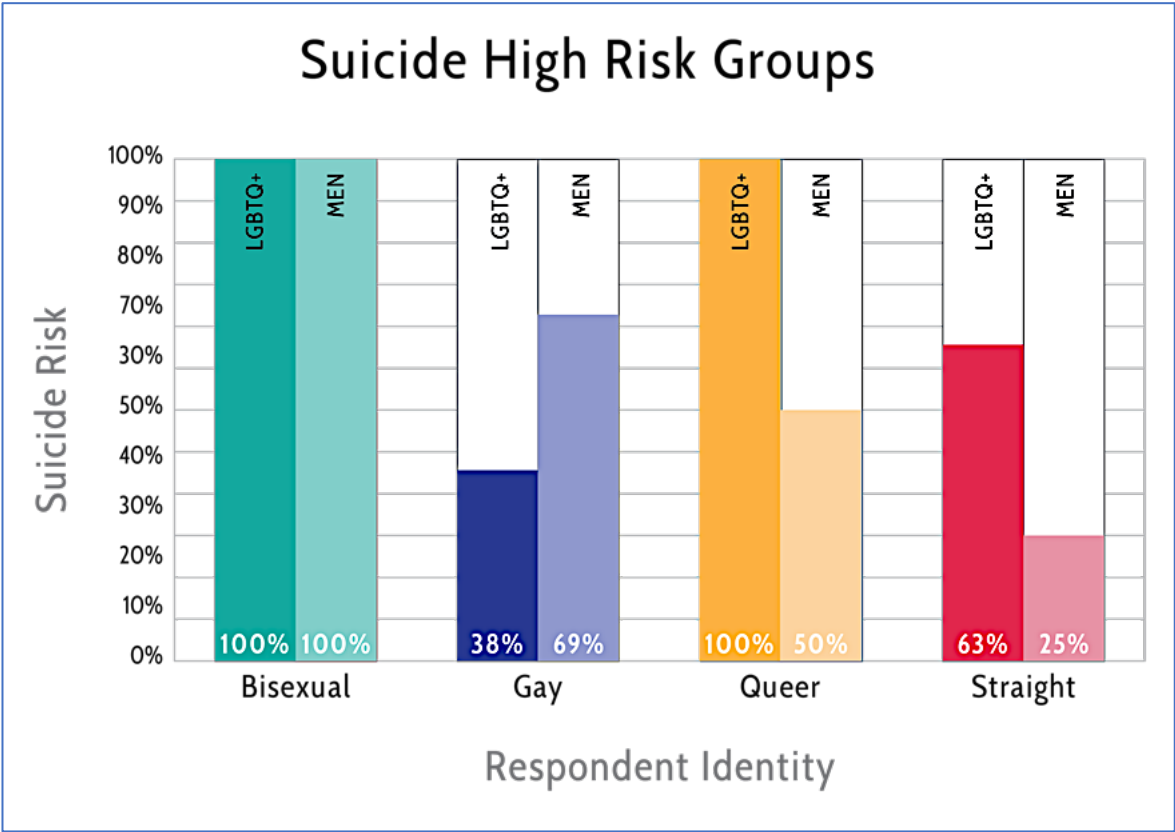
Image 4: Degree to which participants believe suicide prevention is a university responsibility for students, by sexual identity.



a university president had described students with emotional problems as a “...strain on campus resources” (Paczkowski 2018). In 2019, a jury considering the suicide of an Iowa State University student found the administration partially responsible (The Campus Suicide Prevention Center of Virginia 2019), reflecting variances in interpretations of responsibility and liability.

Students were more varied in their responses to the second question. Image 5 shows their responses. Interestingly, each student who was able to answer this question acknowledged that while suicidality amongst female students is more commonly and openly talked about, they did not feel women were at greater risk. Our discussions were on men, LGBTQ relationships and related topics and so the dominant choice of two groups - LGBTQ people and men - was predictable. Most students spoke confidently about this and had considerable existing knowledge about risk factors facing men in general and LGBTQ people more specifically.

Image 5: Student identification of groups at high risk of suicide, by sexual identity.



Students were not required to make a singular answer as I asked them about their perception of the highest levels of risk, not the *only* group at risk. Therefore, some students said they felt both LGBTQ people and men in general presented with the highest level of risk. Of note, no student felt that gay men represented a group at the highest risk and demurred the

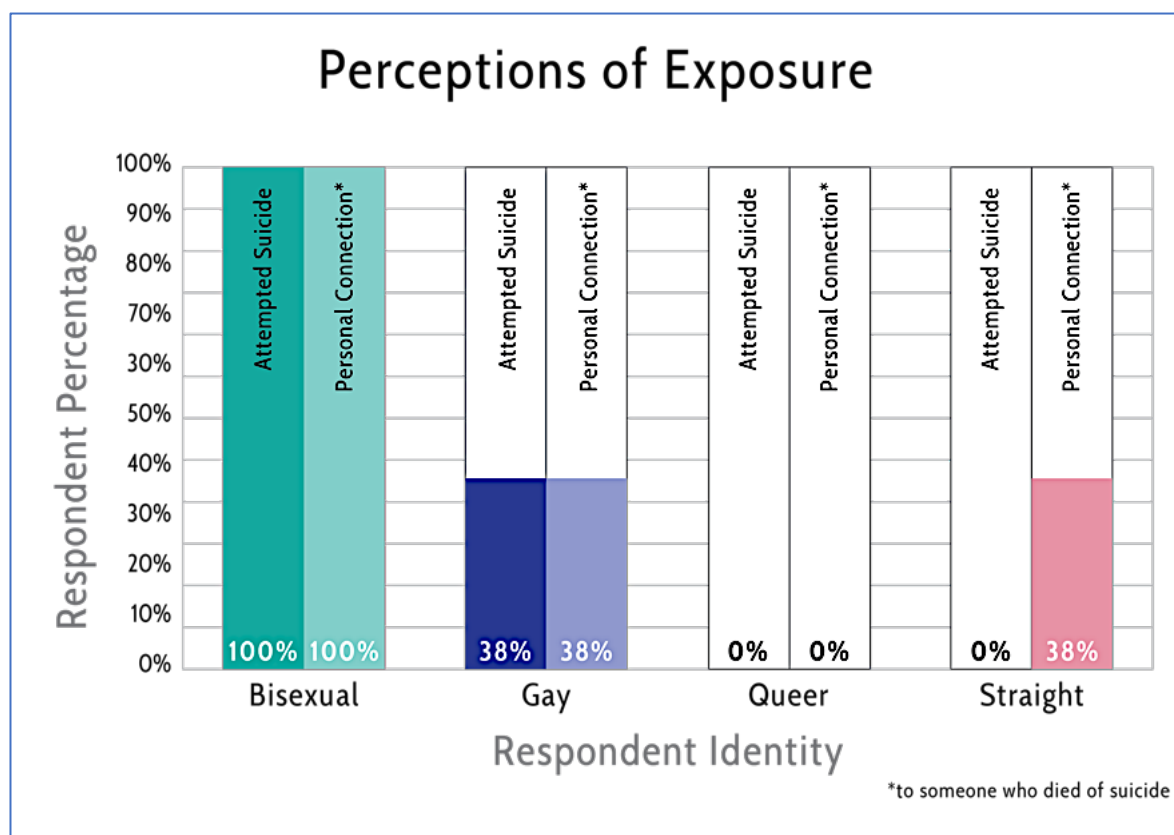
frequent press coverage presenting this as a fact. Instead, in the LGBT group, they typically felt transgender people were at the greatest risk.

Gay men and straight men differed substantially in their perception of levels of risk. Of the gay students, only 38% felt LGBT people were at high levels of risk whilst 63% of straight men believed this to be the case. Amongst gay students, 69% felt men in general were at high levels of risk whilst only 25% of straight men expressed this. I refer throughout this paper to counterpoints, paradoxes and a tipping-point. This is another addition to the broader debate. It may suggest straight men feel more confident in their resilience to suicidality.

The relatively low understanding of suicide risk amongst LGBT people by gay men (38%) was surprising and would benefit from further exploration. The theoretical conceptualisation of new heteronormativity might offer an early explanation of this paradigm, namely that as heteronormative structures become more diverse and homophobia increasingly open to challenge, gay men may see themselves as at lower risk of suicidality and internalised homophobia. This is a relatively unsubstantiated claim but something I have experienced myself; as my gay friends and peers feel more accepted and protected, they feel more empowered and resilient. However, some research cautions against too much optimism as it seems persistently clear that as gay men try to conform to heteronormative structures and masculine norms, the impact of internalised homophobia is exacerbated (Thepsourinthone et al. 2020).

A number of participants had close personal experiences of suicidality and 38% of the gay respondents said they had attempted suicide at least once. One of the two bisexual students had also attempted suicide. Both bisexual students had a personal connection to someone who had died by suicide and 38% of both straight men and gay men also reported this (Image 6).

Image 6: Perceptions of Exposure



4.5 News and social media monitoring

Student newspapers had very limited coverage of LGBTQ stories, events, or health signposting. During each site visit I obtained the most recent two copies of the printed student press to gauge the visibility of community issues. Other than a review of a film of interest to gay audiences in one newspaper, there was no information specifically for the LGBTQ community. One university in Portland, OR., had a dedicated LGBTQ newspaper available on campus, although this was not exclusively for students. Notably, none of the student newspapers had signposting to mental health services or crisis intervention services for the LGBTQ community.

I monitored news media sites, through a social media platform, for the duration of this research. I was looking for stories that focused on the two key themes of heteronormativity and suicidality amongst young men. By extension this included stories that explored relationships between gay and straight men and inclusivity in sports. This was an empirical exercise rather than a quantitative analysis using a predefined algorithm. At the end of 2019, I had gathered 832 articles, news stories and op-eds, all closely related to the topics. While a

substantial number were published by a mainstream press outlet, the articles with the greatest exploratory narrative came from small organisations, such as *OutSports*, a non-profit organisation that seeks to further the work of groups such as Sport Allies by promoting greater exposure for gay sportspeople.

The increase in participants and the volume of social media material initially collected led me to abandon a plan to incorporate an additional layer of thematic analysis by incorporating narratives of media trends. I have stored this information for future research.

4.6 Conclusion

This project set out to capture student voices, organically and qualitatively. A broad, representative range of students gave their time and spoke passionately and candidly about the research topics, which were of interest or importance to them. Students were from a range of ages, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities and were in a range of different higher education programmes, including the social sciences, engineering, and biochemistry.

Measurable data from the interviews are minimal; I was concerned with exploring lived experiences and what this meant for each individual's life perspectives and relationships rather than how it fit into a comparable data model. Access to public data from the CDC helped greatly to establish perspective and context before meeting students, although in actuality this data had no bearing on student narratives. Georgia was an exception, where the apparent very low state-wide suicide rate did not mirror student perception of suicide risk in Atlanta or on their campus.

The exercise in mapping media headlines provided an unexpected breadth of material that was out of scope and capacity. It is, however, indicative of the growing trend to analyse the social issues at play and of a need for exploration through other methodological lenses.

Chapter 5

The lives of men at university

“...friendships with straight men can be very healing. When you experience a close friendship with a straight guy and that person is very accepting, it’s a balm for some old wounds.”
LaSala (2015).

5.1 Introduction

“Their distinct lusts, which may have alienated gay and straight men from each other in the past, inspire the ultimate gesture of fraternal connection: a fist bump.”
Farber (2016).

Despite the abstract nature of the semi-structured questionnaire, interview narratives followed similar pathways. Students did not introduce new topics or tangents that differed substantively from the emergent themes. In some respects, themes were directed by the topic of the debate, although students had full control over how to express their feelings and articulate their experiences. Discussions were rich in detail and students required very little prompting, other than to change the general topic of conversation using broadly interpretable questions such as, *“How does that apply to sports?”*, or, *“How do you feel about...?”* Such prompts were enough to maintain momentum in most cases while adhering to enough critical ‘distance’ to avoid the influence of my own judgement and engagement (Spinelli 2002). I maintained this temporary suspension during each interview and identified emergent themes without attempting to direct the flow or content of the conversation.

Students’ standpoints on sports were inseparable from their understanding of masculinity and there is significant crossover in the discussion about these topics, which had a clear reciprocal relationship. Heteronormativity and sports were established as a binary relationship within a social sphere and was one of the themes represented in each discussion, regardless of the identity of the student.

A message I took away from each interview was that participants cared deeply about the topics. They cared about suicidality and mental health and about their place in the world as men. They were curious about the present, hopeful about the future and concerned about the political landscape in which they were living. Some interviews included very personal, candid discussions of mental health problems or suicidality. In each case, participants felt it

was important to discuss such experiences and to contribute to the body of research that can lead, however gradually, to our better understanding.

This candidness is reflected in other qualitative studies in which researchers sought the experiential narratives of male students and I began the research process with hopes that this would be the case. Harris III (2009) spent a year speaking with sixty-eight undergraduate men about their experiences of masculinity and studying and existing in the campus culture and obtained rich, detailed, and complex information from students who were keen to deliberate and explore their time so far at university. Similar in topic and qualitative richness to Anderson's extensive, pathfinding work with young men in higher education, this study achieved a level of engagement with students that meant the research questions could be fully explored.

5.2 Media and journalistic response to gay student suicidality

The representation of issues important to young gay men in the mainstream press is critically linked to individual self-identity, mental health, and physical safety. Even without considering the special protection needs of gay students, adult gay men are significantly more likely to suffer from alcoholism, drug abuse, sexual assault, structural, and legal discrimination (CDC 2016).

The trend of college students to ideate or attempt suicide as an escape from bullying or overwhelming exclusion is a consequence, in part, of the failure of education institutions to adequately train staff in inclusion techniques. This is coupled with a focus on students themselves, particularly those who struggle to construct effective coping strategies against bullying and who have low levels of resilience against those who seek to persecute or harm them. Some universities use an LGBT ally or 'safe space' scheme, whereby staff and faculty undergo specialist training to support students who present themselves in a state of crisis or who are, literally, running from violence or bullies.⁹⁹

The role of the media is a key element of the study. My perspective is that of a lecturer and researcher in the U.K. (which has a much lower student suicide rate than the U.S.¹⁰⁰, as

⁹⁹ I saw several examples of such schemes in use during site visits for this research. Training was structured and assessed, and faculty were required to pass competency tests that demonstrated they could act empathetically and quickly when a student needed help. Faculty advertised their participation in the ally scheme by placing stickers on their office doors and noticeboards. I spoke with a faculty member who had taken the training as a straight ally in the Midwest. The discussion was outside of the formal interview scope of the project but provided context and an important extra layer of support to that provided by the LGBTQ centre and counselling services.

¹⁰⁰ The 2019 World Health Organisation World Population Review ranked the U.S. as 27th out of 183 countries for suicide rates, with 15.1 deaths per 100,000. The U.K. was ranked 78th, with 8.9 deaths per 100,000.

well as more robust education-based equality protocols¹⁰¹) but with an interest in the U.S. education and gay civil rights systems and with American male identity. Education models in place in the U.K. have been successful in promoting inclusion in colleges for gay students¹⁰². Similar models have been deployed in other European countries to engage young gay people with critical public health information. For instance, a World Health Organisation (WHO) training programme was embedded in Estonian youth services in an attempt to curb sexually transmitted infections and HIV transmission¹⁰³. Estonia had not previously deployed such a structured intervention and the country's media heavily publicised it. WHO declared this a success and worked to embed the structure permanently into the education system.

Despite some evidence of success¹⁰⁴, the American media has been slow to engage in meaningful discourse with university students and educational establishments. The gay media response to student suicide has dithered between outrage and philosophical discussion, whilst maintaining the stereotypical approach to representing gay life with commercial advertising for alcohol, cigarette manufacturers and luxury hotel brands, a process of 'othering' the gay identity¹⁰⁵. This cycle, of decrying suicide rates of the marginalised followed by endorsing prevailing stereotypes, is unhelpful and counterproductive (O'Guinn et al 2015). It reflects the

¹⁰¹ In 2019 the Department for Education (GOV.UK. 2019) announced a new student mental health taskforce to create a new model of suicide prevention in universities. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-creates-new-student-mental-health-taskforce>. Suicide prevention in the U.K. remains inconsistent and fractured with limited evidence of success but an experiential comparison with the U.S. suggests a more structured approach.

¹⁰² The Government Equalities Office and Stonewall have developed a range of training packages designed to improve inclusion for students in schools and colleges. The working model and partnership are innovative in scope and were expanded in 2019 to be inclusive of gender and needs relating to the transgender community. See <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/training-courses-and-opportunities>.

¹⁰³ See Pertal et al. (2009), *Amor Youth Clinic Network in Estonia*.

¹⁰⁴ Sisack and Värnick (2012) explored the 'Papageno effect', which challenges the overriding perception of the negative, contributory relationship between media representation of suicide and suicide attempts. Other work suggests new methodologies of challenging the media types most frequently associated with increased suicide attempts, including social media (Gomez 2014; Sobowale 2016). Since the failure of Rutgers University to act on the misuse of digital media that acted as a conduit to the death of Tyler Clementi, there is growing evidence institutions are becoming more adept at media management. In October 2019 a Portland, OR. school district acted when a local news station released a CCTV video that showed the moment a member of staff successfully prevented a student suicide attempt. The aftermath was a rare, but increasingly frequent, attempt by the administration to shield students from an irresponsible media (Bekiempis 2019).

¹⁰⁵ O'Barr (2012) dates advertising that targets gay men to the 1990s, when the commercial sector began to define this group and recognized its spending power. Sender (2004) identified gay men as the primary target of marketers within the wider LGBT demographic. Such advertising capitalises on the value LGBT people bring to Western economies, through a socioeconomic phenomenon called the 'pink dollar' (Morris 2007), which was placed at \$917 billion in 2015 (Witeck Communications 2016). Zaichkowsky (1986) and Andrews et al (1990) built on his media theory to explain that markets are constructs, not naturally defined by consumers or environments. This is relevant to this study because marketers have developed media strategies and channels for products or addictions that are associated with gay men, including alcoholism and smoking (O'Barr 2006; O'Barr 2012; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2016). The U.S. differs from most of Europe in that cigarette advertising is permitted in most fora without restriction.

complex and contradictory relationship between students and the media and the dichotomy of contextualising its influence (Kromydas 2017).

The purpose of the research has grown exponentially since inception, directed by the exploration of linked topics and themes, and driven by the responses of participants in early semi-structured interviews. Barbour (2013) highlights the value of using such an approach as it enables the researcher to be guided by the experiences, views and feelings of the participants, rather than to engage in rigid work where the outcomes are pre-categorised. I embraced this stance throughout the project, which resulted in research topics expanding from suicide prevention interventions and student interpersonal relationship mechanisms to include masculinity theories, fraternity socioecology, political discourse and the place of gay men in team sports.

Contemporary literature on the normative experiences of male university students is a good predictor of thematic benchmarks. Existing work demonstrates the considerable gravitation of young men towards these topics (Harris III & Struve 2009; Botha & Twine 2016) during the period of increased vulnerability the university environment can present (Liu et al. 2018). Framing this in the theoretical concept of new heteronormativity, there is limited research available on the impact of heteronormative media representations in the university setting. Gannon-Rittenhouse (2015) suggests factors such as media norms are synthesised with the wider education environment and are thus contributing factors to poor mental health and suicidality. Rook (2020) furthers this concept with a specific focus on university sports, suggesting the heteronormativity inherent in sports is found, by extension, in the media. They make direct links between the lack of LGBTQ visibility and acceptance in university sports and heteronormativity. The introduction of new heteronormativity as a theoretical concept in this paper underscores Rook's work and suggests roots of progress and change are already established.

Suggestions of broadscale improvements in representation remain finely balanced with a complex range of normative influences. Ripley et al (2011) discovered an example of this when they found openly gay students adopted heteronormative stereotypes about the LGBT community when lecturers normalised the inclusion of non-heterosexuality during teaching sessions. This suggests a straightforward increase in media representation may not, on its own, lead to reduced risk or improved experiences.

5.3 Campaigns: Straight men as gatekeepers

“Straight men are very good that way. If I’m walking down the street with this young, straight guy I know, and he sees a guy looking at me, he’ll say, ‘Go get him!’”

Toussaint (2016)

The video stills below¹⁰⁶ help to depict the visual style of each campaign shown to participants. Each still includes a text subtitle from the point the image was taken for context alongside key excerpts from the script. The Warwick Rowers video used was a promotional item for the campaign’s 2017 fundraiser calendar¹⁰⁷ and the script does not easily translate to an academic paper. Therefore, for this video, extra screen stills are shown to better reflect the importance of the imagery and design.

¹⁰⁶ Still images are presented here in line with the 2019 Exceptions to copyright guidance issued by the Intellectual Property Office under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. This paper is non-commercial, and study and analysis was completed privately with no for-profit interest.

¹⁰⁷ The campaign is funded through an annual crowdfunding event, the primary output of which is a printed calendar and a digital package of photographs of the rowers.

Image 7: Campaign video still, Straight But Not Narrow, Josh Hutcherson



Still image taken from 'Josh Hutcherson is Straight But Not Narrow', copyright WeAreSBNN (2011).

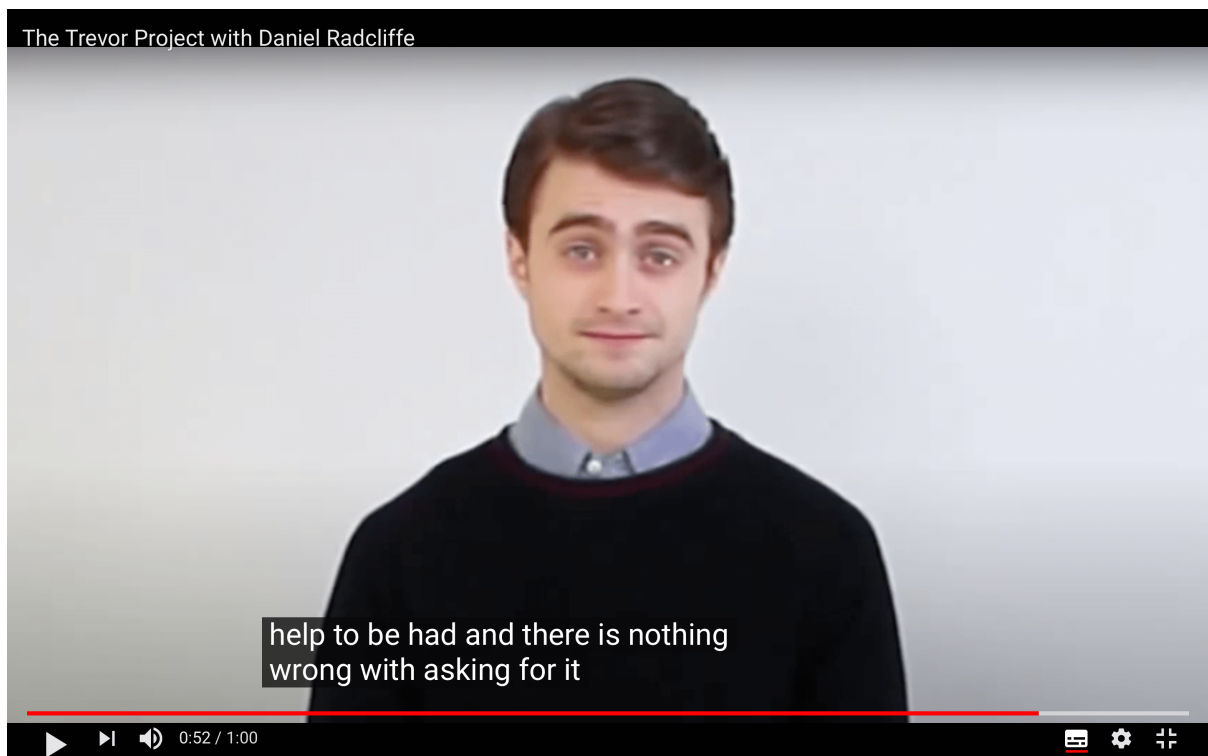
Key excerpts from this script:

“So, there’s a lot of gay people out there talking to gay people about being gay. But we are a group of straights...and we’re here to say we’re okay with people being gay.

Does it really matter if your guy friends like guys over girls? I mean, doesn’t that kind of just leave more girls for you?

And furthermore, we’re not going to let anybody say anything bad about anyone ever again...”

Image 8: Campaign video still, The Trevor Project PSA, Daniel Radcliffe.



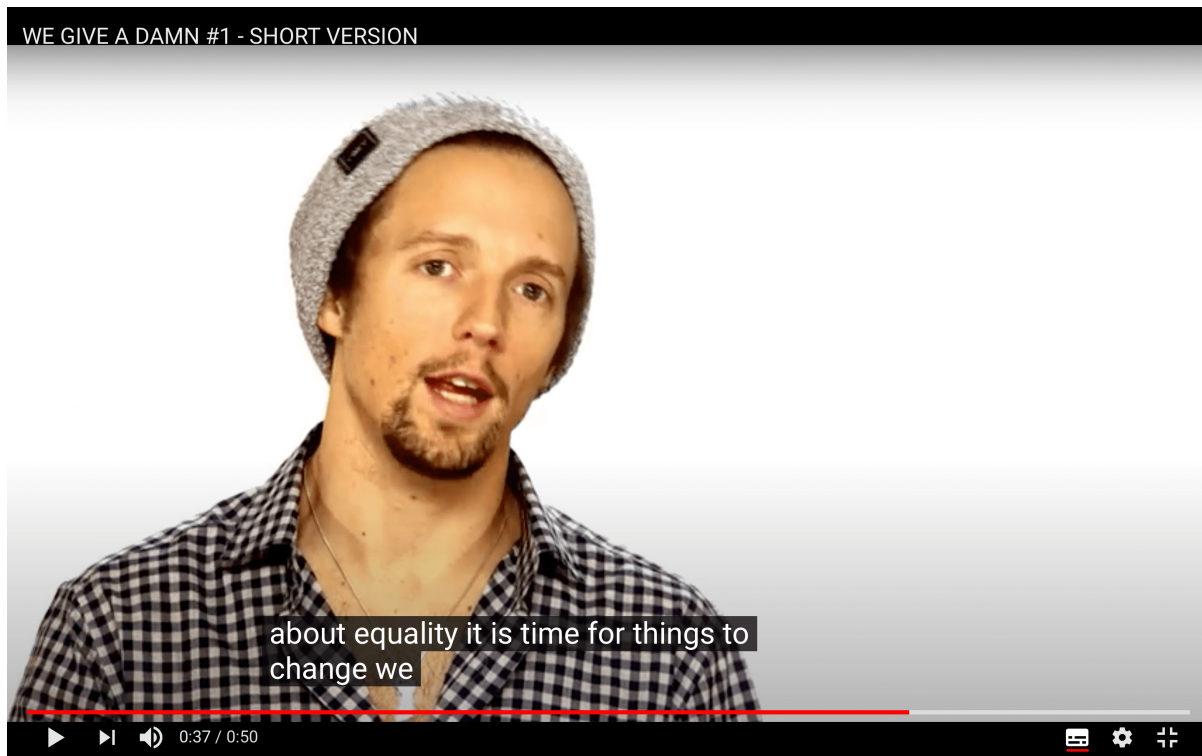
Still image taken from 'The Trevor Project PSA with Daniel Radcliffe', copyright The Trevor Project (2012).

Key excerpts from this script:

"When you feel like you're different or no-one understands you, it's not always easy to ask for help. But no matter what you're dealing with – confusion about your sexual orientation or gender, sadness, or thoughts of suicide, you don't have to do it alone.

I'm Daniel Radcliffe and I believe that reaching out for help is the bravest thing that a person can do."

Image 9: Campaign video still, Give A Damn, various (Jason Mraz shown).



Still image taken from 'We Give A Damn #1', copyright Give a Damn (2010).

Key excerpts from this script:

"I'm straight-

I'm gay-

I'm bisexual-

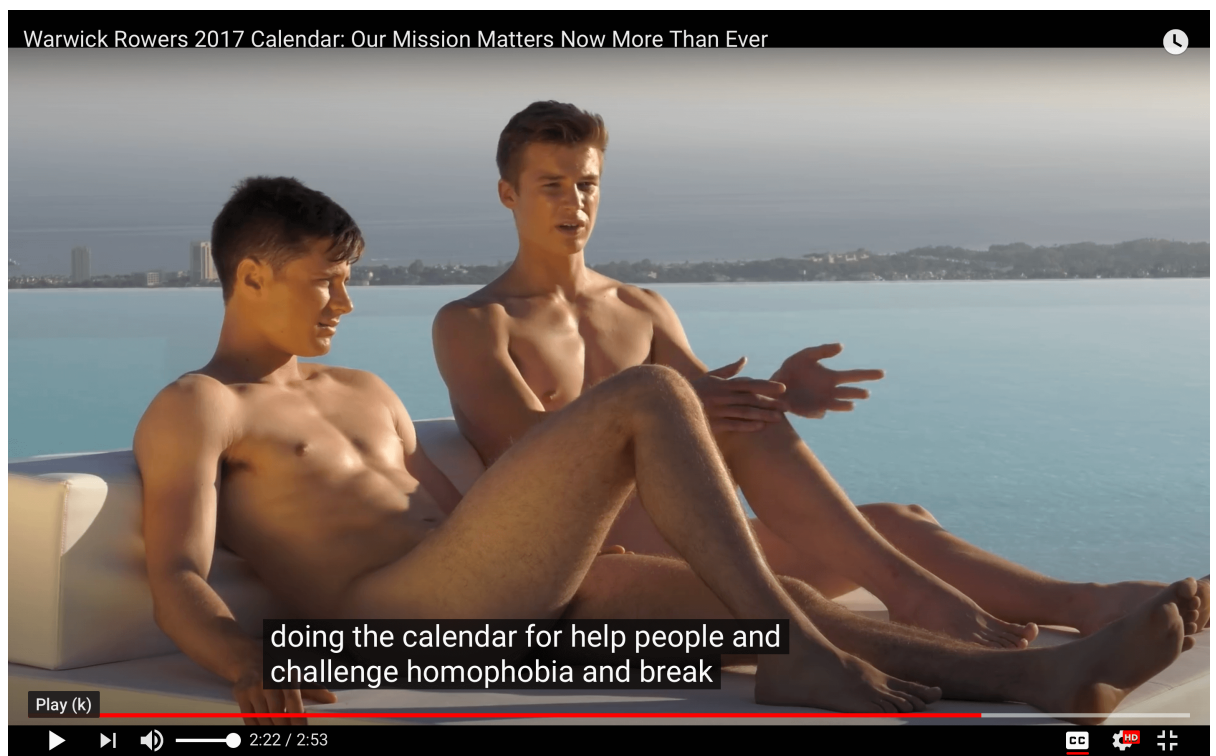
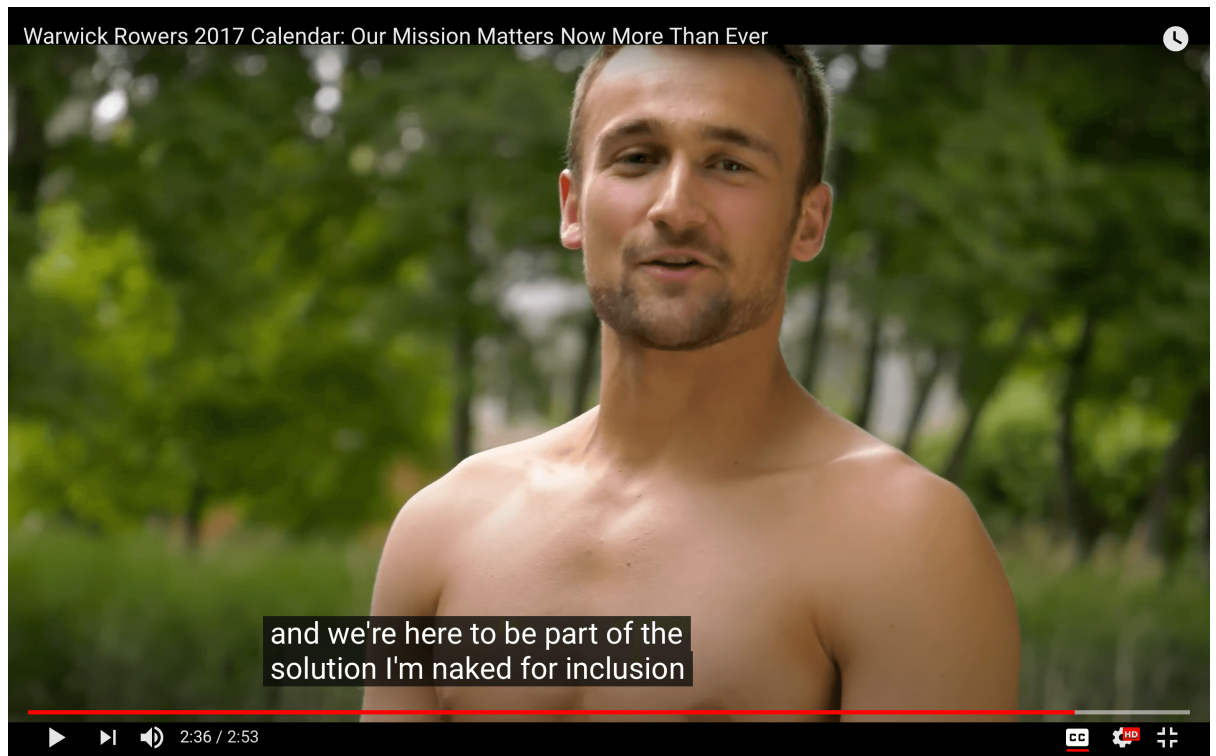
...and I give a damn about equality.

One hate crime is committed every hour of every day in this country.

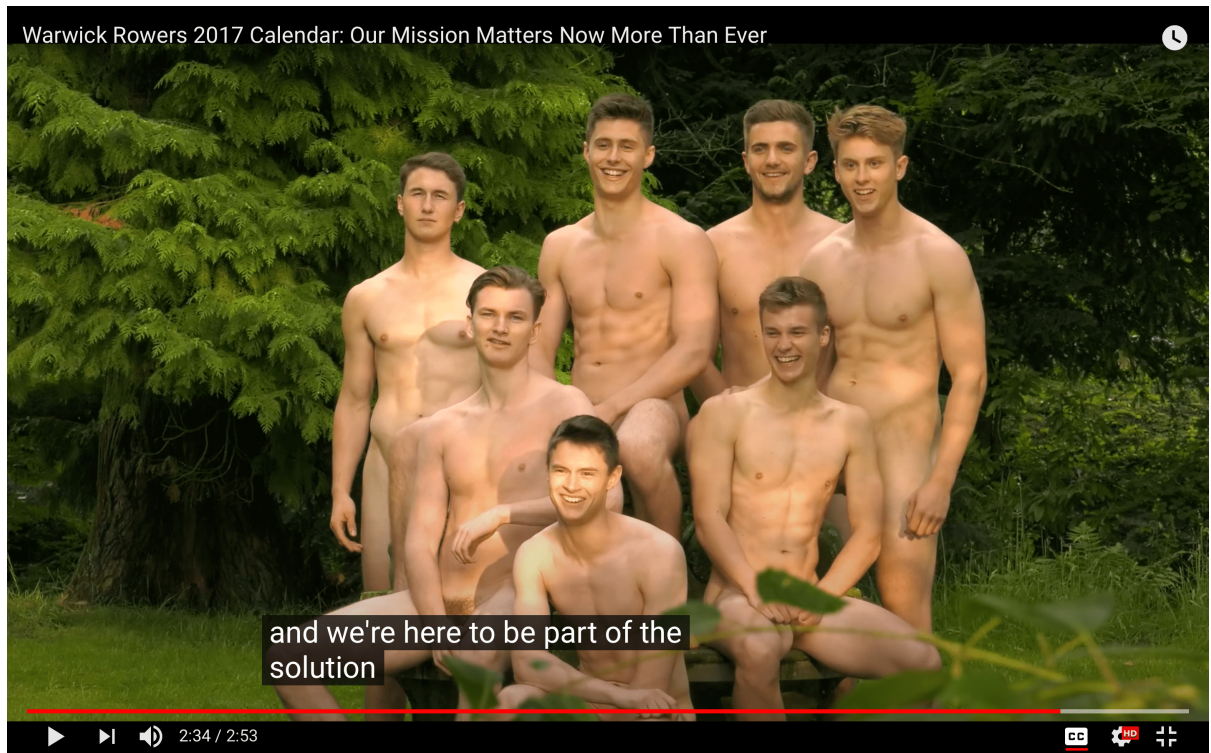
Many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender teens who come out to their parents are thrown out of their homes.

It is time for things to change. We all have to get involved. We all have to give a damn."

Images 10, 11, 12, 13: Campaign video stills, Sport Allies, The Warwick Rowers.



Still images taken from 'Warwick Rowers 2017 Calendar: Our Mission Matters Now More Than Ever', copyright Warwick Rowers (2016).



Still images taken from 'Warwick Rowers 2017 Calendar: Our Mission Matters Now More Than Ever', copyright Warwick Rowers (2016).

Key excerpts from this script:

“This is the story of some guys who decided to change things by getting naked.

I’m naked for equality. I’m here to make a difference.

People who are LGBTQ+, especially during their school years, face difficulties with conforming to identities, heterosexual norms. It made me realise how much of a problem it was in our society because they thought they were not accepted into this great place, called team sport, where you grow as an individual.

We’re here with our boats, our oars, and no clothes to show that your true identity is the best place to be.

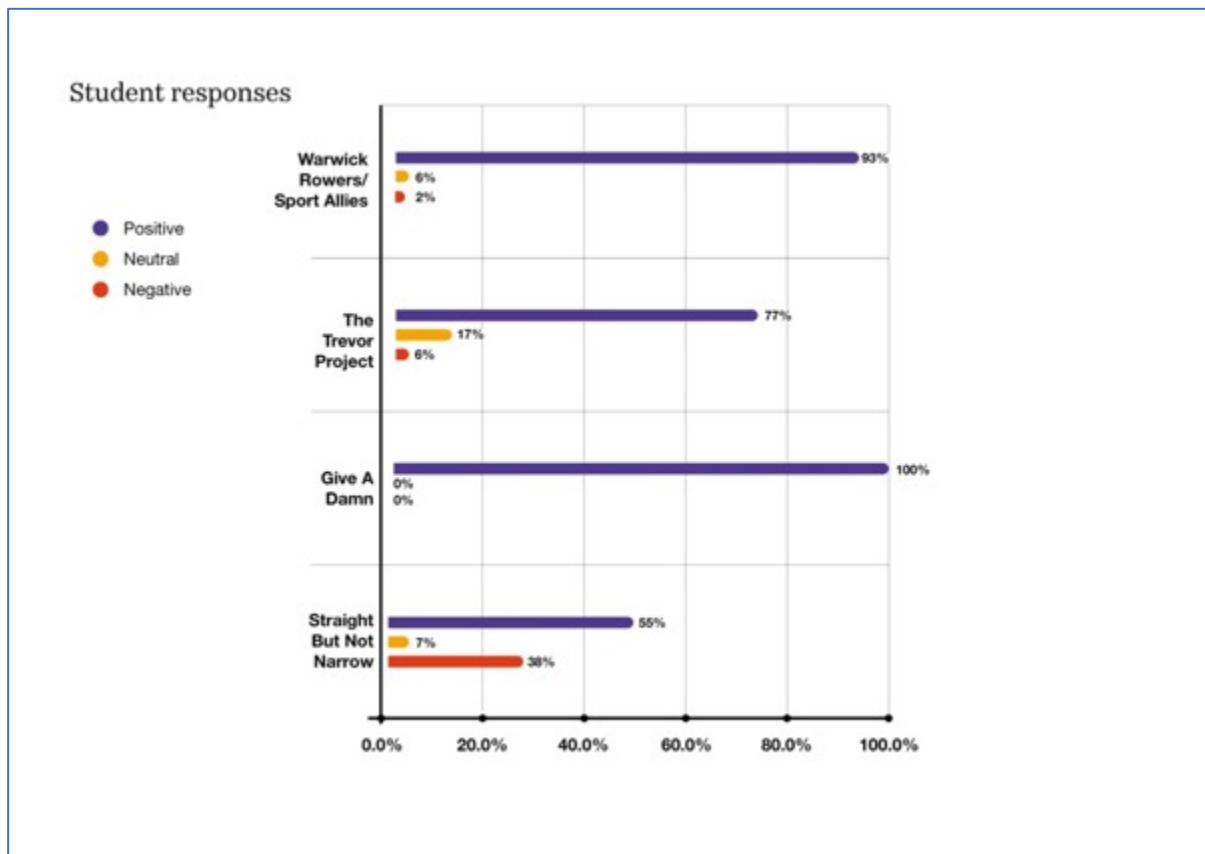
Homophobia is still a problem in sports and we’re here to be part of the solution.”

The tone of Straight But Not Narrow and The Warwick Rowers was similarly light-hearted and humorous whilst the tone of the Trevor Project PSA and Give A Damn! was serious, sombre and aligned with the profundity of the topic at hand. The Give A Damn! campaign was the only video to include visual diversity of race, age, and gender amongst its participants. This was an expected potential barrier to engagement and at the time of inception, there were no other similar U.S. national media campaigns that offered centring of Black or other ethnic minority people. While I was keen to pay attention to issues of race and the differences in experience between diverse students, I was interested to find that Black men in the U.S. raise the same issues as their White peers around masculinity and existential identity concepts when asked about the higher education experience and their conceptualisation of post-graduation success (Brooms et al. 2017; Carey 2017; Brooms 2019). This presented an important implication; despite the additional challenges of intersectional marginalisation, non-White male students engaged in discourse on the nature of their identity as those living without additional socially and politically approved marginalising factors.

The narrative enquiry about feelings of each campaign intended to focus on conceptual value and the semi-structured questionnaire prompted the question, *“How do you feel about that?”* Most students initially focused on the imagery and visuals of each campaign and then reflected on the concept. The feelings of each participant were categorised as positive, neutral or negative for each video and campaign. To address the wide variances in how students described their feelings, additional category descriptors were added to each; positive-enthusiastic, neutral-indifferent and negative-apathetic. This better reflected the responses that were emotive, in a comparable manner to students whose response was confident but less impassioned. Only four students overall identified as bisexual or queer and so percentages in relation to these groups should be considered accordingly. Image 14

indicates how participants felt about each campaign¹⁰⁸ after seeing the promotional video of each and discussing what they perceived to be the producer's goals. This formed a discursive prompt as the number of interviews progressed and enabled me to discuss cumulative trends in feelings. In each case I presented this after the student discussed their own feelings to avoid pre-empting or influencing their response.

Image 14: Student responses to campaigns, overview.

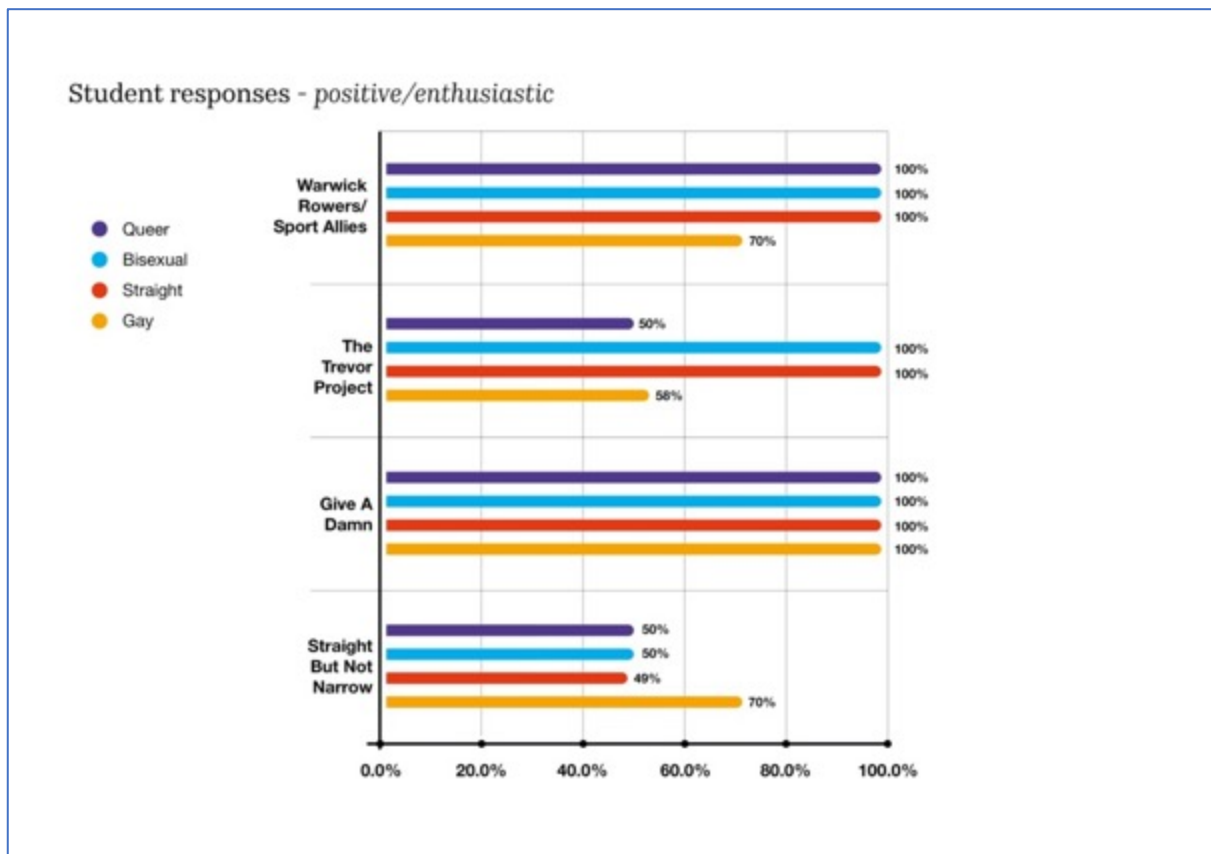


Most students reported positive-enthusiastic feelings about the campaign concepts, imagery and messages and this category scored an average of 81%. This reflected a range from a 100% positive response to Give A Damn! to a 55% positive response to Straight But Not Narrow. While the Give A Damn! script has a notably ominous tone discussing suicides, hate crimes and murders, all participants responded positively to its message of inclusivity and the breadth of sexual identity represented. Students responded positively to the representation and felt that by including recognisable people who spoke openly about whether they were gay, bisexual or straight, it was

¹⁰⁸ Phenomenological inquiry does not readily lend itself to statistical analysis and as we are not primarily interested in generalisability; the percentages add context, not a quantitatively viable indicator.

synonymous with the goal of providing factual, useful information. This is a significant finding as it resonates closely with the enduring guidance of advocacy organisations that higher education organisations must ensure campuses are inclusive and representative of the student body.

Image 15: Student responses – positive/enthusiastic



While all participants viewed the Give A Damn! campaign as positive, their narratives reflected the sombre, serious mood of the video. Reflecting the themes of inequality in the message, students used terms such as “powerful”, “effective” and “brave” to describe their approval. The Trevor Project PSA presented an urgent message and directed viewers to a crisis support service, which students viewed as straight to the point and helpful. Notably, each video generated some degree of discomfort that students took care to describe as a *positive* discomfort.

Participants used a broad range of animated descriptions, particularly in relation to Straight But Not Narrow and the Warwick Rowers, referring to them as “brave”, “satirical”, “hilarious” and “fantastic”. Interestingly, responses mirrored the pace and tone of the video in discussion. The Straight But Not Narrow and Warwick Rowers videos each present a central

message around reducing dangerous homophobia and catalysing better inclusivity in a light-hearted and playful format.

A valuable element of the interview process was that most participants had not previously seen the videos. This helped to establish their initial instinctual feelings followed by a more in-depth discussion of the potential of each to make a difference. Men who were not born in the U.S. and had memories of growing up in other cultures were notably more positive about the blatancy of the core message in *Straight But Not Narrow*:

“I think looking back at the place I am now and my journey with my sexuality, these videos back then, high school years, would have been so helpful. Being in a small town there wasn’t a lot of diversity, therefore looking at those videos now, that would have been so helpful.”

Student in the Midwest region, straight man

“This video is definitely for both gays and straights. Those who are being discriminated against and those who are being the discriminatory people. So, I think it’s definitely just saying, it’s making a very logical point, in a very concise way. Just saying there’s no reason, there’s just no reason. It’s playing with the role of irrelevance. It’s saying discrimination is irrelevant. There’s no reason to choose hate when you can choose love. ...having someone who is a straight White male, especially talking to those in the gay society would be... it would help them be more comfortable around the straight White males. Especially, like, jocks because he’s hot. He’s a very fit individual, so it would make sense.”

Student in the West region, gay man

Such responses reflect Moy and Bosch’s (2013) interrogation of Lippmann’s theory of public opinion, closely linked with McCombs’ approach to agenda setting. The student in the first quote above reflects on the power and influence of the interpersonal influences of media representation (Mutz and Young 2011; May and Bosch 2013), noting that such media material in their hometown would have likely softened the local population’s harder approaches to diversity.

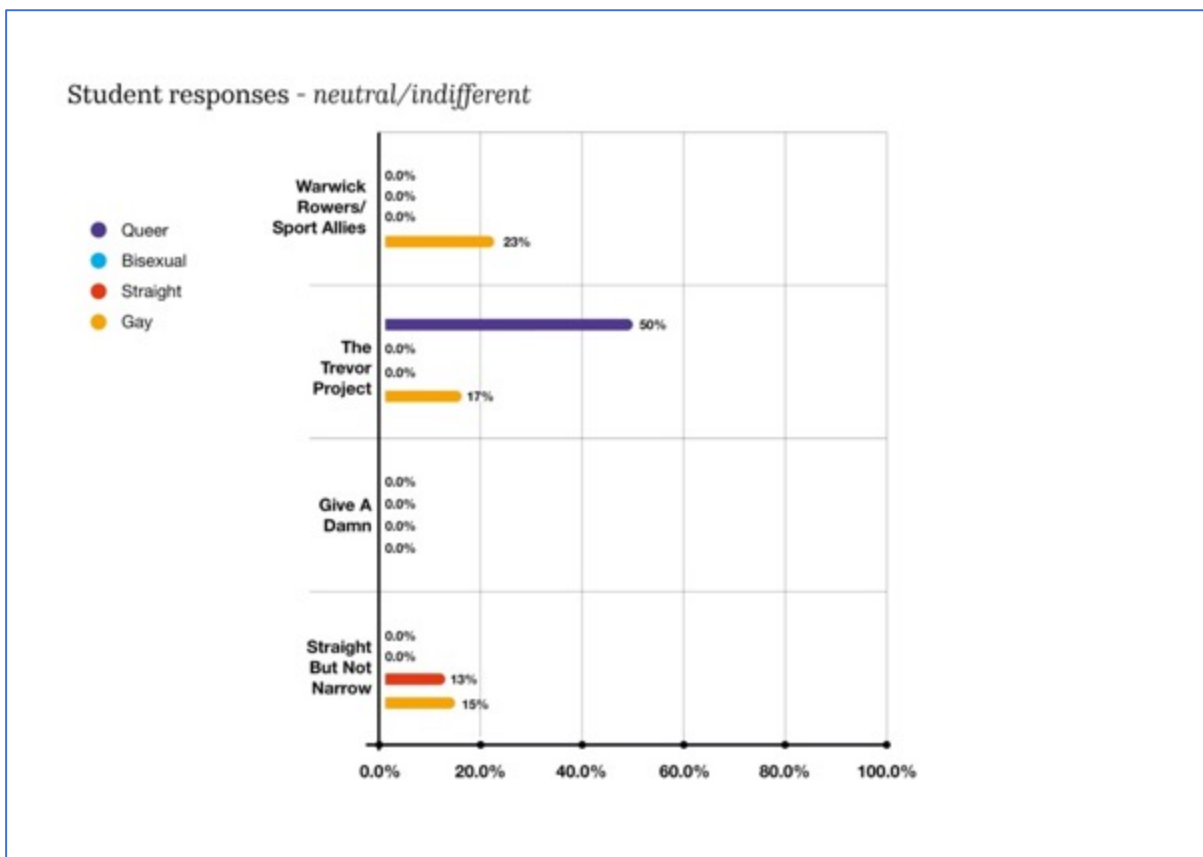
The discourse of both students infers the purpose and potential of using a media-based approach to engagement and behaviour change. When considered in light of Lippmann’s theory of how we interpret our environment (Barbosa e Silva 2008), that we behave based on how we *think* our environment exists, as opposed to how it actually exists, an understanding of each person’s environmental viewpoint is crucial. While Bennett and Iyengar (2008) cautioned against the minimising, desensitising effects of media exposure that is too selective, more recent research on the engagement of young people suggests on-point media messaging has significant social currency. This indicates the positive responses of students equates to relatively positive perceptions of their immediate social environment.

Yoo et al. (2016) found college students were highly receptive to media direction in health concepts, finding that the impact of a presumed influence model helps to explain why college students are more likely to take up smoking when exposed to pro-smoking media. The important element of Yoo et al.'s work is structured in the tone and approach of the media under study. When positive messages are used, the researchers found clearer influences on behaviour. Applied to the suicide prevention campaigns, the student narratives above contextualise how media influence works. In this scenario, the positivity in each message has a strong theoretical presumption for success. Similarly, Johnson (2017) found significantly improved psychosexual health and sexual wellbeing amongst students who were exposed to positive media messaging. This triangulation of positive outcomes linked to media messages helps us to understand the feelings of students who responded well to the images and scripts, suggesting the “*new era of minimal effects*” predicted by Bennett and Iyengar (2008:302) has not come to pass.

The producers of Straight But Not Narrow made it clear in preliminary launch material that the campaign was about love and compassion. While some students took exception to the vocabulary and tone of the message, there is no evidence it was produced to mock or provoke. Josh Hutcherson is an outspoken advocate of the LGBTQ community and has spoken candidly about the loss of two gay uncles to AIDS (Malkin 2012). Students were unaware of this and in the interest of maintaining a bias-free discussion, I refrained from adding this information until after the formal interview ended. This had a marked effect. Students who initially felt positively about the campaign described feeling more emphatic about it while students who had reacted negatively warmed to it, citing the lack of clarity around the true motives of Hutcherson as a barrier to their acceptance. This initial concern, termed as identity suspicion by Oakes (2020), appears to emerge from a confusion between whether the actor, in this case Hutcherson, is acting as a matter of self-protection or as an example of authentic self-expression (Massey 2010; Morgan and Davis-Delano 2016; Oakes 2020).

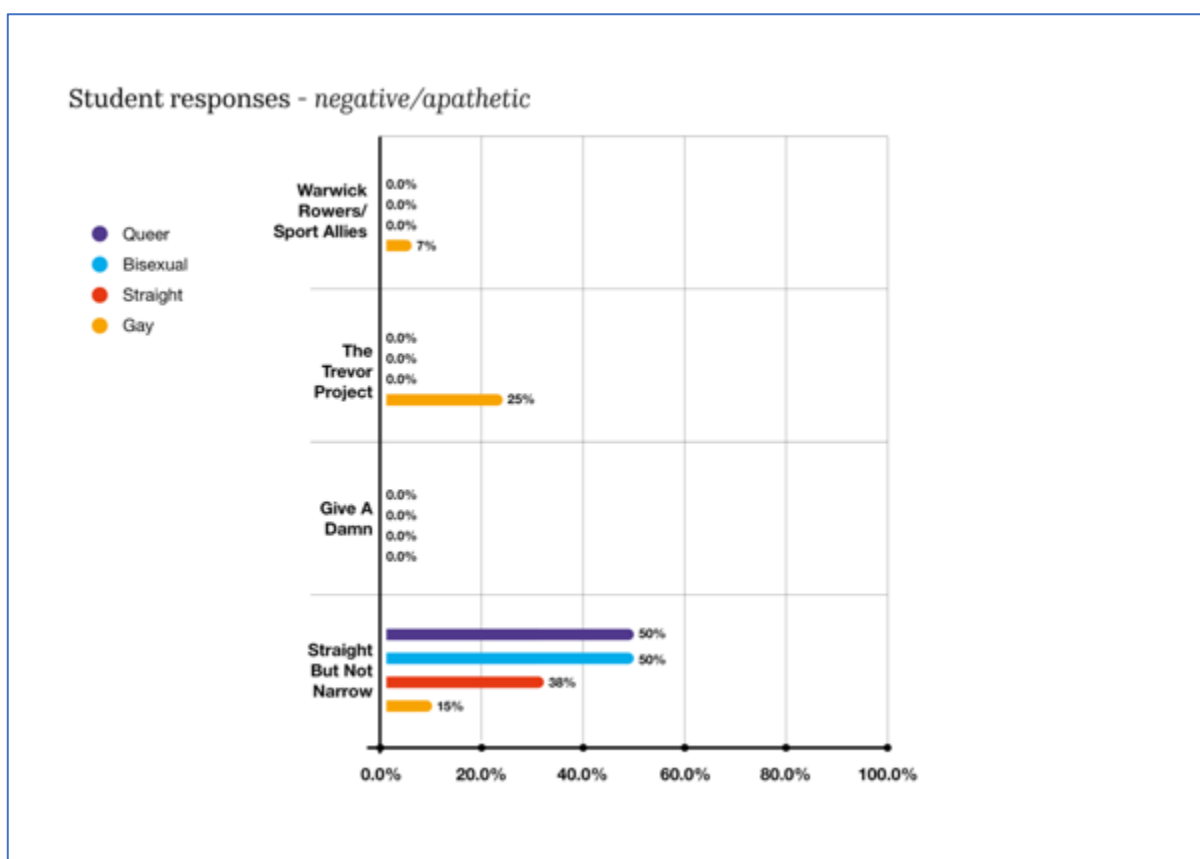
Few students were neutral-indifferent to any of the campaigns and this category attracted just 8% of the responses, reflecting 14% of gay respondents and 3% of straight respondents. Where students reported indifference, this reflected some common concerns. These included a degree of uncertainty in the aims of the message and concern about effectiveness and impact. Students described mixed feelings in these cases, often reflecting that they were unable to reconcile the imagery with the message or that the message was confusing or crowded.

Image 16: Student responses – neutral/indifferent



Negative views of the campaigns represented 12% of the overall feedback and were heavily skewed towards Straight But Not Narrow, with 38% of respondents responding apathetically. Some antipathy came from the participants' pre-existing views of the narrator, Josh Hutcherson, whereas others disapproved of the approach of promising "more women" for straight men who sought out gay friends through reduced competition for sex or dating. In the video, Hutcherson, speaking to a straight audience, encourages men to have more gay friends because it *"leaves more women for you,"* suggesting more gay male friends reduces competition for the attention of women. Rejection of this message by straight men was an interesting outcome as studies with similar groups indicate significant levels of competitiveness for sexual encounters amongst a limited pool of partners on campus. In Harris III and Struve's (2009) study of male university students, participants reported sexual assertiveness in line with masculine cultural expectations and the ability to have sex with numerous women were key positive elements of their time on campus. Musser (2012) and Case-Levine (2016) further these findings and suggest multiple deconstructions are necessary to avoid the problematic toxicity associated with the behaviour, including meanings of masculinities and gender-specific clubs.

Image 17: Student responses – negative/apathetic



Notably, it was disproportionately straight men that disagreed with the message and the concept on ethical or identity grounds, describing it as “shady”, “patronising” and “weird”:

“I think that really, the inner feminist inside of me, is like... “no”. It is an attention getter, I don’t know how positive it is when it comes to the social construction, we have a group that is fighting for equal rights in the workplace and in society, it is a little detrimental to them, and a little shady.”

Student in the Midwest region, straight man.

Gay students who disapproved of the core tenets of the campaign were either unconvinced about the validity or authenticity of the message or felt strongly about its delivery:

“I mean, I guess it plays on that stereotype [of homogeneous straight jocks] ... because I think if people then just become friends with gay people just because of that reason [because they’re told to do so], then that’s a useless reason, I still don’t think they would be interested in them as a person.”

Student in the Midwest region, gay man

This was the general degree to which any confusion about the messaging extended. Some students were unsure if the message was aimed primarily at gay men or straight men

but considered that to be of little importance, noting that if anyone took positive meaning from the campaign then it could be considered successful. Others were tentatively more positive when they considered the longer-term potential of the video to speak specifically to straight men:

"I think it's a piece of the puzzle. I don't think it's going to convert anyone straight out. I think it helps especially if it's part of a larger campaign that does more than just that. I think stuff like that definitely can have an impact overall where you're trying to convince them that, "Yes, this is important, and we can all be on the same page about it and it doesn't have to be one person standing out from the crowd". That's important in getting out of the crowd mentality of, "Well, everyone does it" [behave homophobically] because everyone doesn't do it. The handful who do... no one feels they can speak out against them. So, this campaign could be helpful in that sense."
Student in the South region, gay man.

Where students felt strongly about the campaign, it was often because they transposed their feelings onto their perception of how others would feel. For example, the straight men considered how their gay friends would feel and vice versa.

"I thought it was so patronising. Like the whole, "oh, that means more girls for me", no, that's so patronising. Because my friends who are straight, they're like, "Yeah, we know you're gay, we like you for you and we're going to support you with it." That is fine and normal. They're not like, "Oh you're leaving more girls for us!" That delegitimises the ability of straight men and makes an assumption that they're just all dumb jocks. It's such a shallow representation."
Student in the South region, gay man

This student's testimony resonated closely with a presentation I watched by Raewyn Connell, a sociologist and one of the founders of this field of study, at the 2nd International Symposium on Men and Masculinities in September 2019 at Özyeğin University, Istanbul, Turkey. The theme of the symposium was 'Masculinities: Challenges and Possibilities in Troubling Times' and Connell opened her presentation by stating that we are living in troubling times in which people seek "the defence of social privilege." She went on to say that most people, including academics, misunderstand hegemonic masculinity and that it is important to focus on the survivability of gender relations. The student narrative above reflects other elements of Connell's presentation, particularly that men need to reject efforts to gain a 'perfect masculinity' and instead seek a 'good enough' masculinity based on sustainability. In this context, the student recognises the differences in individual identity and refutes the predetermined expectations of his own behaviour and that of his friends.

Still, voices of dissent on this campaign were in the minority and most students viewed it in the tone in which it was intended, with some humour - to berate those straight men who intentionally avoided friendships with gay men:

“If you watch [the video] and follow it with a long discussion then maybe they will remember it. I like the message, I think the message is great, but you know, “we’re never going to say anything bad to anyone ever”; that’s not going to happen. If you show that to a bunch of college kids one guy is turning to his bud and calling someone fag or something like that, and I hate that word. I don’t think that lands on college campuses at all. So that was definitely a... I don’t want to say objectifying women, but it’s objectifying women, it’s like don’t worry your friend’s gay, that’s great so now you can have all these random objects to yourself because he doesn’t want any of them. I get what they are trying to do there, it’s saying something so simple that will click in the brain of a guy oh yeah there’s going to be more for me...”

Student in the South region (alumni), straight man

Using humour in health messaging is not a field I had come across in my professional or academic experience. I used to tell my undergraduate first-year health promotion students working on their first campaigns that, other than a solid evidence base, the most important aspect of their work was memorability. I explained that health consumers, their target audience, would remember something that made them happy and remember something that made them angry but would forget something that was too neutral. I was accustomed to working with a shock factor approach in sexual health messaging and I used the AIDS Vancouver ‘Think Again’ campaign (2004) and the Montana Meth Project campaign (2005) to discuss the ethics and impact of using explicit imagery.

The Think Again campaign used images of men engaged in penetrative sex and the Montana Meth Project used photographs of adolescents displaying distressing physical images of addiction. Both projects were controversial, but evidence suggests they were effective in their respective aims (Lombardo and Léger 2007; Morales et al. 2012). I was keen to find out if humour on a topic as serious as suicide would be similarly well-received. Existing research suggests that while the incongruity of such messaging might initially be jarring, humour adds sustainability and neural links to the central threat of the message (Lewis et al. 2013; Hendriks and Janssen 2017). As is the case with almost every theme and topic that arose in this research, masculine identity comes to play in the responses. Murray (2014) found men are much more likely to be receptive to health messaging that combines humour with a serious, often threatening message. This is a distinct reflection of my own teaching experiences – male students, regardless of any defining factors such as sexuality – were almost unanimous in their approval of the shock images described above whereas female students had a more variable response.

Discussions on suicide varied broadly and there were substantial differences in how students viewed the topic. This reflected the range of backgrounds represented in the sample group, in terms of age, life experience, and exposure to factors such as religion and mental health. Interviews were not structured to enable quantitative assessment of viewpoints and experiences but cumulative learning from each discussion indicated that students would readily and passionately engage in such work. Within the semi-structured process, students frequently referred to demographic groups they considered to be at higher risk of suicide and to their perception of responsibility within the university administration system.

Despite differences in opinion about the imagery and messaging, students agreed with the overall concept of awareness-raising:

“I did call the suicide awareness hotline which is a different one I think at one point in my life, after I was rough, it was young love, I was crazy, but these videos would have been so helpful when it comes to orientation cause that is different.

I think it does a lot to bring down barriers and stigmas.”

Student in the Midwest region, straight man.

Tensions between the media and suicidality are discussed in the literature review, reflecting the complexity of suicide etiology. Student narratives complicate this further. Gould (2001) discussed the frustrating links between media and suicide:

“I am not talking about healthy people reading Romeo and Juliet. Media coverage of suicides has been shown to significantly increase the rate of suicide, and the magnitude of the increase is related to the amount, duration, and prominence of coverage.”

In the same way as I describe a tipping point in heteronormative relations between straight and gay men, we need a similar framework for suicidality and the media. While Gould sounds an alarm about irresponsible or uneducated reporting, they also call for capitalising on media strategies that work with young people to support good mental health. Concluding their 2019 study with caution about the erosion of inclusive acceptance amongst young straight men, GLAAD’s president calls on the media; *“This year’s results demonstrate a need for GLAAD to reach younger Americans with stories and campaigns that build acceptance.”*

I described earlier in the paper my initial efforts to carry out a structured mapping exercise of social media content relating to male student suicidality and male identities. I suspended this when it became clear that I could not do justice to the approach based on the enormous amount of material generated each day. This represented considerable

momentum across media platforms for such discussions and included headlines such as, “*Men Are Tweeting #BiSexualMenExist. Here’s Why That Matters*” (Wong 2020) and, “*As a gay man living in 2020, I find myself asking at LEAST three times a day, “Are straight men OK?”*” (LaConte 2020). As an indicator of need, such material demonstrates the urgency of much more work with men to understand their experiences, social lives, and risk factors.

5.3.1 Warwick Rowers and Sport Allies

The Warwick Rowers campaign attracted some accusations of impropriety through their “naked for inclusion” strapline and related imagery, which reflected the feelings of the 2% of respondents who viewed the campaign negatively. Overall, students responded positively to the Warwick Rower’s campaign. The concept was new and enticing to most students. Some found it challenging to distil a core message from the sexualised imagery and strapline of “naked for inclusion.” While students generally liked the concept, they had questions about the motives of the rowing team on a micro level and the charity on a macro level. This was similar to feelings about Josh Hutcherson and Daniel Radcliffe and centred on whether the rowing team participants were engaging in the charity work for admirable reasons.

Feelings about the material were guided heavily by the imagery of the rowing team, which was not diverse in body type or ethnicity, instead presenting images of polished, young, toned men who were almost all White. Students did not necessarily criticise this as a concept but felt it meant the message was somewhat diluted and not applicable to the sports in which homophobia is most prominent, such as football and ice hockey.

“That was fantastic. That’s so cool. I think it does have to be a specific sport with specific body types because American football, you’ve got everyone from the man made of muscle to a 300-pound linebacker who is not entirely muscle. A lot of Americans, if that guy walked out entirely naked would not be happy. They would be quite offended by that.

I think the fact that the rowers do have a body types that is considered societally attractive definitely helped out and made them visible in a positive way. I think that it could get pulled off again.”

Student in the South region, transgender queer man

Curious about the extent and limits of this student’s views, I asked if it was important that the rowing team was made up of openly straight men trying to encourage gay men to join, rather than the other way around:

“Part of it is that the straight White cismen already have so much power, it’s so much easier for them to make their voices heard. Whereas the LGBT community has been silenced for so long. With the straight White cismen doing this, they- I don’t like the metaphor ‘giving a voice’ because these marginalised groups do have a voice. It’s

more like giving them your megaphone but by doing that, they are making it more visible and more in-your-face that you do need to step up, grow up, it's the 21st century."

Student in the South region, transgender queer man

This standpoint further evidences the work of advocacy organisations to improve LGBT wellbeing on campus by improving their visibility and empowering their voices, rather than speaking for them. Harris III and Struve (2009) identified this as a critically important concept in acceptance and validation for male students, noting that where individuals failed to establish themselves positively and confidently with culturally dominant norms on campus, they would likely experience significant crisis. This presents a further tension. If marginalised groups have a voice as effective as this student suggests, efforts to reduce suicidality and improve campus experience that focus on empowerment through support from dominant groups have been misguided.

Although the Sport Allies campaign was launched in the U.S., it had a limited audience, and most students were unfamiliar with it. While students said they were familiar with media marketing and campaigns that used female nudity to engage, they were unaccustomed to a male equivalent.

"I think the [sexual component] has overtaken everything, cause I feel like even when they are at pride or making the calendar all they said, they said were hoping to have a lot of fun, and all of that stuff and like, there is more of the fun component or being at pride showing off your body, you are going to get attention, I probably think that's more of their concern."

Student in the Midwest region, gay man.

This student's standpoint on the rowers' attendance at London Pride reflect a growing chorus in the press that pride parades are becoming dominated by straight allies (Ashbrook 2017; Vaughan 2018). This provides an additional layer of complexity to the debate about straight presence in a gay domain, although this is largely overruled by the myriad benefits of being more inclusive of invaluable allies (Tatchell 2018; Zane 2019). For some students however, the presentation of the Warwick Rowers was incongruent with how they viewed the meaning of pride events:

"Well I feel like they weren't actually saying anything, other than that they support [gay people], but, it's hard to make those points seem genuine, when you are stood there naked, cause I feel like its focusing on, its focusing on their bodies, it's still like worse, focusing on the sexual component of their audience, I feel like that's not helpful. That's how I feel about that."

Student in the Midwest region, gay man.

As a concept, the Warwick Rowers were generally better received than the Straight But Not Narrow campaign to test the acceptability of straight men as gatekeepers, such as in this interview section:

Student: "Like I kind of like how they did the video, and like how they all introduced themselves, "I'm naked for inclusion, for equality", and I think that, like the way I saw it was like they are stripped down so all their defences are off in a sense, and they are still there, still accepted and still having fun."

Interviewer: "And things like where they went to LGBT Pride in London, that sort of visibility, is that important?"

Student: "I think that's pretty important, cause it's one thing to say you support something, then it's another thing to actually support and be there and do something.

I feel that's kind of like a big thing on like, even for us in the gay straight alliance, being a community on campus, it's one thing to say we care about the community and not do anything about it, than to do something about it.

I feel like it can eventually work in sports, cause right now we still have a very closed minded and narrow generation, which makes sense I mean cause even people around forty or even thirty are kind of set in their ways on how things have to be, or supposed to be, and it makes sense for them to be reluctant to it, and plus anything you do for change there is going to be a push back.

You just have to wait until the resistance may not be as strong, cause right now if you tried doing that same video and it be professional sports, or even like, oddly enough, even the wrestling sports, they are already in their underwear basically."

Student in the South region, bisexual man.

This student compared the legitimacy of straight men leading a campaign for Sport Allies with the same measure for those in a GSA. This was relatively unusual in the interviews as most students, regardless of sexual identity, presented an imbalanced, unequal equivalency of levels of responsibility. For example, most students were emphatic about the need for straight allies to prove their worth to be accepted in LGBTQ circles but there was less emphasis on the need for gay members of alliances to be as accepting of new straight members. This imbalance echoed Scheer and Poteat's (2016) findings regarding the range of external factors at play in alliance engagement.

"Hmm, cute rowers, I was wondering like... so who is this aimed at? I do feel like when it comes to sports participation, the locker room is really lively, like the main place of anxiety... am I going to get beat up or whatever? So, the nudity, I gather these are mostly straight guys and it seems to be signalled like, its fine, it's ok, like we're not freaked out to be in the locker room with you, it's fine, you know... feel safe."

Student in the Midwest region, gay/bisexual/queer man

The duality of the Sport Allies campaign was a key point of most discussions. Students pondered whether the rowers were trying to encourage gay men to join sports teams by

establishing a safe space or trying to reduce the hostility from some straight men as an enabler to a more diverse team:

“Cause it seems all possible it could be on both sides, so my first thought is its addressing potential gay participants in sports but yeah if it’s sort of doing this interesting dual thing... where maybe, if it’s not speaking directly towards straight guys, it might be saying something like, “this is what’s cool now”, if you do express a kind of reluctance to increase diversity and maybe it will set you apart, and “look at how we are all hanging out and having fun on this photo shoot and don’t you want to be on this fun team”, so that’s interesting.”

Student in the Midwest region, gay/bisexual/queer man

Students who were definitively more positive about the campaign’s imagery saw humour and quirkiness in the styling and thought it would appeal to a broad audience.

“That’s awesome. It’s interesting; I think it appeals to both straight and gay men... oh geez. Um, just because naked men catches your attention. Yeah, naked people in general catch your attention (laughs).

Yeah, but a bunch of straight guys on a sports team naked grabbing each other’s asses.

I think, I mean it’s kind of funny, but at the same time it’s saying something.

I think it’s challenging heteronormativity, like they said.

Which is different than the Josh Hutcherson thing (laughs) because they are genuinely coming at you with, I think, humour. And some awkwardness and some appeal and like, and you’re interested and then they, they bring it to why we’re here.”

Student in the North region, transgender straight man

The importance this student placed on the genuineness of the team’s intent and manifest actions is reflected by Howell (2020), who identified integrity as a crucial factor in inclusivity if allies are to be trusted, accepted and effective. He attributed this to the willingness of men in the dominant group to reconfigure their approach to advocacy and identity. Pivotal to this scenario is the reconciliation of intersecting identities, essentially that minority men must accept support and advocacy from a group of men whose ideology and existence has been developed during decades of oppressing others. Duhigg et al. (2010) explored ally commitment with a group of heterosexual men and laid a foundation for developing trust and efficacy, which had similar features to Howell’s work, noting longevity and an open-minded insight into their own privilege and sexual prejudice were key indicators of successful support. This work requires the construction of a new masculinity in the education sphere that reflects and respects the recursive relationship between students of different identities.

Filteau (2014) established a precedent for this tension in an unlikely environment, oilfields. Participants subordinated the existing hegemonic masculinity that dominated life in the field in favour of a new ‘socially dominant-nonhegemonic masculinity’ that incorporated

concepts of masculinity, femininity and gender dominance. The research showed that while tightly controlled by a hierarchical gender order, mediation and reconstruction was not only possible but celebrated by many of the environment's inhabitants. Similar research in the fishing industry (Gustavsson and Riley 2019), mixed martial arts (Filteau 2017), and the country music genre (Leap 2019) found similar opportunities to explore subtler nuances of masculinity and redefine its dominance by working with men living within its subjectivities.

This work is deeply meaningful across typologies of hegemonic masculinity and can have a negative impact on men who do not conform to the expected, central tenets of identity. It provides a roadmap for higher education communities to improve the environment for all students and most crucially, those at heightened risk of suicidality. The examples of a more fluid, thoughtful hegemony is reminiscent of Duncanson's (2015) work, which found the dominant form of hegemonic masculinity was contingent on the buy-in of all of its members. As this more often fails as men become more introspective about their social hierarchies, change is theorised and developed, which Duncanson describes as a previously underdeveloped element of Connell's work.

5.4 Campus climate

"We are at the moment where we can collide, or change. But first we have to be the change."
Davis (2017)

Few students felt their university made a determined effort to engage with male students over mental health and suicidality. They typically recalled an introduction to counselling services and mental wellbeing during fresher's week but said this was procedural and did not serve a memorable or helpful function. Students described supportive faculty members they could approach for issues around mental health support, but overall students did not think this was promoted in the same way as counselling services aimed at female students:

"In high school there were like a lot of posters about like suicide prevention but here I've barely seen anything. I would say that there's more of a focus on like women and their depression. And uh they're like eating disorders is a major factor and there hasn't been really a focus on men's mental health."
Student in the Northeast region, straight man.

Students spoke more positively of services on campus when they had accessible, supportive faculty members. Students in the Northeast region described their relationship with a professor who was very open in discussing gender, sex, identity and mental health and this

group were notably better informed and more confident about their wellbeing and how to recognise friends who might be in trouble.

“I would say it's a topic [suicidality and mental health] amongst students. Definitely the classes I've taken with [professor] have um brought up the discussions and I've been able to take that to my friends and have those discussions. So, if I didn't take those classes I would have had a lot less exposure to situations like that.”

Student in the Northeast region, straight man.

Regardless of the presence of supportive faculty members, students did not think universities consistently promoted information on where to get help for suicide or a mental health crisis with regularity or enthusiasm:

“Um the only thing I could think of is uh like the, the bulletin boards. There just might be a poster saying um like I, I saw this one thing. It was like a butterfly that said um, you are worth it.”

Student in the Northeast region, straight man.

While students were critical of administrations for their approach, they also recognised a need for student bodies to be more engaged:

“...there's definitely resources...like a self-harm and suicide awareness group. I don't know how much people talk about [these issues] outside of the specific groups. It could be a big topic for you but for the other 14,000 people or whatever, they could be removed from it. ...people are desensitised to it if it's not in their group.”

Student in the Northeast region, straight man

A lack of student engagement is similarly reflected in Liu et al.'s (2018) work, which found low uptake and utilisation of the services provided by universities. However, the researcher's discussions with students concluded that both mental health need and suicide risk were so high that responsibility for improving utilisation must lie at least jointly with administrations, who they called on to implement more effective strategies of support and suicide prevention. Wexelbaum (2018) considered if the availability of LGBT-specific resources, such as an LGBT library, had a mediating impact on negative mental health outcomes for students and found similar results to Liu et al., that the incongruity between availability and utilisation is substantial. This is central to the debate of a question a number of students found challenging to answer: is it sufficient for universities to simply provide support services or is there a need for them to be proactive in engagement?

Overall, 88% of students felt suicide prevention amongst university students was the responsibility of the administration. In some cases, students felt the university was wholly responsible whereas others took a view that the university shared responsibility with student

groups and local healthcare providers. No students felt universities did not have a degree of responsibility but the 12% who were not affirmative in this area said they were unable to make a decision in relation to responsibility.

Discursively, there was some degree of correlation between students' beliefs and opinions and their perception of their university. For example, where students felt universities should take more responsibility to protect students, they described their own institution as doing little in this area.

"I think students have a lot of responsibility. But since the universities really do have like, a leadership role and control over these students, I feel like they should have some responsibility to at least make an effort to make sure that students know what they can do."

Student in the South region, gay man.

Where suicides had occurred at the university, students were critical of how the administration handled this. One student at a university in the South described regular suicides on campus and they felt negatively about how the university talked about this:

"It's not very well publicised if they do make efforts, the counselling and testing centre is pretty great in itself, but again, not well publicised and there was actually a transgender student committed suicide as well. And the only reason people knew about it was because they jumped off the university building, people are walking back and forth all day."

And other than the university news statement saying, 'this is a tragedy, we hope it doesn't happen again', there was a blanket email that went to every person."

And they made a Facebook post on the church's Facebook page, and that's it."

After a while it just kind of died down but like to this day like people are still saying okay, it's a heavily populated building, there are offices on every floor, and it should have been prevented. You should have been able to stop someone from jumping out the window."

Student in the region, gay man.

The night before my arrival at one university, my faculty contact got in touch to tell me a student had died by suicide. He had been a fraternity brother and I was due to interview several of his friends the next day. The faculty advisor had met with the fraternity, whose members had elected to proceed as planned. Students on this campus were the only group out of the sample to discuss notions of a healthier masculinity to balance the 'toxic masculinity' they felt bombarded with in the media. This was mediated by regular classes with a professor who led discussions on masculinity, heteronormativity, and men's health:

"...there are, there are groups of men who um get together and their testosterone rises, and they have to be the alpha and um like situations like that. But we've been taught and talked to about like helping masculinity."

And [professor] came in and talked several times. We have like new member education that has lectures about healthy masculinity.

There's a series here, I think it's the women's center that holds it. It's called Men in Action. It's just a group talking about healthy masculinity, and we have several brothers in that.

So, it's, it's like a well-educated group and I think the more educated people are the more they're going to be open to having that conversation. And, I had a conversation with my one friend the other day about healthy masculinity and he, he didn't want to have the conversation because he wasn't really educated of how to talk about it and he was really closed... “

Student in the Northeast region, straight man.

Some students were unable to say if they thought the skills they developed from being members of a group such as a GSA or fraternity would carry them into the working world after university. However, conversations such as this indicated in some cases students were building agency and resilience to constructed societal norms and were developing the skills needed to challenge these.

Students connected how universities responded to the aftermath of suicides and their track record on health promotion to the general stigma around suicide. Stigma was not a common theme during the interviews and students were either unaware of it or did not subscribe to its premise. The exception was in a discussion about a university response to suicides on campus:

“I think it [health promotion about suicide] does need to be fundamentally different, just because suicide is so stigmatised that if someone does attempt, the school thinks they were just asking for attention.

And I feel like if the university were to do a suicide prevention campaign, it would need to start with changing viewpoints, not just ‘don't do it’.”

Student in the South region, gay man.

Students in the Midwest had encountered similar barriers and challenges:

“They found someone who had passed away in their dorm room and it was suicide. They didn't really say anything past that, it was just like a brief thing, like a brief news flash of something that happened and then I don't think they said anything after that.

One thing that they did that I support, the parking garage near my dorm building, on the second floor they have signs with a suicide hotline on them, there's a lot of suicide apparently attempted that way.

I'm still on the whole... people are always worried that it'll be their fault and they don't want any backlash. I feel like universities they care about their students, but they're also concerned about their public image. They want people to still come here and they're worried that this happened at our school then people won't attend. I still feel like that's a part of it.

But I feel they should do more, instead of just mental health awareness there should be more like suicide awareness because it's a very real problem especially nowadays. The numbers have gone so far up that I feel like they should at least try to do something more about suicide awareness.”

Student in the Midwest region, transgender gay man

Even when students were generally satisfied with their university's stance on suicide prevention and mental health services, the occurrence of a death caused them to consider the constructs in place that stopped administrations from adopting a humanistic, caring attitude. One student in this region provided an extensive discourse on this:

"I think the administration um, I very much believe that capitalism has taken over a lot of universities. And so, I do think that we kind of model a capitalistic thing in that like we... our administration's focus is more about money and less about student wellbeing. And even so education should be the most important part, but also mental health, I think mental health is often times forgotten about on college campuses. And we do have a counselling centre but it's always super super booked. And it's really hard to get into. And so that is kind of, for some students they don't want to go to because they know they're not going to get to see anybody.

There have been at least two or three student suicides while I've been here. Um and usually we get an email any time anything happens to a student, and I remember the first time that it happened, and they had said that they didn't state the cause of death. Which is usually what happens in the case of a suicide. If there was another reason for their death it would have stated. So, we usually assume and then later on we do hear that this is what happens in the case of a suicide.

There was a student, I think maybe before I came here that had jumped off of one of the parking garages and that was a way that um, that they had killed themselves, which was really sad to think about. Um, but other than that I think it's something that some of our professionals on campus are aware of, but it's not talked about.

I think that they're uncomfortable talking about it. So, I think it's a lot of like they don't know how to handle it. And I don't think it's that they don't want to help, I think it's just that they don't know what they can do. I honestly think that they just... I think people are uncomfortable talking about suicide, it makes them uncomfy because it's an uncomfy subject."

Student in the Northeast region, trans straight man

The nature of the selection process meant it was not possible to consider the history of LGBTQ politics and culture in significant depth in advance of interviews other than superficially. Instead, there is substantial existing evidence of the geographic and existential trauma we can reasonably assume most gay, bisexual and trans men have experienced. Although generally considered to be safer in urban areas and cities, concepts of 'queer urban trauma' (Hartal & Misgav 2020) indicate that the existence of LGBTQ activism and existence of vibrant gay communities, while protective factors, do not remove associative risks of historic inequalities and injustice. While I did not intentionally prioritise urban areas, universities tend to be situated in cities or major towns and all the sites identified by my search criteria were located as such.

In 2003, Lorri L. Jean, then-Executive Director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force noted that for every step forward in improving university life for students in minority groups, they contested with an opposing action or setback (Rankin 2003). This comment

prefaced a campus climate report published by the organisation's Policy Institute and incorporated guidance and directives from a range of respected sources including the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the American Council on Education, all of which advocated for improved equality of opportunity and the fostering of diversity that can flourish in the higher education environment.

It was interesting that my own findings were very similar to those from the policy paper, which preceded my work by 14 years. The theoretical concept proposed by this work, new heteronormativity, is an undoubtedly powerful driver for positive change. This is however muted when compared with the student voices in the 2003 campus climate report. Blumenfeld (2012) offers additional context. They found LGBTQ students reported general comfort with their campus climate until they were pushed to consider the LGBTQ climate specifically, as a separate or distinct entity to overall campus life. In such cases, as documented extensively by Tetreault et al. (2013), we must consider that perceptions of campus climate are contextual by nature and influenced by a wide range of individual, institutional, and environmental factors.

Participant's perception and interpretation of campus climate has been the focus of previous scrutiny. Street (2010) talked to students about access to support resources on their campus, such as LGBTQ groups and mental health support. They found student awareness of such services diminished proportionately with how sufficient the resources were. Essentially, the more available and effective a service, the less likely students were to be aware of it or perceive it as an option for help. Tetreault et al. (2013) recommend developing a model that can predict campus climate and help to meet the needs of diverse student groups. Their findings that openly gay students who have experienced discrimination hold generally more positive views about their campus than those who are closeted but have no experience of on-site discrimination is indicative of the complexities and nuances of effective campus climate structures. This discourse is furthered by Garvey et al.'s (2017) review of the Campus Pride Index although countered by the lack of substantive progress from the 2003 national report and the studies dating back to the 1980s it quotes within.

5.5 Awareness and barriers

Students generally had some understanding of the known warning signs for young people in crisis who might be considering suicide. Where they had experience of suicidality themselves, they were able to postulate how to consider local level interventions.

“I didn’t know them as well as most people, but they were all like, “he didn’t even change, you couldn’t tell.” So, I don’t know that maybe they planned it for longer and nobody knew, or it was a sudden thought and people just didn’t notice.

I’ve had a few straight friends who have committed suicide this year I believe. I think the university can’t really like prevent it, but I think the awareness of knowing, hey somebody could be at the verge of this, be kind to people, don’t do anything that might, I hate the word trigger them, but don’t do anything like that.

And I think it’s just really awareness and trying not to offend people or push them to that spot, and then giving them, like I said they have the therapist, give them a place to go to if they need it.”

Student in the South region, bisexual man.

Some students had conceptualised why men die by suicide more often than women despite similar rates of attempts:

“I would assume it has to do with...people noticing signs of it and acknowledging signs of it. And like I don’t know in my head it’s like I always notice when my female friends are struggling with something and so I know that if something that’s going to happen...I am already prepared and can intervene. [With my] guy friends I might not pick up on any of those signs because they might not be giving off any signs. I think guys tend to self-medicate with drugs and alcohol.”

Student in the Northeast region, trans straight man.

While students were clear on the need for rapid access to counselling services, the nature and construct of that service was equally as important. Students reflected that most promotional material on campuses for mental health services or counselling centres was aimed at women, using imagery of females and text targeting younger female students particularly:

“I don’t know that [the counselling centre] is as aggressive at advertising as they could be because I know for a fact there are people that could use those services that don’t know it’s there.”

Student in the South region, gay man

Several students also said counselling services were housed conspicuously and they felt it would be difficult to retain confidentiality. Other students said their help-seeking behaviour would depend on the availability of specific types of counsellor:

“Having it being a guy, you were raped or assaulted, that’s what hurt you, you may not want a man therapist.”

Student in the South region, bisexual man.

“Our counselling center has like two counsellors, both are older women with curly white hair, one looks like my gramma. I’m not going to talk to her about personal stuff.”

Student in the South region, gay man.

Institutional approaches to suicidality were common across the education system and not only consigned to higher education, as described in this extended quote from one student:

“People are more open to talking about mental health, they're not as open to talking about suicide. I know because two of my friends committed suicide when I was in high school and it was a hard time for the school because the school didn't know how to handle it. The school had started a mental health awareness program and then this happened.

The first one happened, and they tried to almost brush it under the rug like they made the announcement and then they never mentioned it. The second one they handled it a bit better, but you could still tell they had no idea what to do, they didn't really want to talk about it. They just tried to say it had nothing to do with anything there.

It was hard because a third friend of mine passed away actually, he was in a car accident and they had tributes to him everywhere. It was really hard for us who knew the past two, and we were just like, "Where was that for them?" There was definitely a disconnect between when we had the ones who committed suicide that was really like let's remember them, but when it was the car accident it was like, we're going to put posters everywhere and stuff.”

Student in the Midwest region, transgender gay man

This was correlative overall to the narratives of students who discussed their experiences at high school as well as at university in that there was little difference between how school systems and the higher education system approached the topic.

5.6 Gay-Straight Alliances

Garfield (2015) discusses the concept of gender policing, an ideology closely tied with social constructs, societal expectations and prevailing understanding of masculinity. Applying this to our understanding of homophobia, the (straight) author realises close gay male friends in his life apply an internalised, regulatory homophobic narrative in their relationship with him. Discussing the experiences men have in close friendships when they have different sexual preferences, the author finds a gay male friend alters the way he hugs him as an internalisation of the common homophobic assumption that gay men want to have sex with their straight male friends; *“You’re the gay guy and I’m the straight guy. But when you hug me, your hugs are so stiff. What’s that about?”* His friend notes he doesn’t want to scare him or appear as a sexual predator. Referring to the social influencers present in this example; Garfield identifies it as one of three dementors in male friendships that can challenge relationships when the members adhere to socially constructed expectations.

Gatekeepers are used routinely in health and social care work, both operationally and strategically. Usually in a safeguarding role (Hek et al. 1996), their position is based on

positional power with an inherent protective factor. While their intent in health promotion and intervention work comes from a wish to help or support, studies of the role caution against blind acceptance as it can lead to the smothering of the very group they seek to protect.

Men with few social connections or friends have much poorer long-term health outcomes, something Garfield (2015) equates to vulnerability and isolation, noting boys often feel unprotected and trapped in this situation. Kimmel (2018) believes college-age men have no plan B and live in a bubble, in contrast to their female peers. Their research also suggests men intentionally avoid emotional enrichment and consciously want to ‘go it alone’, backing themselves into a corner. This can be particularly dangerous for men with existing mental health needs.

Each university had a variation of a GSA, varying from a formally structured student body to a fraternity, to dedicated advocacy groups. The key importance from the master theme list was that an organisation existed with a functioning membership and evidence its members worked towards diversification and inclusivity. From the outset, gay students were generally unsure of straight men in GSAs:

“It’s hard to get straight guys to do any gay-straight alliance, to begin with, I will assume. What’s the benefit to them? Why would they be interested? I think those who do usually are folks who’ve had people close to them who are GLBT. They see some of what we go through and they’re interested in doing something about it. That’s always going to be a small group. I don’t know how you get others in. I don’t know if you can. I don’t know if that should be a goal.

Interviewer: Have you come across any straight guys and groups like that in your experiences? I have had a couple of friends who’ve been- one in particular, a good friend of mine who, he wasn’t involved in a gay-straight alliance, but he was very aware of and very open to the stuff that we dealt with, and very supportive in general, and a couple of other guys who I’ve gotten that impression from.

For the most part, they’ve been ambivalent, loosely open to the subject, but mostly ambivalent of not doing a whole lot about it, not being very involved in it. I think that’s okay. Yes, trying to get folks to the point where they’re willing to speak up if they see something or hear something, it’s tricky”

Student in the South region, gay man.

5.6.1 Fraternities

Students were acutely aware of the associations made by the press and society at large relating to fraternity membership. Considerable media coverage depicts fraternities as highly toxic¹⁰⁹ and hyper-masculinised spaces. Students at each campus acknowledged the problem of sexual

¹⁰⁹ Salter (2019) traces the mischaracterisation of ‘toxic masculinity’ from the mid 2000s, when it became popularised in wider culture, following a rapid transition from academic work to popular media. Claiming the term offers an, “...appealing simple diagnosis”, for gender-based violence and wider masculine failure, Salter rejects a singular masculinity and calls for greater understanding of the difference between causality and definition.

assault locally and spoke candidly of the reputation of the traditional fraternities with narrow entry criteria. A multitude of academic studies and longitudinal media tracking has found the masculinity encouraged in some fraternities to be lethal, including instances of structured, planned peer support in carrying out sexual aggression and campaigns of planned rape (Humphrey and Kahn 2000; Foubert 2013; Valenti 2014).

Student voices may be more important in combatting this culture than university administrations, whose responses are often lukewarm and ineffectual. In 2019 a group of students stormed a fraternity house at Swarthmore College to demand its closure. This followed leaked communications between fraternity brothers that boasted of a “rape attic” in the property as well as strategies to have sex with underage girls. The protest group, the Coalition to End Fraternity Violence, jarred the administration as it placed the small, elite college at the centre of an international debate usually reserved for much larger institutions.

While students understood the mainstream media’s animosity towards fraternities, they had an understanding of how they could work for a common good:

“One of the reasons why I joined a fraternity is because, you know, most of the friends that you make in your college career tend to just be for one semester. I was looking for something that [would last] a bit longer.”

Student in the South region, gay man

Boswell and Spade (1996) caution against generalising the component parts of the toxic elements of fraternities, noting our understanding of rape culture is generic and often results from anecdotal evidence that perpetuates myths. They also note the differences in behaviour between men and women on campus make it difficult to fully interrogate the problem and its causes. Positive fraternity experiences led to substantial changes in mental wellbeing and personal development, far removed from the association with toxic behaviour:

“I’ve been backstabbed so many times from men, even my own dad. So, I used to think all men are evil. I joined the LGBTQ organisation and two men approached me from a fraternity. I finally came to realise it could be nice and I’m slowly gaining their trust. They’re really wonderful people and I feel like I definitely grew some, I’ve definitely grown from each and every single guy [in the fraternity]. I finally realised that guys aren’t all evil, that they can help me out to be a better person.”

Student in the South region, gay man.

Fraternities are Greek societies typically formed of homogeneous men from a predictable mould: White, athletic, wealthy, and straight. Two of the universities I visited had fraternities that were diverse and inclusive and that worked to define the organisation through brotherhood and shared experiences. I interviewed fraternity brothers, all of whom were

passionate and emphatic about the benefits of being part of the group. They explicitly distanced themselves from the pre-existing assumptions about fraternities and talked in detail about how being a brother had helped them in their personal and academic journeys. Crucially, students with different sexual identities said their fraternity acted as a de facto alliance, without necessitating the explication of that element.

“...it's not something you would find in every fraternity [like ours] here on campus. There are fraternities on campus that are just a bunch of straight White guys. [Ours is] more of just education and tolerance and just openness I'd say.

I keep mentioning [faculty member] but she, she did a lot for us in educating us in how to deal with certain situations and how to approach gay men and welcoming them into our fraternity. “

Student in the North region, straight man

Students positively linked fraternity membership with their peer relationships. Interestingly, there was a correlation between the extent of sexual inclusivity and the type of organisation of which the student was part. Students in a more traditional GSA organisation, such as a formal LGBTQ alliance, spoke of the organisation more as a concept than a tangible presence. Students in fraternities were able to articulate more tangible outcomes and benefits with a clear link between improving relationships and supporting wellbeing:

“I would say that our, the specific fraternity I'm in is very diverse and open to people. And we have several openly gay brothers. We've had conversations in big groups and like personal interactions like talking about just our emotions and how we feel and how it's okay to like let out our emotions.”

Student in the North region, straight man

One university did not have a fully formed inclusive fraternity but the leadership of one fraternity and of the LGBTQ alliance had established a friendly partnership to explore more intragroup understanding. The fraternity had policies against homophobia and other types of discrimination, which had led to a richly diverse social environment:

“The alliance does a lot of 101 with fraternities and sororities, they come in and do a quick fifteen minute, “this is who we are this is what we do. If you are out and want to be part of this, let us know, if you are not out and want to be part of this, we are also confidential”. So, they try and spread to the broad range of it all.”

South region (alumni), straight man

Where the fraternity had achieved diversity through appealing to a broader range of men, students were keen to discuss the positivity:

“...we don’t discriminate with anyone, we don’t say you have to be a White male to be part of the fraternity, we have African Americans, Asian Americans, Indian American, Native Americans, gay, straight, no trans as far as I know, but we have considered ourselves, we are very proud of our gay members who weren’t afraid to come out to us and tell us.”

South region (alumni), straight man

Straight men had considerable insight into the stigma surrounding the traditional Greek society model and acknowledged that many fraternity brothers in these worked to maintain the status quo¹¹⁰. However, for those with knowledge of the harmful reputation and risks of the more extreme elements of membership, there was immeasurable value in developing a kinder, more supportive culture:

“...there is that huge stigma about fraternities that you know, you’re gay we hate you, not true at all, not true at all, at least with our fraternity and I know a few more on campus that, most of them on campus all have gay members, so a bunch of our members who are gay were very comfortable coming out, and even if they didn’t come out it was... they were comfortable themselves, they didn’t necessarily come out to anyone, it was more like everyone just knew.”

South region (alumni), straight man

Such experiences and cultural attitudes were not generalizable to each university. One student at another university in the south noted he was a fraternity brother and a member of the GSA. Talking about commonalities between the groups or efforts to improve socialisation of members, the student described reluctance from the straight men. Interestingly, he attributed causality for this to the structure and image of the GSA as opposed to the attitudes of the straight men:

Student: “I think they [GSAs] are good, conceptually, but I feel like, based on the one here, sometimes how they are run can be very exclusionary with allies or even other LGBT community members because the people who, for example in this one who are very interested in it, they are usually the very ‘out there’, the very, they don’t really go with the norms, their gender as well, they may be very feminine presented men or very masculine presented women, and so some other LGBT members also feel excluded from it.”

Interviewer: “Do you think it’s a welcoming environment for straight men?”

Student: “It depends because if, especially straight men feel uncomfortable with the idea of, oh as soon as I walk in I’ll get hit on, probably not, if they are with a friend they may be more comfortable but I know that from

¹¹⁰ Shapiro (2017) notes annual new memberships of 100,000 and a common belief that fraternities provide a holistic education the university could not otherwise deliver as evidence of undiminished attraction. McGough (2019) found correlative narratives from pledge brothers, who identified a hypermasculinated culture as an attractive option, although this study does note some indications, the fraternity executive board sought to move away from this perception. Hechinger (2017) explored fraternity life across the country and summarised it as, *“...the unholy trinity of fraternity life: racism, deadly drinking and misogyny.”* Despite some unease at the more extreme elements of fraternity life, most young men were comfortable with the harmful elements of membership.

when I was in the fraternity I invited people, like hey you should come we are having a meeting tonight, a lot of them did feel uncomfortable with the idea or coming or attending, like I'm not gay so there isn't really any point."

Student in the South region, gay man

The mediation described here; that gay, bisexual or trans men might influence the relative levels of comfort of other based on perceptions of their 'feminine' behaviour, is common in gay male communities. Anderson (2016) explored "spaces that people are afraid to occupy" and found traits such as femininity a key characteristic of the prejudice aimed at some gay men by others who value, admire or fetishise more masculine traits. There were differences in experience for students who considered themselves to be feminine and one student felt their fraternity was an important environment for them to express themselves and to be comfortable:

"Oh my god, it's such a huge thing to be in a group filled with guys who are similar. Coming into university I finally understood why it is really, really, really important to find people who are similar just like whether it is in your values or morals or sex or in your sexuality because they can help you and make you feel like you're not alone in this world, life is already hard. I'm oppressed just for being Black, Asian, gay, half feminine... the layers of oppression, my God."

Student in the South region, gay man

Students extrapolated their own understanding of the functions of a fraternity as a supportive structure with other men who were experiencing poor mental health:

"I did hear that there are so many gay guys who are on the brink of committing suicide until they join the guys in the fraternity, and they help them out. They make sure that they feel like they're special and unique that they can be respected as a human being. And then it changes your life completely. RuPaul¹¹¹ [said] you get to choose your family. So, it's a mixture - you make sure that you choose who is around you and that you're basically looking for the right people and they will come to you."

Student in the South region, gay man

One university in the south had a fraternity whose brotherhood was primarily gay men although students were keen to welcome a broader base:

"Our fraternity is - while we are primarily gay, we are open to anybody. My [mentor], his big brother was a straight man but all the rest of us are gay. It just kinda works out that way, that on this campus everyone has either been gay or bi and we had our first trans man join this semester, which is a lovely addition. One of the

¹¹¹ References to role models such as RuPaul were rare throughout all of the interviews. Other than discussions about the gatekeepers in the media campaigns, students were disinterested in adulating celebrities or other popular figures.

ways we are planning to grow is through gay straight alliances and making inroads with the straight community, so we are not keeping the gays just to ourselves!”

Student in the South region, gay man

While there was a positive narrative correlation between fraternity membership and mental wellbeing, the setting did not act as a protective force against suicide any more than other types of student clubs or groups. Students from three universities knew fraternity brothers who had died by suicide. One student recalled this during our interview:

“Oh wow, I just totally remembered one of my fraternity brothers when I said it, one of my fraternity brothers killed himself

...one of my pledge brothers, I saw him about a week before he did it and he seemed happy.

And this is the issue, seemed happy, seemed fine, asked him about his grades, asked him about his life, everything seemed fine. Got out for winter break, got a text over winter break, from our fraternity president saying that he had killed himself.”

South region (alumni), straight man

The mediating effects of fraternities are highly contested. While students who were in a brotherhood were overwhelmingly positive about the mental wellbeing and companionship it provided, the literature presents a more sinister picture. Lake and Tribbensee (2002) linked student suicides caused by alcohol-induced self-inflicted injury with fraternity membership, citing the expectations of toxic levels of alcohol consumption as a requirement of membership. Kirabo (2018), furthers this narrative to critique the existence of fraternities as inherently toxic, postulating that the very existence of a fraternity is oppressive and in place so that men can validate their masculinity and justify toxic behaviours such as rape misogyny. Kirabo's stance is not unusual and it is difficult to find a source, whether in literature or the press, that convincingly presents evidence for non-harmful positive outcomes of fraternity membership. Existing studies on fraternities skew further away from the student narratives in this study, as in Lodi's (2019) investigation of the deaths of two suicides in a Truman State University fraternity, allegedly after a brother helped the two individuals to plan their deaths.

One notable exception is a fraternity and sorority-led drive at Penn State University to address student suicides, established followed more than 12 such instances between 2013 and 2017 (Pattani 2018). The Greek life community established suicide prevention training for new members and actively sought to build on the positive elements of brotherhood, including comradery, support, and companionship, whilst addressing the toxicity more commonly associated with the groups.

While this example stands out as rare in the literature, it is reflective of the experiences students discussed with me and of the narratives reflected in past university press outlets (Showers 2014; Freedman 2016), which highlight that the community contribution of fraternity brothers is often overlooked due to the pervasive nature of the media coverage of the more problematic elements of fraternities. The complexities and tensions in existing material on fraternities and the narratives of students in this paper indicate a need for richer qualitative data and deeper understanding of the nature and impact of such organisations, particularly to identify the existence of mediating factors against suicidality.

Students in the West region had encountered hostility when they had tried to join an alliance, although this came from different standpoints. Gay students described an unwelcoming, unfriendly atmosphere in the GSA from some members when straight friends had tried to join. Faculty had intervened and helped to establish a more positive, inclusive relationship between different members. One student said the alliance felt like a *“militant feminist group that is not at all welcoming to gay men, never mind straight men.”* A student in this university felt that it had been the straight men who joined the alliance who had succeeded in challenging the group’s pre-existing assumptions about heteronormativity¹¹²:

“...the [GSA] had put themselves in a very uncomfortable position and the straight guys really challenged the meaning of heteronormativity. I think that was hard for some group members to accept.”

Student in the West region, gay man.

It was not unusual for students to debate the appropriateness of some new members to their respective alliances and gay students described concerns about the true motives of straight men who approached the group. Students said they considered these issues between themselves and with faculty advisors and ultimately delivered on their group’s function to offer inclusivity. The West region GSA was an outlier for this and both students and a faculty member I spoke with attributed this to an unusual mix of personalities and specific events leading up to the academic year that had contributed to the group becoming inward-looking and unfriendly. The incident of hostility draws parallels to Dean’s (2014) finding that straight men are neither anti-gay nor pro-gay in a binary sense, they display a multiplicity of stances. The students who initially resisted the straight men’s membership had to ultimately come to this conclusion themselves.

¹¹² There is precedent for this finding. In 2011, Yost and Gilmore found straight men attending a liberal arts college to have fewer sexual prejudices and to be more open to diverse friendships than their gay peers. The study also found straight male students to be more committed to a positive, inclusive campus climate.

Although the existence of GSAs in high schools is not necessarily a predicting factor for similar equivalent groups in nearby universities, Worthen (2014) found in a case study sample that university students who had attended a school with a GSA were significantly more likely to have positive, long-term effects on their attitudes towards LGBT peers. The period of transition between high school and university in this study was influenced by high school experience with respect to attitudes and beliefs towards LGBT students but there were likely additional influences during the first stage of university study that contributed to attitudes. For example, although students who reported positive attitudes towards LGBT individuals were more likely to have had a GSA at their high school, this applied disproportionately to upperclassmen and not to freshmen, who reported variable attitudes towards LGBT individuals.

This suggests attitudes to sexual identity may be guided by GSAs but are vulnerable to on-going community and environmental influences (Hammack 2005). This was most significant amongst students who came from the south (Fetner and Kush 2008; Worthen 2014), which is representative of elevated rates of self-reported victimisation (Brown et al 2015) and highly pervasive religiosity (Schulte and Battle 2008; Worthen 2014), although broad attitudes towards LGBT people in the 14 states constituting the south have improved markedly (Williams Institute 2016). Additionally, it is likely further contextual factors such as the size of the GSA, its level of activity, and how school administrators support the group that influence student perception and subsequent attitudes to each other (Seelman et al 2015). There is a correlative relationship between good organisation and representation and empowerment of LGBT students (Poteat et al 2016), and self-reported levels of social connectedness (Stone et al 2015).

During the informal debrief and discussion after each recorded interview, students reflected on their feelings and how the interviews had presented them with challenges in their thinking. One student felt concern that gay groups were becoming insular and isolated as a result of the growth in far-right, anti-gay groups following the change of administration in the government:

“I don’t want gay groups to become hateful towards straight men. Trump has done that – he has divided people and either you’re for or against something and that has turned gay men against straight men. That’s going backwards. The Black Panthers were about hate and I don’t want us to go back to that.”

Student in the Northeast region, gay man

Straight men had a deep understanding of the factors that contributed to suspicion and distrust towards them from gay peers:

“Well that makes sense you know, when you are oppressed for so long, you see your enemy in everyone who is from the same group [meaning how gay men view straight men], although not everybody is the same, but you find something common, and it’s not because you want to hate, it’s because you want to preserve yourself, so I completely understand it, I’ve never been through that, that never happened to me but it makes a lot of sense you know, people not to, practice hate or any kind of separation but by that they think you are preserving yourself so they are helping themselves, protecting themselves maybe.”

Student in the Midwest region, straight man.

Similarly, straight men could also understand the reluctance of other straight men to engage with alliances:

“So I did a little piece on that, talked to a couple of people who were higher up in the women’s outreach and LGBTQ community and talking about what they do and how they go about making that community feel comfortable, and try and get not as much discrimination on campus. They opened up the LGBTQ lounge, which is just a place they can go, people from that community can go, not necessarily to feel safe, that word ‘safe space’ nowadays, people look at it and, quit being dumb, in my opinion it was a place they could go and meet people from the same community, opposed to having to go out and about. I guess almost, it’s not guessing, but especially for the gay men I know, it’s difficult for them cause it’s like, they will be out and be nice to someone, because they are comfortable and everyone knows they are out, then the person they are being nice to comes up to you and goes, you tell them to stop flirting with me bro, it’s like, they are not, they are a nice human being, relax.”

Student in the South region, straight man.

An alliance in the South region, in Atlanta, was very diverse, with over 700 students registered as members. However, students said weekly meetings and events typically drew no more than 10 – 20 members, who were usually the same people. While this group was aligned to the needs of transgender students and LGBTQ students from ethnic minorities, students described a period of soul-searching when bi-sexual or straight men wanted to join:

“...the involvement is very important. You can’t just be like “people can’t be straight in the group” because there are straight people out in the world. You got to be able to interact with them. LGBTQ + involves straight people but I feel like...really?”

Student in the South region, gay man

5.6.2 Alliances as a suicide prevention concept

All but one student felt there was value, to some degree, in the centring of straight men in gay narratives on suicide prevention and inclusion advocacy. Where gay, bisexual or queer

students felt apprehension or disapproval towards this, they referred to the lack of visibility of gay voices in society and, similarly, the lack of community representation in some sectors.

The project aims are not concerned with LGBTQ visibility per se, but links between heteronormative values and the lack of gay role models or figureheads and suicidality are substantial. In the theoretical sphere that suicide ideation in adolescent men is developmental in nature (Russell & Toomey 2012), prevention efforts in the transition period from high school to university are time critical. Synthesising this with the suicide narratives identified by Salway and Gesink (2018), we can establish the critical importance of the individual's environment. Within the environment, the visibility of LGBTQ role models in the media is positively correlated with improved mental wellness (Gomillion & Giuliano 2011) but has been found to contribute to worse mental health when the roles models are fundamentally inaccessible, such as in the case of celebrities (Bird et al. 2012).

This is interesting to explore but equally unhelpful in trying to unravel the already complex and confused picture of the placement of the media in our understanding of suicide risk. Students who praised straight men for publicly taking a stand in suicide prevention and equality but who simultaneously caution against the side lining of gay men in similar roles are echoing the totality of our understanding of this paradigm: we want straight men to be more vocal and more robust in their rejection of homophobic norms but we also want greater visibility of LGBTQ individuals in the mainstream. Students discussed this at length and the topic, alongside discussions on sports, generated the most compelling and impassioned responses:

"Yet another attempt of heterosexuals to hijack the LGBTQ narrative and I'm still reeling a little bit. What I first thought was, "Okay, Josh Hutcherson, I've seen his face before." Then he started talking. He's like, "I'm straight." Oh, really? That's interesting. I couldn't have told, by the... everything about you. It seems like a very juvenile tactic. It's not very intelligent. Just a straight guy saying, "Oh, there's nothing wrong with being gay, I've met a gay before."

Student in the South region, gay man, in response to the Straight But Not Narrow campaign

"It was like when you see all of these guys and they're like "I'm straight and I support you." It gets like, but are you actually going to do anything about it? Because that was one thing, I noticed was that it didn't really say this is how we're going to help, it said, "We're here, we support you."

Student in the Midwest region, transgender gay man, in response to the Straight But Not Narrow campaign

Students viewed the specificity of the casting for the Straight But Not Narrow campaign and The Trevor Project PSA as important alongside the debate of the extent to which straight men should be included.

“The Trevor Project one was weird to me, just having Daniel Radcliffe who I believe is straight. That was a bit odd, in my opinion. I feel like they decided the most famous person they could buy, Daniel Radcliffe.”

Student in the Midwest region, transgender gay man

This student echoed similar comments from others who felt that Radcliffe was a curious choice because of the perceived elevation of his fame. Students also found it difficult to separate Radcliffe from his role as Harry Potter. Some participants were aware of Radcliffe’s broader work to improve LGBTQ equality and his high-profile film roles in which he plays gay characters. In *Kill Your Darlings*, Radcliffe played the Beat Generation’s Allen Ginsberg during his university years. Radcliffe portrayed Ginsberg’s complex relationships with drugs, alcohol and other men through a highly sexualised visual script. This prompted a flurry of discussion in the international gay press about his casting, with the central question representative of this study, whether straight actors should play gay characters. A number of gay press outlets wrote furious columns about it. Students varied in their feelings about this:

“Yes, it would be nice to have more gay actors, but also I don’t think they should have attacked him for it. It would be nice to see more LGBT actors out there. I see it especially with trans people, I don’t like seeing cis people playing trans characters. Especially when they’re playing someone who’s FTM and it’s played by a female. I don’t see as much of a problem with him [Radcliffe] playing a gay character, I guess. I’m trying to sort this out in my mind.

I can see the whole wanting more gay actors, but I also don’t think it was his fault necessarily. Because there is not a ton of gay actors out there, which is the sad truth, but yes. On one hand, I am okay with that. On the other hand, I kind of wish that they would choose more gay actors to play gay roles, but I also don’t want that to be like a typecast thing. That’s the thing though, I don’t want people to be stuck being like, “I’m gay, so I have to play the gay character”. It doesn’t feel fair saying, “You’re straight, so you have to play the straight character.” It’s a complicated ordeal.”

Student in the Midwest region, transgender gay man

“I can’t see a problem here... it’s not much of a problem, and certainly as The Trevor Project is giving you something practical you could use, I’m almost inclined to say ok I don’t care, its fine, its good, just go with it, and Daniel Radcliffe its fine, people are hopefully going to pause long enough to see that ad and that’s good. You could say the same about Josh Hutcherson, but after you see the thing, in the case of The Trevor Project [PSA], you are probably going to remember the information and you are either going to make use of it if you need to or not. [Straight But Not Narrow] is less clear, clearly there is something that is meant to be accomplished, you are going to think about it later in ways that don’t have any specific action...except maybe how you relate to a person, so that makes it an important issue, how the person making the statement is being related to, I am not sure exactly what I think about that.”

Student in the Midwest region, gay/bisexual/queer man

This discursive, cyclical approach repeated itself during discussions of straight allies and the place of sports in heteronormativity and suicidality. Such discussions were indicative of deep thought and students attempting to work through the considerable tensions that arise when trying to reconcile both. Where students were more confident in their feelings about the disparities between the sexual identities of actors, their conclusions tended to be focused ultimately on the overall agency of gay men:

“It’s taking the narrative away from those who are not in those positions of power.”

Student in the North region, straight man

Where students felt enthusiastic about the role of straight men in gay men’s suicide prevention, this came with a clearly defined caveat: that they are persistent, credible and loyal. Intriguingly, these prerequisites are conceptually similar to the innate psychological needs of social development and wellbeing in Ryan and Deci’s (2000) interpretation of self-determination theory. Citing competence, autonomy, and relatedness as three critical factors across domains including health, education and sport, the links between self-determination and realising the potential of strong, inclusive alliances are remarkably similar:

“I think the difference is between people who just say, ‘I’m an ally’ and then people will actually get out and actually say something about it. People actually get out there and -- It’s like knowing that he’s been the leader of this pro-LGBT movement, it makes me feel just a little bit differently about [him]. At first, I was like, ‘Did they just want to get a random stranger to do this?’”

Student in the Midwest region, transgender gay man

I do see what he’s trying to do. That being said he doesn’t truly understand like how does it feel to be gay but I do but that’s definitely not a bad thing because we do need allies that’s a great thing. It’s definitely good that he’s been doing this. He’s gonna help you out but is he gonna fully commit to being LGBTQA friendly?

Are they going to truly help you? Like, do you understand your privileges as a straight White cis guy? So, they have to understand their privileges in this. And make sure like, if you want to be the straight advocate, it’s about more than just being a straight man.

But how about your gay friends? Will they get a pass to your protection?... you gotta understand them, check your privileges. Make sure because I feel I don’t know if they’re trying to fully understand like LGBTQ community.”

Student in the South region, gay man.

The tension between the levels of acceptability of straight men’s involvement in suicide prevention and more generally in domains predominantly seeking to engage gay men was present throughout the narratives. Where students experienced little tension themselves, they had an acute awareness of the broader issues and could extrapolate this onto the experiences of their peers.

I asked a student in the West region, who identified as a gay man, if there was value in establishing relationships with straight men for gay students who had grown up in areas without straight friends or role models. This was a weighty question. The student had responded with moderate positivity to the media campaigns and pondered the lack of gay role models, which led them to a sympathetic conclusion that Hutcherson and Radcliffe were acceptable spokespeople:

“I think it can be beneficial. I mean, it's this sense of validation that comes from straight men that say like, yeah, I actually don't care and are actually really supportive. You know, there's a sense of validation. I think it's really beneficial for gay men. So, I don't think it's necessarily bad. I personally don't think that it's detrimental that there is this discussion that's opening up.”

Student in the West region, gay man

The student used the active voice to suggest a changing social landscape, “this discussion [is] *opening up*” (my emphasis), suggestive of the changes in the key themes of this project. Deliberating the evolution of gay-straight relationships through structures such as GSAs, fraternities, and sports teams, resulted in clear conclusions that while individual and community identities are important, opportunities for improved and fluid inclusivity supports social fulfilment and mental wellbeing. These narratives also support the sense of a gradual, but positive, shift in momentum towards improved relationships and mutual support.

Students who were somewhat sceptical about the meaningful benefits of alliances acknowledged the broader purpose of straight men, supporting equality and inclusion outside of the university setting:

“It may not help but it does definitely give hope. The smallest act of resistance is an act of solidarity in and of itself. Seeing all those retired couples put up rainbow flags, seeing people across the street from the Westboro Baptist Church paint their house into a rainbow, it seems ridiculous from an outside perspective but it really is just like a small act of solidarity saying, “I will stand with you, I will fight for who you are, for what you believe in.”

Student in the South region, gay man

This student was referring to protests against the Westboro Baptist Church, a militant organisation whose members violently picket the funerals of gay people and of military servicemembers in protest at the liberalisation of equality laws. The student’s perspective was dichotomous. While he was reluctant to accept the viability of straight men supporting LGBTQ rights on campus, he had a much more conciliatory approach to older men in the community. This reflected students’ persistent requirement that straight men be committed to

inclusivity and not simply engage in it from time to time, essentially identifying retired men as having proven their loyalty. Older students felt they manifested this in their understanding of relations and alliances:

“Because I am so much older than them, I relate to them differently than they relate to each other. It’s not a hard difference.”

Student in the South region, gay man

5.7 Sports (and masculinity)

Sports and fraternities were the two topics that proved most emotive to students, even more so than discussions on suicide, often because suicide was seen as final and ‘done’, whereas sports and fraternities continue to dominate discussion of campus mental health and outcomes for men. Lenskyj (2012) considers the relationship between young men and sports and adds to the considerable existing evidence base that sports promotes the familiar mantra that only straight men play sports, contributing to a culture of homophobia and heteronormativity as social control. This nexus of sports and identity is deeper than a simple defining principle; it has profound implications for each individual’s university experience. In Harris III and Struve’s (2009) interviews with male undergraduates, they found sports team membership was how students both defined themselves and were judged as men in the university. One student told them (2009:6),

“People are often like, “Oh, they’re on the basketball team. They’re awesome!” And so they get invited to all the parties, they get to get all the girls, they’re very comfortable with themselves, and they really don’t care about what other people think because they are on the... whatever team.”

Interestingly, students who were in a fraternity but not on a sports team saw themselves as second in the masculine hierarchy but still superior to students who were in neither,

“Given their popularity and influence on male campus norms at Widney, the characteristics that were embodied and expressed by fraternity members and student athletes (for example, being in good physical shape, tough, competitive, and sexually assertive) were the standards by which men were judged...” (2009:6).

The ubiquitous negativity that is a common thread through the literature on male university students and sports from a mental health and sociological lens was reflected by some students in this study:

“Why are we even worrying about getting sports to be more inclusive if gay guys don’t want to be on sports teams? What’s wrong with that? Maybe I’m a little defensive, yet obviously, if they do want to play sports, it

sucks if they have that closed to them, or maybe would want to play sports and already feel like it's completely closed. It's interesting... I can't identify with the masculinity in sports, with a team in that kind of sporty way. I don't think I'm being very clear what I think cause I'm still figuring it out, but yeah, it's interesting, I think if I thought about it more I would think more clearly."

Student in the Midwest region, gay/bisexual/queer man

This narrative is part of the evidence base and goal of the Sport Allies Warwick Rowers campaign; to engage gay men who have never been interested or accepted in sports and to deconstruct obtrusive levels of masculinity. Such a concept presents an interesting dichotomy: if sports for young men are so toxic, why would gay men *want* to participate? A more in-depth exploration of the field finds a multitude of evidence that participation in team sports reduces anxiety and depression (Hagiwara 2017; Swann 2018; Pluhar et al. 2019; Vella 2020) and that mental health and suicide prevention work based in sports programmes have evidence of success (Liddle et al. 2019). This evidence is the basis for inclusion programmes, in which sports participants seek to widen inclusion to share the collective benefits of the team scenario. We can delineate this scenario to understand the impact of sports from two angles; the proven mental health benefits of positive team sports along with the devastating impact of the exclusionary demands of overbearing masculinity. In this sense it is useful to frame sports in Hechinger's (2017) and Hassan's (2019) reconceptualised understanding of fraternities, that fraternities per se are not the problem, the inherent White toxic masculinity is.

Most students had not heard of Sport Allies although some students had a peripheral awareness of the Warwick Rowers through their interest in the campaign. While the majority of students found value or potential in the concept of the material, they did not feel it was readily translatable to the U.S., both because of the likely offense caused to sports fans by the placement of nudity and because of the toxicity and homophobia of fans in key sports:

"[They're] doing this for a reason. And I think it's really cool. I think if you, I think if you're in the U.S., a whole bunch of football players watching that video probably would not have a very nice reaction (laughs). Um, I just can't imagine that they would be super thrilled. And I can just I can hear the slurs just being tossed around. Um in my head, just thinking about ya know men's sports teams. I, I think that there is just, something extremely toxically masculine about sports. So, like if a football player were watching this, they might be like, well that's a rowing team. And I'm on a football team. So obviously like I'm more masculine (laughs)."

Student in the North region, transgender straight man

One student was aware of a similar organisation in the U.S., *You Can Play*, which they were keen to discuss. *You Can Play* is a non-profit organisation with the strapline, “LGBTQ athletes. Allies. Teaming up for respect,” and a mission statement to drive equality and inclusive participation in team sports. As the Warwick Rowers focus their efforts on rowing, *You Can Play* has partnered with the National Hockey League and targets gay sportspeople by dispersing assumptions that all professional sportspeople are homophobic and hypermasculine. I was unaware of the group myself and was curious as to why other students had not mentioned it. The student described an organisation very much built around family values and diverse inclusion.¹¹³

“There’s a really influential family in hockey called the Burkes. One of them is a general manager and another one is- he works for the league. They’ve been involved in high places in the league for a long time. Like I said one of their sons is the general manager. Their other son was gay. He didn’t play because you can’t be gay and play hockey. It’s just not a thing that happens. He was a team manager for a college team, and he came out in college. It was important to him to try and change the fact that you can’t play hockey if you’re gay, or at least you can’t be openly gay if you play hockey. He wound up being killed in a car crash by a truck driver. That was awful. His family took over his mission of changing the sport. They’ve dedicated a lot of time and effort and substantial amount of money to founding the You Can Play project, which is exactly that. It’s an organisation dedicated to making hockey a safer sport for folks who are GLBT. It started with hockey. It’s expanded beyond hockey into some lacrosse and soccer and baseball, but it’s still largely hockey. They’ve done a lot. They have an ambassador on every team in the league, on every team in the NHL, which is the big league, but also the two minor leagues as well that they’re affiliated with. The person on every team that has gone through training with them.”

Student in the South region, gay man

This narrative is important for a number of reasons. It demonstrates a campaign that has expanded beyond its original aim into multiple sports and it has forged relationships with premier teams. The student’s statement, “*It’s just not a thing that happens*”, in relation to openly gay players in hockey, is reminiscent of the multiple narratives from students about openly gay players in football. The cultural magnitude of football is vast, and students linked this with their prediction that an openly gay successful player with a long-term contract would be highly improbable. Of note was despite the profundity of the importance of *You Can Play*, the core message had still not resulted in any openly gay team players on a major league team. However, the student identified a substantial qualitative value in the campaign, which he said could be easily replicated to university sports teams and other sports:

¹¹³ The student who introduced *You Can Play* was 25th to be interviewed overall. According to the organisation’s public information, it was formed in March 2012 and has a considerable presence in hockey leagues. It is therefore worth exploring in more detail why there was so little awareness amongst this national sample group.

"We don't have any publicly, openly out players in hockey, in men's hockey, yet. One of the big things when they have someone who, say, gets in trouble for calling someone a faggot, then they'll sit down and have a conversation with them. They very much approach it not from, "You did something wrong" and instead from the perspective of, "Here's why that hurts. Here's why that's a problem. Here's the harm that causes" to try and help them understand why they shouldn't do that, why it's a bad thing. It's less of a- and more of an empathetic thing. I think that's a much more beneficial approach in general. I've tried to mimic that when I've encountered- wanted to do a similar thing with folks that I know of saying less "Don't say that" and more, "Here's the problems that can cause. Here's what that can do. Here's why that's bad". That is way more effective and less antagonistic. When you're trying to get someone to do something for you, you don't want them to feel like you're mad at them."

Student in the South region, gay man

A subtheme of discussions about sports was the placement of football as a central part of hypermasculine, deeply heteronormative and dependably homophobic sports culture. This parallels international sports research, which portrays broad homophobia in football and soccer and the slowest movements towards inclusivity compared with sports such as lacrosse and rugby (Ferez 2018). Students were aware of the notoriety of English soccer as a parallel to American football and equated homophobia and heteronormativity similarly. There was one exception to the perception of soccer:

*"Soccer! Soccer here is super gay!
Well, they collapse on the pitch a lot and need people to give them little rubs and I think that's pretty gay.
Every, every like of every gay man I know if they've played a sport, it's probably soccer.
Like my high school had like 200 people. Whoever, but the soccer team was mostly gay men.*

Like if you've got, if you've got somebody on campus or whatever, he thinks "Oh I really want to go to that sports game, but I'd feel out of place I don't want to you know, stand out".

Student in the South region, bi-sexual man, and queer man

This discussion highlighted the critical importance of perception; they were surprised to find there were no openly gay premier league soccer players in the U.K. Students were interested in the paradox of football – its popularity and appeal to the widest range of audiences, regardless of background, age and other sociodemographics. However, generally accepted as an environment hostile to gay men, students were unable to reconcile these opposing factors. I introduced some visual material in such discussions from the Stonewall Rainbow Laces campaign. This is an on-going effort from Stonewall to reduce homophobia in sports and they launched this across the English Football Premier League in the year before the interviews took place. None of the students were aware of this but they approved of the concept:

“I think like our whole GSA would definitely go to like a football game if they were wearing rainbow laces. Like, I don't go to football games... Me not going to football games now is not because I don't know if they're pro-gay, it's because I just don't want to go to football games. I'm just not very interested but maybe if they were doing like an event where they first wore their laces or their socks or whatever. I may go to support that.”

Students in the South region, bi-sexual man, and queer man

This suggests some traction for such media campaigns to positively impact young gay men who feel reticent about team sports for complex of reasons. It also suggests students who do not engage in sports because of a lack of interest, as opposed to concern about acceptance, would become involved to support diversity work. Such efforts snowball into much broader, positive change and should be championed (Barnes 2016).

5.7.1 Sports, sex, and the locker room

“The locker room culture is the locker room culture. It is a very tough environment for someone who's gay to come out in.”

Chris Kluwe, football punter and writer (Zeigler 2016: 23)

“...the locker room culture is not an issue of intention, but instead something all should be made aware of to prevent accidental offense.”

Daniela Brighenti (2016: 19) paraphrasing Wayne Zhang, a founding student member of Yale University's Supporting Athletes at Yale (SAY) LGBTQ+ athletes organisation

Earlier in this paper I presented the findings of Harris III and Struve (2009), that male university students in sports teams self-defined by sexual assertiveness and numbers of casual sexual partners. Other research indicates sports team members claim to have significantly higher numbers of sexual partners whilst at university than their peers (Faurie et al. 2004). Habel et al. (2010) found these claims could be traced to younger students, in middle school, and equated it to higher rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). In contrast, Denison et al. (2018) found risk of STIs was not an effective mediator for safer sexual behaviour, noting sports prowess and numbers of partners were overriding factors for sexual safety.

Allison (2016) cautions against a singular view of college sexual cultures, noting in a wide sample that in opposite-sex hook ups, female athletes were more sexually aggressive and dominant than male athletes. This work would bear further scrutiny and extended student-led participation as it is significantly oppositional to much of the research in the field. Murnen and Kohlman (2007), found a positive correlation between membership of college athletics teams and attitudes amongst male students supportive of rape as an extension of accepted sexual aggression on campus. While equivalent levels of masculine toxicity were discussed with

student participants in this study, the topic of rape or overt sexual aggression did not come up, including with the fraternity members. Boyle (2015) explains this dichotomy and tension with their finding that fraternity brothers who commit rape and sexual aggressions are predisposed to seek out fraternities with known high-risk subcultures and uncontested behaviours. The nature of my research means intersection with such individuals was unlikely although this presents a compelling basis for future research.

“I don’t see much of a problem with sports and acceptance, I feel like that’s probably the best common ground there is. It’s very simple. These people are in your team and they will help you.”

Student in the South region, bisexual man.

Regardless of disposition towards sports, and whether they participated in sports already, the locker room was a continuous topic of spontaneous discussion as a powerful, volatile, contested space. A mediated space, it holds significant currency in concepts of masculine identity and behaviour and the social environment it fosters is the subject of widespread inquiry into misogyny, hypermasculinity and normalisation of sexual violence (Brighenti 2016; McGivern & Miller 2017; Cole et al. 2019). Even in research focused on the inclusion of LGBTQ people in sports and the detrimental impact on mental health and performance of sports players who conceal their sexuality, authors consistently centre the locker room as a contested space (Lida & McGivern 2019).

It is a straightforward exercise to find research that highlights overtly sexualised, toxic fellowship in male locker rooms, but a growing body of evidence attempts to mediate this. McGivern and Miller (2017) find that ‘locker room masculinity’, however toxic or pervasive, is negotiated between athletes, representing a space in which multiple masculinities are possible. The authors codify this finding into an urgent call to ensure locker rooms are safe spaces for all sports participants. Zeigler (2016) suggests the sexualised nature of locker room talk, exclusively focused on heteronormative narratives, diminishes on a continuum from high school to professional league sports, with universities skewed towards diminished toxic masculinity.

Professional sports players who do come out as gay remain critical of the locker room environment. Robbie Rogers, an out gay soccer player who transferred from a U.S. club to a U.K. club said, *“It’s a tough place, the locker room...homophobic, sexist”* (Haltermann 2016:15). Chris Kluwe echoed this sentiment; *“The locker room culture is the locker room culture. It’s a very tough environment for someone who’s gay to come out in.”* Despite such persistent narratives, gay men who

have come out in the team sports environment report acceptance and inclusion that surpassed their fears, indicating the core messages of the Sport Allies men are realistic and compelling (Fryer 2020; Reimer 2020; Thomas 2020).

OutSports, an LGBTQ-focused sports news agency, tracks coming out stories and experiences in sports. One such story followed Mitchell Thomas, a tennis player who came out publicly,

“[My fellow co-captain] responded better than I could have imagined. He thanked me for sharing such an intimate part of my life with him. He expressed his excitement for me as I was doing what made me happy and was becoming the most genuine version of myself. He also reassured me that the tennis team would have my back as any good teammate would support me on and off the court” (2020:12).

The platform presents a number of similar narratives, which have steadily grown in 2020 across a range of sports including ice hockey and track running.

The alumnus who participated in this research had substantial experience of the locker room environment having worked as a reporter during his higher education years. His narrative added considerable depth to the positioning of masculinity and sexual identity in the locker room as a component part of our broader discussion:

“So I was in locker rooms, talking to players. But, it’s a huge problem [lack of LGBT visibility], if you look at... football, obviously it’s a problem, statistically there are multiple gay men in that locker room. I am not aware of any football players being out, I think that that would be something you would hear about, but then again you have to think about, you know it’s almost like a fraternity in itself. There may be a guy in the locker room who is out, but it’s just within their brotherhood, I don’t know, but it definitely won’t be the quarterback. The quarterback is the quote unquote alpha male always, and even if the quarter back is gay, he would never tell anyone. He’s got to get all the girls, he’s got to be the best athlete he’s got to be the talking head, other than the head coach, so it’s not him. At the college level of sports and American football you are never going to see, I won’t say never, but it will be a while before we see anyone from the LGBTQ community as a figurehead, whether it be a head coach or otherwise. Now on the women’s side I believe there are some head basketball coaches that are out and gay, and that’s a start, you know, they are comfortable in their community and their school and all that, or they were out before and the university was comfortable hiring them, which is great. But as far as men’s sports... man it’s going to be tough in general if you are in that community cause, in locker rooms you are naked a lot with a bunch of other men, and that may make some people uncomfortable if they know there is a gay or trans or bi male in the room.”

Student in the South region, straight man.

This narrative adds to the discussions of others who identified differences between types of sports, suggesting masculine norms and acceptability levels of non-straight men occur on a

continuum based on the sport itself. Dorer and Marschik (2020) shift the narrative of this discussion by exploring the need for situating intersectionality in the sports sphere, noting that to encourage more gay, bisexual or transgender men into sports does not go far enough in deconstructing the normalcy of White hegemonic masculine capital. Highlighting a lack of infrastructure for a common inclusivity, there is evidence of cross-cutting grassroots work to address this.

In 2016, six male athletes at Yale University, each from a different sport, joined forces to establish a programme to encourage greater acceptance of LGBTQ sportsmanship and inclusivity (Brighenti 2016). Two years after its inception in 2018, Gallagher found the group had expanded and successfully embedded itself into the campus landscape. The organisation, Supporting Athletes at Yale (SAY) is now listed as a fully-fledged student organisation with an established governance and ally programme (Yale University 2020), providing evidence of both the potential for change and the importance of student-led initiatives. Other institutions have found an equivalency of success in structured, co-opted efforts to improve inclusivity for diverse students, such as efforts at Villanova University to establish a student coalition, similar in nature to a GSA, focused on equality (Pettit 2016).

Poteat et al. (2016) substantiate this approach and identify significantly better levels of socialisation, personal agency and resilience against victimisation amongst LGBT students in education institutions with a structured GSA. Although similar positive effects on agency were not found for straight students despite them engaging in advocacy and social activities at the same rates as their LGBT peers (Poteat et al 2016), the consistent improvement in self-reported well-being and educational attainment is found in all GSA participants based on levels of engagement and not sexual identity (Toomey et al. 2011). This provides a degree of confirmation of Handlovsky et al.'s (2018) findings that resilience against discrimination is a lifelong factor in lived experiences and manifests itself in gay men over the age of 40 most profoundly when they had access to socially sustaining networks in their teens and 20s.

5.7.2 Sports - postscript

Sports became a central focus of the conceptual structure of new heteronormativity as I explored it with students, faculty, and others who wanted to talk. Research on the impact of heteronormative principles and marginalising applications of masculinity in sports is well documented in educational settings. In the high school setting, Berg and Kokkonen (2020) found variable levels of resistance amongst (straight) teachers who were asked to be more

inclusive of LGBTQ identities in their lessons; students suggested the use of more inclusive language as an early antidote to oppressive levels of heteronormativity.

Rook (2020) considers the wider impact of heteronormativity and representation in sports and draws direct links between professional sportspeople and student experiences. They describe widespread oppression of LGBTQ students because of heteronormativity that fails to be inclusive. A significant finding in Rook's work is that the sports world harms a portion of their own population with the use of normalised language, resulting in fear amongst LGBTQ sports students to speak openly about their identities and experiences. This was reflected to some extent in the student interviews in this study and is discussed elsewhere in this paper. Since the conclusion of the interview process, I have monitored university-based sports spheres in the U.S. through the OutSports platform, as well as the mainstream media for developments in LGBTQ visibility.

This would benefit from a formal, structured study to identify conceptual links between Rook's claims and real-time occurrences in professional and university sports. While not a formal extension of this paper, the monitoring resulted in points of interest and presented evidence of an environment mellowing for LGBTQ sportspeople. The pace of such developments was notable in 2021, with a number of examples of progress:

- Jack Dunne, a pro rugby player came out as bisexual to the public and noted he did this specifically to support his fans and young people struggling with identity (Padgett 2021).
- Carl Nassib, a major league American football player, publicly came out as gay and cited the need for improved representation for other LGBTQ sportspeople. In particular, Nassib noted a need to help students afraid to come out and engage with sports (Longman & Thames 2021).
- The U.S. National Football League (NFL) produced a range of media posts to promote inclusivity and acceptance, including a notable new video with the 'Football is gay' tagline (Yurcaba 2021).¹¹⁴
- OutSports documents dozens of coming out stories in high schools, colleges, and universities covering a wide expanse of sports including swimming, golf, rugby, soccer, and wrestling. Testimonies of each individual are profound and indicate an opportunity for significant future research.

¹¹⁴ Time and again during student interviews, football was seen as the holy grail of homophobia in sports. Even seasoned sportsmen in the sample, who proudly spoke about their allyship of the gay community, found it difficult to envisage a time when football in the U.S. would be overtly welcoming to LGBT people. The NFL media campaign was the first of its kind in the country and in the sport. Delivered on social media, the statement read, *"If you love this game, you are welcome here. Football is for all. Football is for everyone. The NFL stands by the LGBTQ+ community today and every day"* (Yurcaba 2021).

There have been promising signs that new heteronormativity in sports is influencing decision making and policy outside of the U.S. In June 2021, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), blocked the plans of Munich city officials to illuminate their football stadium in rainbow colours during a high-profile match (Connolly 2021). Officials wanted to extend their warmth and welcome to LGBTQ fans and players during the state visit of the Hungarian prime minister Victor Orban, a vocal anti-LGBTQ politician. UEFA blocked the decision on the grounds it was political, a decision that resulted in significant criticism from stakeholders and fans, including many who identified as straight allies. UEFA's decision was particularly interesting considering their U.S. counterpart, the NFL's, decision to promote rainbow labelling and visibility more openly as part of an inclusivity strategy. UEFA responded angrily to criticism and released a press statement to say they were an inclusive organisation and changed their own branding to include rainbow colours (UEFA 2021). This likely tempered any feelings of inclusion and respect LGBTQ fans and players may have felt prior to the match in question.

This incident transcends the scope and focus of this paper, but it provides insight into the evolution of new heteronormativity and the reduced willingness of public bodies and spokespeople to accept anti-LGBTQ prejudice.

5.8 The shadow of sexual script theory

“My relationship with Michael, and with other gay men, is wonderful for me. It expands me as a human being. There’s a playfulness in talking about sex that I don’t hear from my straight male friends.”
Garfield (2015)

Sexual script theory (Simon and Gagnon 1999) identified multi-layered influences on sexual relationships with a critical assumption that heteronormative societies permeate and dominate young men's development (Pham 2016). Studies of the sexual ideologies of university students and the social scripting of sex around heteronormativity are readily available and indicate challenges for LGBTQ people in understanding the sexual scripts in their lives.

This theory was a contextualising factor in the conceptual framework; ostensibly it is difficult to talk to young men about their social lives and experiences without understanding something about the situating of sex in association with their identity. Pham's study took place in a U.S. university and included participants with different sexual identities. Concluding that male sexual constructs were dominant over gendered norms, the research found delineation occurred when heteronormativity was disputed or rejected.

This was not necessarily the case in this study. While not all students talked about sex, those who did framed it very clearly in either a positive frame or negative, harmful frame. In the instances of harm, students felt the pressures from hypermasculine, heteronormative expectations were monitored in the socially constructed environment. Where students had more positive experiences of sex, this tended to be because they had supportive, robust relationships with peers:

“I feel like those friendships [between gay and straight men] do arise, in a different fashion, because you have to find other things to like. One of our roommates is gay, I mean we became friends because of our sexuality, he was like oh I’m going to hook up with this guy, and I was like well no you probably shouldn’t that guy has a history of messing guys around, so, because I feel like when you are making friends with other LGBT people, especially if you are in different age cohorts you can see more of a guiding role appearing. I made different friendships while I was in the fraternity, all of them saying they were straight men, you see that emerging differently because that was a, “Oh what’s up you want to hang out and just talk about girls?” and random things of that nature, while you see in the other role more of a support aspect emerging.”

Student in the South region, straight man.

Students who had positive experiences discussing their sex lives with friends of other identities reflected the emerging work on sexual fluidity amongst men. Straight men spoke about the reservations some gay men might have in joining sports teams because of the sexualised perceptions of the locker room and the place of physical contact as part of the game. Although they understood this reticence or fear, they felt enough straight men in their teams were allied with gay men enough to foster a welcoming environment. Some students had experienced challenges in talking about and exploring sexuality with friends of different identities, as discussed by one student:

“Oh yeah, because a lot of the guys that I know, that are straight usually get really uncomfortable if I ever bring up I’m talking to this guy now, oh I just had a hook up or something like that, they get very very uncomfortable with the notion, but if they were to sit there and talk about a women in that fashion, they are very comfortable, but they are very uncomfortable with a relationship when I mention my sexuality.

Yes, compared to like with my [gay] roommate it’s like, we can talk about anything it’s like, Oh I just had sex with a man, I’m talking to a guy now and some of our closer friends are very comfortable with it too, like oh have you gone on a date recently with a guy or whatever, they are very comfortable opening up about that.

I feel like after a while some of the guys did appear to be more comfortable with that, but they were still very hesitant to talk about my sexuality, talk about my experiences, but they were very comfortable with facts like oh I don’t have to worry about you hitting on me or stuff like that.

I had a hook-up with a football player on the team here and he was very open about how the team wasn’t very inclusive in that nature, because of how hyper masculine it was, about the toxic hyper masculinity that had built itself around the idea of football as well.”

Student in the South region, gay man.

While this study was not structured to identify quantifiable differences between student responses, it was notable that students with tensions around sex, like the quote above, were in the South region. The exception to this was where students were part of a fraternity, in which case they described greater satisfaction with their sex lives and positive, supportive communication in relation to this with their friends. There was limited evidence, however, to suggest a substantive shift away from the invisible heteronormative constructionism or the politicised bent of marginal sexualities depicted so graphically by Warner (1991). However, students reconceptualised heteronormativity within developing theoretical frameworks, named by Marchia and Sommer (2017) as heterosexist-heteronormativity and cisnormative-heteronormativity¹¹⁵.

Twenty-eight years prior to the conclusion of this project, Warner called for a stronger, bolder voice from social theorists and academics to support the drive for more inclusivity in heteronormative societies and the normalisation of queer theory to help marginalised people create better lives. Warner's claim that, "*The main theoretical debate over constructionism seems exhausted*" (1991:5), feels like a form of resignation. While social theorists have accepted the challenge and researched and published feverishly on the subject, changes in social constructs appear to be much slower. Holmes IV (2019) identifies a series of "macro-level factors" that maintain the institutionalisation of heteronormativity, including beliefs and attitudes, the government and religion. These closely match the same notions identified by Warner, albeit in a shorter, less urgent sense. While students were able to identify the harmfulness of pervasive heteronormativity and suppressed sexuality, and link both with suicidality, they were less able to explain why such norms insisted on prevailing.

5.9 Is masculinity always toxic?

"They are struggling with the rupture in gender roles and a crisis in mental health. But this generation of 20 and 30-somethings is also inventing radically new passages."

Gail Sheehy, quoted in the *International New York Times* (Seelye 2020:2)

Gail Sheehy dedicated her adult life as a journalist and social observer to understanding cultural shifts and the social 'passages' that demarcate each person's life, in particular the life of men. She passed away shortly before I finished writing this paper and the

¹¹⁵ Marchia and Sommer's study introduces four theoretical notions of heteronormativity, prefixed with cisnormative, gendered, hegemonic and heterosexist, to define changes in theoretical and constructionist thinking.

International New York Times ran a spirited obituary that outlined her work in understanding how men live in a “*distracted society*”. Sheehy’s work, which began in the 1960s, resonated closely with the experiences and narratives of the student participants. Giving a commencement address at the University of Vermont in 2016, Sheehy said (Seelye 2020:2):

“Whenever you hear about a great cultural phenomenon – drop everything. Get on a bus or train or plane and go there, stand at the edge of the abyss, and look down into it. You will see a culture turned inside out and revealed in a raw state.”

Every student interviewed referred to masculinity as “toxic” at some stage during their interview, referring tacitly to its hegemonic nature and the decades-old understanding that it is defined by the “*subordination of women and marginalisation of gay men*” (Connell 1990:83). I was aware of media attention around this for the year leading up to the interviews and took great pains to make sure I did not inadvertently introduce this descriptor for the phenomenon. While most participants saw little value or path forward in exploring their masculinity in current social contexts, they expressed curiosity and interest in the cultural shifts they perceived as leading to this point in time. Reflective of Sheehy’s work, participants viewed the shifts in levels of acceptance and perception of masculinity as profound. Those students who were not overwhelmed with its implications or with its negativity were curious to engage with unfolding events, the “abyss” that Sheehy found so interesting. Students were situated in one of three broad descriptive beliefs:

Masculinity has *become* toxic

Masculinity has *always* been toxic

Masculinity has more than one type and *some* types are toxic

This created considerable tension for some students in navigating their university years. For gay men without close straight male friends, masculinity was typically toxic by definition and perception. For gay men with straight male friends, masculinity was more fluid and could be toxic in some circumstances. Straight men had a more introspective view on masculine norms. Students interlaced their definition(s) of masculinity with other disciplines, including femininity and social standing. The following extended narrative is from one student:

“And I think we have been raised in a society that tells you if you are experiencing certain emotions, then you are feminine and those emotions are feminine and ya know, don’t complain about being upset and so I think a lot of men internalize that. Um and sometimes when it’s depression and it feels like they can’t talk about it and then that builds up and then one day they’re like well I can’t deal with this anymore and I can’t talk about it because I’ll, no one is going to take me seriously cause I’m a man.

But like, it’s just like, like the mindset that I think some people are in. Other than that, I mean, I don’t know I think men are just more scared to talk about it.

I think that men who, I don’t... this is like hard, men who go to college, men who are educated and learn about these different things are more likely to be willing to sit down and talk about their feelings; and I’ve met guys in college who are cool with talking about their feelings. And actually, they kind of like embrace it.

And it’s more of something that they want to do and so I think we are shifting towards that but obviously there is still um, there’s a disconnect.

I have some friends who identify as trans and even we sometimes give in to that toxic masculinity, where it’s like we don’t want to talk about those deep feelings.

Because we don’t want to be seen as feminine at all, because we are trying to prove our masculinity. Um so it is something that, we fall into, but I think that for the most part we try to be more aware.”
Student in the Northeast region, trans straight man

This student’s considerable insight into the impact of masculinity on their own identity and mental wellbeing reflects both the acceptance that some parts of masculinity can be toxic and in contrast that this is becoming more challenged by society as a whole. By accepting their occasional submissiveness to toxicity, they also provide themselves with a framework to understand and analyse their feelings. Their experiential understanding does allow for some deeper insight and understanding, which is a key component of Lomas et al.’s (2016) work to identify positivity in Connell’s concepts, which they note are inherently toxic because of their reduction to a singular construct. In this scenario, an exploration of social dimensions with a group of men indicated community engagement focused on wellbeing did lead to the adaptation of toxic constructs but remained mediated by embedded social processes, the complexities of which were present as themes across the interviews in this project.

The overarching negative standpoints students described on the concept of masculinity and how this played out on campus were closely reminiscent of van der Toorn et al.’s (2020) work on the prevalence and deep embeddedness of heteronormative ideology and masculinised institutions. Some students were able to identity, or conceptualise, the potential for modified hegemony masculinities through their experiences:

“I don’t think we necessarily talk about it [masculinity], per se between us, but I will say this. So I do work part time on campus and I work with the undergraduate populations. I work in one of the administrative

buildings and so I'm exposed to the undergraduate population quite extensively. And the topic of masculinity received by the undergrads is very gender stereotypical.

There's a certain way that all the boys dress if they're going to be [together], like they all wear the same flip flops. Like, kind of funny Adidas flip flops and the same basketball shorts and the T shirts. And the big strap backpacks. There is an odd homogeneity to it. And they wear the same clothing from like, March when the temperature goes above freezing through like November before, you know that before it gets too cold, maybe October. I think there's a lot of unmet needs here amongst the masculine gender stereotypes."

Student in the Northeast region, gay man

This student's understanding of conformity and complicity is a component part of Connell's concepts of masculinity. However, it is also part of Filteau's positive findings, that traditional hegemony can be deconstructed and rebuilt to better reflect the needs of its members with competent facilitation and some degree of insight from the participants. Student conformity and compliance with hegemonic masculinity persists as a stable structure in their environment is congruent with the toxicity students described and leads to poor academic engagement, performance, and outcomes (McIntyre 2020) whilst simultaneously being reinforced by students who benefit from its norms (Zernechel and Perry 2017). While many students interviewed had some insight into how they reinforced hegemony because they were either compliant or did not overtly challenge it, there is a substantial evidence base that such challenge is insurmountably difficult when not situated in structured programmatic efforts to modify behaviour (McGraw 2017; Zernechel and Perry 2017).

The student narratives and perceptions of their place in relation to masculine concepts and associated suicide risks demonstrated the commonalities of their concerns, including that they experienced confusion about how they were expected to behave with regards to peers and intimate partners. To some extent, researchers interested in U.S. society in the post-Obama period have attributed the dissonance and disconnectedness amongst young men in relation to their gender and sexual identities as products of changing concepts of masculinity, not a strict adherence to the contemporary definition (Orenstein 2020). However, this has not yet resulted in more balanced, fluid masculinities pervasive enough to calm anxious students. Instead, men who self-define themselves as part of the dominant patriarchy report feeling marginalised by a more balanced constructed socioecological environment and rail against substantive change to their ideology (Kimmel 2017).

This presents an interesting dimensional question to the discussion; to what extent are our student narratives defined specifically by the concept of American hegemonic masculinity? The research took place in the U.S., and I use national statistics throughout this paper to conceptualise and better understand socioecological spheres. Three students who participated

were born outside of the U.S. and became citizens. Their perceptions of masculinity and related suicide risk differed based on how they compared society in their country of birth with accepted norms in the U.S. One student originally hailed from Latin America and made this observation when I asked about the differences between Brazilian and American masculinity:

“My Brazilian [male] friends are always hugging me and hugging each other and because we are Latin Americans that is ok but when they do that in other communities like here, it gets a bit weird. I am half Brazilian and half Honduran, and I lived ten years in Honduras, my father is Honduran and my brother is Honduran and my father is the son of the general of the army. So, you know, real men keep their problems to themselves. And that brainwashed me, I don’t agree with that but it’s something that is so engrained, and I have so many problems talking about my personal life, that’s why I came to an American university, to see if I can feel better.”

Student in the Midwest region, straight man

There is a new dichotomy in this narrative: American students report poor levels of satisfaction with the social constructs in their socioeducational spheres and many were curious about how European countries viewed their current administration and domestic policy. However, this student placed dominant hegemonic masculinity into an international perspective, providing valuable insight into how we can find some positive aspects for identity and self-expression, namely that he felt safer displaying affection towards other male friends in Brazil or Honduras, reflecting sociological work that finds masculinity is fluid amongst people who move between nations and can be reconstructed (Subbi and Balakrishnan 2020). This acceptance of physical affection in Latin America was mediated by the feeling that ‘psychological intimacy’ between men is more acceptable in the U.S.

Substantial literature and data are available on the interconnectedness of patterns of suicide risk, GSAs, and masculinity. In contemporary literature and research, data are focused on understanding where suicide occurs in patterns that are quantifiable by surveillance and reporting systems. Such systems typically neglect to include the voice of suicide survivors or the life stories of those lost to it. While the paradox of similarities between gay and straight men in masculinity studies becomes increasingly popular, studies of GSAs and the influence on students remain focused on statistically based outcomes and GSAs in high schools (Hatzenbuehler 2011; Toomey et al 2011). Although media coverage focuses intermittently and reactively on a specific element of risk, such as increased risks for gay students (Katz 2010), there is little discourse analysis or experiential narrative from university students that incorporates the perception of importance or impact of masculine and sexual identities in relationship contexts.

Qualitative studies of the impact of suicide prevention media aimed at gay men are limited, although there is evidence young people may not meaningfully engage with the messages, which may reduce clarity on the causality of risk¹¹⁶. Goltz (2012) notes *It Gets Better* (IGB) is often met with derision in academic circles, a development of their 2009 argument that gay people face intrinsic challenges in their future; a “*harder path*” (Goltz 2012:136).

Critics of the campaign conceptualise the idea of an inherently difficult, challenging future as an entrenched social norm. They evaluate the campaign in emotive terms including noting that the message is misleading (Femmeplane 2010), generalised and exaggerated (Sanchez 2010). Halberstam (2010), Lim (2010), Ryan (2010), and Tseng (2010) are critical of the campaign because they feel it makes promises about post-high school or post-education experiences that are false, because social situations for gay people are “getting worse” (Lim 2010). Commentators on such campaigns have been similarly sceptical, including the assertion that straight allies should not be rewarded or recognised for their contribution to social interventions such as *Straight But Not Narrow* (Friesen 2012). Counter arguments identify that LGBT people need allies to raise awareness and exert a powerful voice in the work for equality (Lauper 2011; Mullinax 2012; Lauper 2017).

Ripley et al (2012) explored the role of lecturers in the maintenance of heteronormative discourse and social structures in the university environment. The study found that gay-friendly students who identified as straight perceived the university environment as an almost exclusively heteronormative environment, with the use of LGBT-related material by a lecturer taking part in the study distracting because of the rarity of such material.

Gay-friendly or gay-accepting students are known to see the omission of LGBT-related material or discussion during lectures as institutionalised homophobia rather than overt heteronormativity (McCormack & Anderson 2010; McCormack 2012), a key concept in the theoretical basis of a new heteronormativity. Such perception leads to significant self-reflection amongst students, indicative of their wish not be identified as homophobic; an increasingly undesirable label (Frank 2008). This includes a fear that they have unknowingly ‘defaulted’ to homophobic values, however subconsciously, when they came hypersensitised to the recognition of LGBT material during lectures and led to recognition that heteronormativity was a prevailing construct of the university system, not of their social and community groups.

¹¹⁶ I discuss the contradictory and often confusing mixed messages presented around the influences and confluences of the media in suicide prevention. Organisations in the discipline suggest the benefits of media engagement are greater than the risks and in 2019 GLAAD recommended increased levels of engagement to address harmful levels of marginalisation towards LGBTQ people.

Rondahl (2011) found similar heteronormative representation and impact in health education programmes for student nurses and Preston (2016) identified significant contribution to classroom homophobia from a lack of teacher training. Some universities have made strides to address this by implementing LGBTQ inclusivity drives in specific disciplines. For example, Out in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Incorporated (oSTEM) works with partner institutions to expand access for minority students in STEM subjects. It is a good example of the de-centring of the toxicity of masculine norms within the new heteronormativity concept, which recognises masculinity is not inherently damaging by nature but becomes so when misused.

5.10 Accidental ethnography

A key finding from the actions of doing the research, outside of talking to students, was that people find suicide an uncomfortable subject but one they nevertheless want to talk about¹¹⁷. Whilst travelling between interviews, two realisations came to light; people are genuinely curious about outsiders in their presence and suicide is not so stigmatised that it cannot be discussed with strangers. These voices added significantly to the context of the research and shaped my presuppositions about the view of suicide from the American general public. Although such material was not within the scope of the formal research plan, I was keen to give people time to talk and to ensure their narratives were reflected in some way.

Unexpected happenings and unplanned turns of events are common in qualitative research, although outside of ethnographic studies, this ‘peripheral data’ is usually lost. Conceptualising an accidental ethnographic methodology to ensure this information is converted into usable evidence, Fuji (2015:525), notes unexpected experiences are important, *“The importance of these observations lies not in what they tell us about the particular, but rather what they suggest about the larger political and social world in which they (and the researcher) are embedded.”* Within an ethnographic context, Fuji describes how they applied accidental ethnography during research in several different countries, including the U.S.

A barber, a taxi driver, a car rental agent, a Lutheran minister, a bartender, three university administrators, and a construction worker made up the chorus of ‘outside’ voices to varying degrees. They had all been touched by suicide in some way. As well as a curiosity about my research and emergent findings, each individual also wanted to talk about their own

¹¹⁷ This was somewhat at odds with the perceptions of numerous students, who felt suicide was often stigmatised to the point of being a non-starter in conversations. This may be regulated by the university environment and the capitalistic forces at play, which are described elsewhere in this chapter.

experiences. The group included a mix of men and women and all disclosed, unprompted, their sexual identity as straight when they found out the target groups of my work. I did not record any of the discussions and I hand-wrote notes and summaries after each encounter. Some dominant themes emerged, including that people generally have a good understanding of who is at the greatest risk of suicide, why this might be, and how this risk has grown year-on-year. Regardless of their gender, people understood young men were at a higher risk of suicide but felt despondent because they felt there were so few proven options to help.

There were three notable exceptions to this, from three men who had one thing in common: their sphere of engagement with men. The barber, bartender and taxi driver all had a captive audience. The taxi driver was a part time journalist and had spent time interviewing young men at a local detention centre on the subject of self-harm and suicide. At the end of the drive, he asked if I would sit and talk about his findings. The bartender said they frequently came across men who were in crisis and contemplating suicide. While mixing alcohol into such situations was risky, the bar environment, of being able to have a one-to-one discussion with another man who had a sympathetic ear was deeply cathartic¹¹⁸. Similarly, the barber noted the one-to-one scenario in an environment that was non-judgemental and, while masculinised, not deliberately heteronormative, to be beneficial in de-escalation of mental health issues.

Others I spoke with either knew someone who had died by suicide, or attempted it, or had felt suicidal themselves. Interestingly, the men made an assumption that I was gay myself when I explained I was looking at the regulating and mediating factors in suicidality based on men's sexual identity. They all professed an affinity for men's health regardless of sexuality, but four people said they felt straight men needed to be much more involved in intra-sexual discussions about suicide. The bartender in particular observed both the fluidity of sexuality and the damaging confines of hegemonic-heteronormativity and said he tended to notice straight men had less agency to recover from their own damaged perception during times of crisis. He said *"Straight men are worried about not appearing manly enough. And asking for help is not seen as manly. They come here and ask me for help...not like in a direct way, not saying 'please help me', but more like I can tell they want to talk and they sit for a long time and you get piecemeal conversations, which helps them."*

¹¹⁸ Public health research typically prescribes abstinence from alcohol during times of challenging mental health. However, similarly to research on the place of barber shops in the men's mental health toolkit, Emslie et al. (2013) found men experiencing suicidality and other mental health crises found bars had significant health-promoting benefits in some circumstances.

Conversations with university administrators happened organically during coffee breaks or during campus events to which I was invited, such as research presentations and socials. Staff perspectives reflected a crisis in young men's mental health, and they were deeply concerned about the lack of traction in this area. I spoke with a Lutheran minister after they contacted me with interest in the project. They had a transgender, disabled family member 'stuck' in a religious town in Texas, unable to leave due to dependency on local medical treatment, despite experiencing bigotry and abuse on a frequent basis. The minister was coordinating an evacuation of sorts to get their relative out of Texas following a series of suicide attempts. The breadth of suicidality in such discussions was profound. Nobody had lost hope, but they were intensely frustrated and angry with the failure of the political system to care.

I spent time with the directors of two university LGBTQ student resource centres. Such spaces were microcosms of an imagined utopic society. Students were fully themselves, in a safe space, and supported by trained staff, volunteers and inclusive resources. In these spaces, mental health issues and other personal needs were discussed freely, as they should have been elsewhere in the universities but could not be for various reasons.

In the Midwest region, the LGBTQ centre was profoundly embedded in student life and had an inimitably positive impact on the student experience. Even when students had not had direct contact with the centre, they were familiar with the impact of the director, volunteers, and member students¹¹⁹. Discussions around the strategic priorities of the university and the Nebraskan political system helped to situate the power of the centre's work within the university ecosystem and the community at large. Targeted research on such centres as case studies would add greatly to our understanding of how they contribute to improved student outcomes.

I considered unplanned encounters occurred within the social, experiential frame of Fuji's accidental ethnography. The model identifies "mundane moments" such as buying coffee, or talking to hotel staff, that result in conversations and scenes researchers have previously lacked a theoretical basis to fully comprehend. There is precedent for capitalising on random encounters. Trigger et al. (2012) considered 'revelatory moments' during ethnographic fieldwork intended to extract meaning from intensive, immersive 15-minute encounters. However, this approach negates the value of other avenues, such as more fleeting

¹¹⁹ I came across multiple LGBTQ centres during the interview process, each with a unique character. This location was markedly different. It had a demonstrable impact and reach beyond the campus and city and is referenced in national material and resources as an example of exemplary practice.

encounters or observations. Instead, Fuji promotes a combination of Burawoy's (1998:6) concept of "explicit consciousness" and the propensity to apply the experiences to contextual knowledge along with more comfort and confidence in using scribbled field notes as a strategy to deepen our understanding of random circumstances. There is no doubt that unplanned encounters added value on a multifactorial level, not least in providing encouragement about the research topic and rich cultural context to my perspective as a relative outsider in each community. I consider the meaning of this in the final conclusion.

5.11 Politics (a reluctant note)

Political discourse was not part of the original project plan or a theme in the semi-structured interview script. I intentionally wanted to avoid politically-framed discourse, mainly because I'd seen the polarisation and divide it can create amongst students and because I cannot pretend to be unbiased when it comes to political landscapes and LGBTQ 'rights. However, dramatic changes in the political landscape during the research meant discussion of some degree was unavoidable and intentionally omitting it would have negated its impact. Notably, none of the students felt positively about any aspect of the Trump administration and several connected his administration with similar populist movements in the U.K., Italy, and Austria.

Some students offered a measured, impassioned defiance of the government. Others were temporarily overcome as they tried to gather their thoughts and express their feelings. A gay student in the south region who was very positive about their university experience and about the growth of gay-straight relationships on campus talked about their future predilections:

"Small-scale resistance in the face of political upheaval is the only way to make sure we protect ourselves. The large-scale protests we saw after the election are good for recognition but it's the low-level stuff that makes the difference."

Student in the South region, gay man

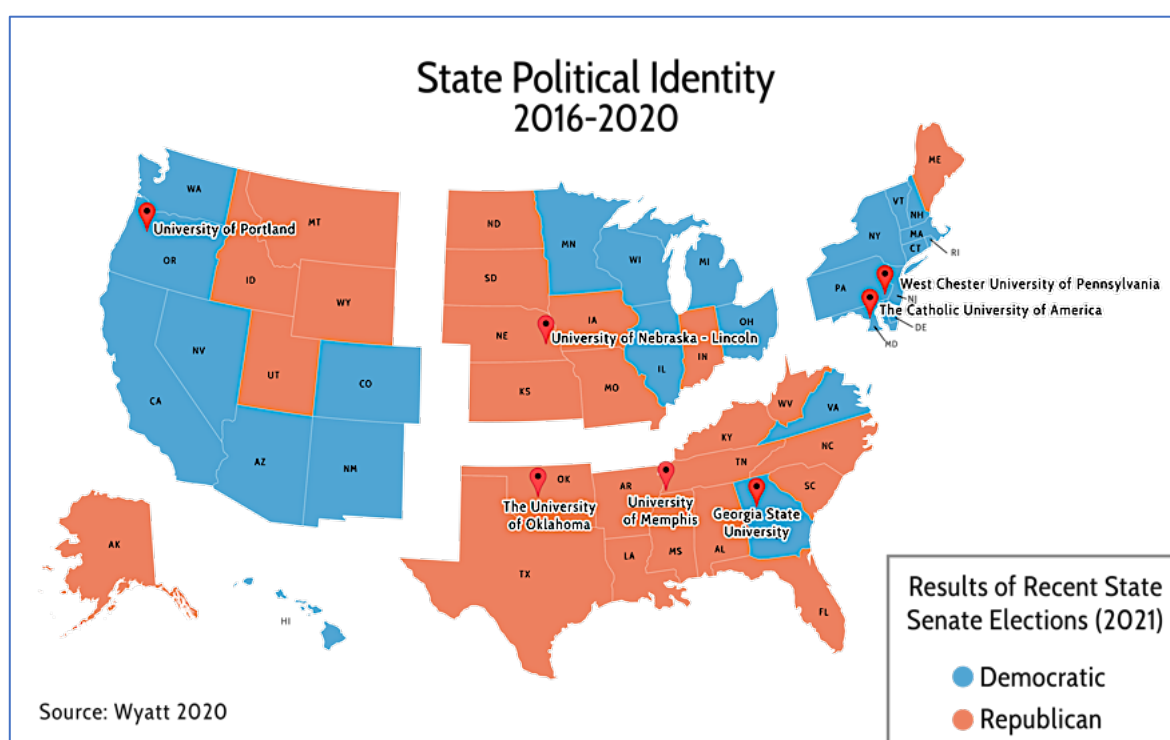
I asked him if GSAs could structuralise the community integration of straight men to maintain the momentum of long-term resistance:

"I don't know. I hope so. The generation causing all of this – these problems – they will die out. We have to stay intact long enough to rebuild when Trump leaves. You know...one of the saddest things I've ever heard, a friend said to me after the election – "They would never let us have a Black man [Obama] then a woman [Clinton] for eight years. They'd never let us have that much." We have a lot of repairing to do [after this]."

Student in the South region, gay man

Links between the political climate and campus climate are undeniable and the political landscape in the U.S. changed repeatedly during and after this study. The end of the Trump presidency saw an attempted insurrection in the Capitol and a marked increase in violence towards marginalised groups and those seen as anything but solidly right-wing. Earlier in this paper I refer to Lorri L. Jean's perception that progress towards a more inclusive university environment is usually tempered with opposite action of similar potency (Rankin 2003). This maps to the political environment, which is an important consideration because of the impact it has on student's self-reported wellbeing in this study. Map 14 presents the political identity of each state with research locations overlayed.

Map 14: Wyatt (2020) State Political Identity 2016 – 2020. *Overlayed with study regional separation and the study location of participants.*



At the time of writing, Joe Biden is president of the United States and is vocal in his belief of LGBTQ equality and protection. The U.S. has also installed, for the first time, openly LGBTQ politicians in senior roles, including the Secretary of Transportation and the Assistant Secretary for Health. In parallel, some politicians are increasing their efforts to block equality and roll back hard-won victories. Still, this is a cycle, an ebb and flow of progress. At the same time as the hateful rhetoric of Marjorie Taylor Greene in the U.S., the governor of a

state in Brazil, a country known for shocking violence against LGBTQ people, has come out as gay and is running for a more prestigious political position¹²⁰. Such contradictions and visibility run as themes underpinning much of this paper.

5.12 Conclusion

The study evolved conceptually and empirically, involving the reinterpretation of existing models and theories into new systems and concepts. Considerable tension remains between the disciplinary fields, not least that public health, education, criminology, and suicide prevention often sit at odds with each other. While these remain critical to researchers and health authorities, participants were less concerned with interdisciplinary models and relationships and more concerned with evidence-based prevention and results. Students reflected diverse areas of academic study and interests and this demonstrated, with great clarity, that they did not view one particular discipline as more important in the work to reduce suicidality and to make universities more supportive places.

Student narratives were diverse, complex and on topic. The relatively few master themes extracted from interviews indicated the similarities between students' experiences at university and their philosophical standpoints in relation to interpersonal, intra-sexual relationships. Digital media tools prompted useful conversations with students, including the importance of visual messaging and on the place of straight men in gay social spheres.

While there were differences in standpoints and opinions on the situating of masculinity and heteronormativity in theories of suicide, participants agreed that both concepts held a dichotomy of damaging and healing properties. This was a memorable aspect of the interviews and caused me to ponder for many months after they were completed. Popular media tends to frame masculinity and heteronormativity in hyper, extreme norms, which caused profound questions of understanding and identity for students. Their narratives resonated with the examples elsewhere in this paper of magazine interviews with young men struggling to reconcile their feelings, beliefs, and philosophies with constructed norms and communities. Direct links to suicidality were unambiguous in nature, although there was some debate on the agency of each influence and the extent to which they could lead to suicide ideation. For example, students differed in their views of the role of university administrations in prevention and others felt students lacked resilience.

¹²⁰ Eduardo Leite, the governor of Rio Grande do Sul, came out in July 2021. Ribeiro (2021) notes the Brazilian LGBT community viewed him with a mix of admiration and suspicion, the latter centred on whether his announcement was timed simply to amplify his presidential aspirations as the incumbent (openly homophobic, far-right) president founders during an international crisis.

Most students saw value in friendships with men of other sexual identities although straight men tended to speak more constructively about this. Gay men demonstrated more questions and, sometimes, suspicion about the motives of straight men who were vocal as allies. This did not detract from the potential value and importance of allies per se but did give gay men pause for thought and they emphasised the need for long-term, genuine commitment from allies as opposed to fleeting, novel, or reactionary efforts.

I intentionally avoided prescribing hypotheses for this project. In line with the philosophy of IPA methodology, my sole interest around the research question was to learn about student experiences and life stories, which they were happy to provide. Their narratives depicted a diverse and passionate student body, with many challenges and worries but with considerable insight into how they planned to change their social worlds for the better.

The narratives did not provide succinct, quantifiable answers and instead added more questions by presenting interlinking theories with a range of mediating factors, including campus climate, socioeconomic, and sociogeographic background. For gay men, previous experiences with straight men, particularly in high school, tended to frame their current beliefs on friendships and alliances, with the exception of the influence of an inclusive fraternity.

A distinct finding from the interviews, from a reflective and autoethnographic perspective, was how detached student experiences were from the guidance published by statutory agencies and specialist organisations. I follow the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) as well as other regular and novel publications in the discipline. They have a clear place in public health and in understanding suicidality from an epidemiological standpoint. However, the MMWR rarely has a human voice or frame within it. CDC's periodic publications aimed at helping practitioners reduce suicidality in their communities are critically important but even references to "promoting connectedness" (2008:3) lack a personal touch. The conversations I had with students felt a million miles from the sector's approach to prevention. Therein lies a challenge and, perhaps, an explanation for the lack of progress.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

“This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all. And the dead will be commemorated, and we’ll struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won’t die secret deaths any more. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come.”

Prior Walter, closing monologue, Angels in America

6.1 Introduction

As I draw this paper to a close, a brief scan of the day’s related news on social media highlights why we need to keep talking to students and find ways to bridge together the broad initiatives and studies taking place in silos. “University Investigating Homophobic Grindr Taunts Directed at Rival Basketball Player” (Edelson 2020) is the headline on a news page from Asbury Park Press. The incident involved fans of a basketball team using printed copies of the online dating profile of some members of the opposing team, using these in homophobic abuse. The university president promises an investigation, but the incident encapsulates so much of what I heard from students through hours of interviews: sport is not yet inclusive, and neither are universities.

At the same time, Buzinski (2020), reporting for a sports news outlet, has released an article that describes the efforts of a former (straight, male) major league football player to drive LGBTQ inclusivity into the sports teams of Brigham Young University, a religious institution with a ban on gay sportspeople. This dichotomy of events, the see-saw of a step back and a step forward, presents hope alongside frustration.

In October 2019, local news in Memphis reported a homophobic attack on two University of Memphis students by members of a fraternity during a party. The attack was verbal, with a threat of physical violence. This was a sobering read. I interviewed a number of students from this university and their stories were critically important in the project. They were more hesitant to embrace alliances and different variations of heteronormativity and masculinity than students from elsewhere. They were also acutely aware of the societal barriers in living an openly LGBTQ life in the state. However, they described an active, supportive, and diverse social scene and were confident things would get better.

6.2 Research questions

Aim:

How is suicide ideation and attempt amongst gay male students in higher education institutions influenced or changed by the existence of gay-straight alliances and preventive services led by straight men?

Research questions:

1. How do university students perceive LGBT media-based suicide-prevention campaigns that are led by straight male gatekeepers?
 - a. From the perspective of straight male students?

Straight male students were in favour of a gatekeeper role in a social protective context using a media-based instrument. They thought such an approach helped to demystify straight men to gay peers and had potential to rebuild trust, recognizing many gay men had long-term psychological barriers to such friendships from bullying and abuse. There were some caveats to this; straight men should mediate their efforts with a genuine commitment and should measure the use of humour to match the delicate environment in which they operate. As straight men are often the source of suicidal causation amongst gay men, participants acknowledged presentation should be interactive and not prescriptive.

- b. From the perspective of gay male students?

Gay male students were more guarded in their view of this approach. In principle, they approved of the method and channel of delivery, but a number of people felt this approach simply further meteorised the power and hegemonic heteronormativity of straight men, particularly White men. When straight men appeared as gatekeepers with some evidence of additional extraneous work to deliver messages, gay men felt more comfortable with this. There was an uneasy consensus that straight men should be encouraged to participate in such health promotion work outside of their perceived comfort zone but gay men who were unaccustomed to diverse friendships sought more substantive evidence of meaning and intent.

Can gay-straight alliances be effective as suicide prevention tools in higher education institutions?

The resounding answer to this was ‘yes’, with some social regulation. More mature students, and an alumnus, talked confidently about the long-term benefits of diverse friendships specifically between men. Structures and fora that facilitated such alliances and partnerships were critically important to mediate the hostile, inconsistent messages they received from outside sources, included religion and politics.

Fraternities that intentionally sought a diverse brotherhood and whose leadership was unambiguously welcoming to gay men were notably more popular amongst students than the more common definition of a GSA. While fraternity structures did not appear to mediate suicidality risks, they did result in markedly better perceptions of mental health and wellbeing.

Traditional GSAs were polarized and, in some cases, contentious. Gay students saw these as groups of exclusivities for the LGBTQ community and were troubled by straight membership. Gay men found some hostility in groups with female students and there were blurred boundaries between the purpose of such groups, including some discomfort with a perception of a feminist agenda. Students in fraternities felt the social skills and relationships they built would last forever; students in GSAs were uncertain how this would impact their ability to develop after graduation. Where alliances were mediated by a formal LGBTQ centre, or equivalent, students felt unwaveringly positive, and the campus-wide impact of such work was clearly embedded.

How do shifting concepts of masculinity influence suicidality amongst male university students?

Students overwhelmingly felt degrees of negativity about concepts of masculinity. Every student referred to masculinity as ‘toxic’ to some extent. Some men felt masculinity as a concept, theory, or construct was inherently toxic and damaging and directly linked to suicidality. Others identified masculinity as a layered concept with differences between philosophies, sociogeographic considerations and community norms. Most students said there were overlaps between masculinity and heteronormativity and again framed this with elements of negativity. Straight men were more likely to identify typologies of masculinity that were supportive and positive contributors to good mental health. Similarly, gay men in

fraternities and those with close friendships with straight men had a clearer understanding of theories and applications of masculinity.

Where students viewed masculinity through a hegemonic, toxic lens, they emphatically linked it to suicidality. However, masculinity was not a singular factor and additional notions such as heteronormativity and sports were deeply embedded in these. Students who had more positive experiences of masculine concepts linked it to suicidality but only in specific realms of toxicity, such as when it was used in a dominant manner to exert uneven power or when it was intentionally used for harm, such as bullying. Outside of such uses, students felt masculinity, in fluid forms, was an important part of their identity and was a tool to help fight mental health issues and suicidality.

6.3 Theoretical conclusions

6.3.1 Diversity in Higher Education

Overall, students understood the wider benefits of improving inclusivity in universities, including the benefits of GSAs and of supportive, diverse friendship groups. However, a number of gay students vocalised the defining features of Sorensen et al.'s (2009) critical-dialogic model in diversity. This model centres a group communication process as a pathway to intergroup relationships and collaboration as an alternative to a directive, blanket enforcement of an arbitrary diversity policy. This was explicitly the case for students who discussed positive experiences with an inclusive fraternity and those who valued the role of LGBTQ resource centres, neither of which was associated with arbitrary approaches to diversity.

6.3.2 Resiliency on the seesaw

The topic of resiliency amongst young men is a contentious one. Even after 15 years' working with young people, including many acutely vulnerable young people, and in the public health sector, I tend to receive strong admonishment for suggesting suicide prevention efforts could be more balanced with additional focus on resilience in the preventative toolkit. Arguments against this are predictable and usually stem from an assumption that I am simply converting the common "Man up!"¹²¹ phrase into an academic context.

¹²¹ "Man up!" is a throwaway, commonplace admonishment often aimed at men exhibiting emotional sensitivity or stress. The American Psychological Association calls the phrase, "...an *amazingly powerful insult*" (Smiler 2016) and notes it can lead to a rapid deterioration of mental health.

This is not true, but I understand the reaction. Suicidal young men are unpredictable and often have needs unknown to the people or systems that can help them. Despite our evidence-based campaigns, longitudinal studies and behavioural experts, we have summarily failed to stem the rate of deaths by suicide. Why then, not tentatively move towards a resilience model? The development of the seesaw model of male suicide in Fenaughty's (2003) research holds substantive promise, 17 years after its inception. The model balances traditional preventive efforts with resiliency skills and suggests this as an area overlooked by more traditional theorists.

Resiliency looks different between men of different identities and backgrounds. However, this research has highlighted a number of commonalities including a broad *desire* for improved life experiences and a *desire* for better inter-sexual relationships. Some students had, through perseverance, converted their desires into reality and benefited from strong, resilient relationships that would stand them well in their challenges ahead. Others had not, and lacked the knowledge, skills, or capacity to address this. Fenaughty refers to resilience as the "*neglected dimension*" (2003:4) and posits the need for Clark et al.'s (1996:1) "...*layers of protective and adaptive mechanisms...*" to address this gap.

Students alluded to this throughout the interviews. The broad differences in how individual perceived levels of suicide risk suggests both straight men and gay men see each other as a higher risk for suicide, suggesting their levels of resilience are misplaced and inaccurate. For gay men, heteronormative environments often equate to heterosexist environments, which are closely linked to the homophobia with which they are intimately familiar. Resilience against homophobia requires a range of resources and support factors, which should be readily available in the university setting. This research found that while these resources are available, such as counselling and crisis response staff, they are not always appropriately targeted or accessible on the students' terms.

The results chapter discusses the legal standpoint of university administration systems in suicide prevention. The research available on this topic is bleak. It presents universities as monolithic entities devoid of human feelings with goals set purely in finance. This is clearly not always the case and is perhaps unfair. However, most students did not speak positively about their university's efforts to curb suicide risk and none thought their institution made clear, defined efforts to improve mental health resilience. This echoed the public narrative of institutions after they experienced a suicide.

Many gay students traced their current position on alliances and friendships to high school experiences. This demonstrated challenges in living with their identity but also resilience and determination from a young age:

“We had one on the books. And I only know that because we did not have one. And my friend and I were planning on going through the full process to get the club approved, get a sponsor, and all of this. And we went to talk to the teacher that we wanted to sponsor, and he said, “Oh, we already have one of those.” And then it existed. There was technically a code for it because they had like this handbook. That designated what each club was and who the sponsor was, and it had been erased from the book, but it existed.

So, living in the south of the United States is very difficult to be LGBT. It's not easy living in the Bible Belt going against everything that the Bible says. And so different administrations to make it very difficult for you to know that you can do that. So, my friend and I ended up restarting our GSA, but because our school was so Republican, nobody wanted to join. And so, it ended up dying out again, it would be two members who would just hang out on their own and call it a club.”

Student in the South region, gay man.

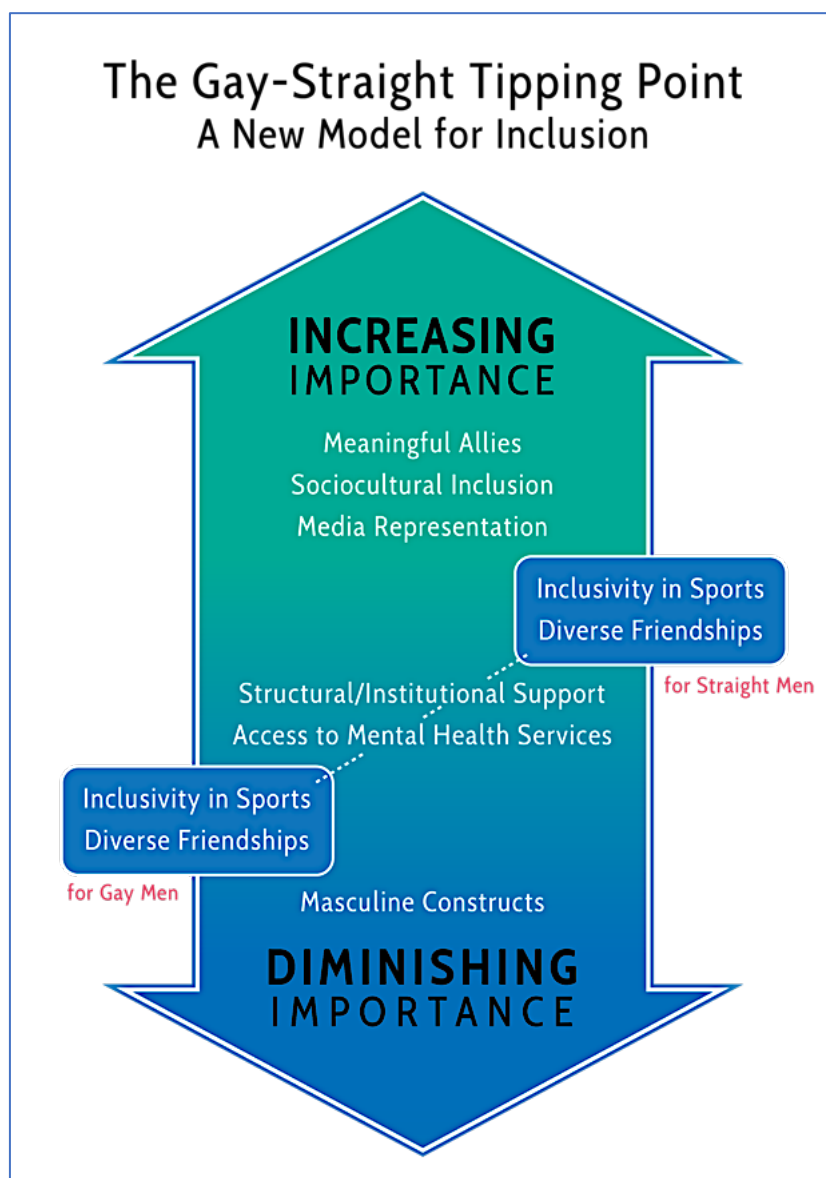
This student was somewhat deflated but still hopeful that their previous experience would not direct their next chapter. While insightful and articulate, I did note that many of the students lacked the ‘entitlement’ that those who had successfully fought for change before them demonstrated (France 2020). It made me think of ACT UP! in 1980s New York City. France (2020) described the movement, formed to force the U.S. government to acknowledge the AIDS disaster and invest in research for treatment, as slow burning at first and noted decisive, critical change happened only when younger, more entitled members joined. In this analogy, change in the areas discussed here, but most importantly in suicide prevention, may continue to move slowly.

6.3.3 The gay-straight tipping point – a new model for inclusion

Combining the critical-dialogic model with the seesaw model provides us with a new prospect: diverse social groups that are constructed to ensure inclusiveness and that provide meaningful resilience. The ten themes resulting from this project are interconnected to each other and through the research questions. Students spoke about how each of these was interwoven into their experiences and life story so far.

Image 18 summarises the theoretical outcome of the research and proposes a new model, based on the narratives of our student voices. Centring the student as the key component, the model builds on Engel’s biopsychosocial model to illustrate the pathways and concepts that continue to influence a new heteronormativity, the model reflects the destabilisation of a traditional, rigid concept (Reeser & Gotzén 2018).

Image 18: The gay/straight tipping point – a new model for inclusion



Established groups and campaigns such as Sport Allies and *You Can Play* will continue to promote their ideals and, hopefully, make the sports field better for the marginalised amongst us. The work of advocacy organisations and the support of celebrities, both straight and otherwise, will continue to bring people together and to soften the sharper edges of heteronormativity and (toxic) masculinity. There are also promising signs that inclusivity in other types of organisation is improving.

In 2019 at a West Coast fraternity pledge address, the chapter president redefined the group's meaning, *"We've worked really hard to build a reputation as a house of nice guys. If you endanger that reputation, you'll immediately be kicked to the curb. We're not the douche frat house. And with that comes*

learning how to be a nice human being...how to properly treat girls” (Robbins 2019). This is a clear sign of a fraternity’s movement away from the hypermasculine norm and towards a less harmful norm. The chapter president’s speech indicates an assumption or awareness that all pledges are straight men but his approach suggests heteronormativity does not need to adhere to traditional definitions. This is a step towards improved mental wellbeing for the fraternity brothers and for those in their social circles.

While the model presents an opportunity for framework-based developmental work, it is important to remember that transgender men remain profoundly othered from much suicide prevention work. Marine and Nicolazzo (2014) identify the fragmentation of the LGBTQ movement on college campuses as particularly harmful for trans students, who are at risk of ostracization even from those in other LGB and Q minorities. The work identifies tension between trans students, other minority students, faculty, and university administrations as they attempt to navigate a legal, political and academic programming system that is unaccustomed to meeting their diverse needs. The need to improve campus safety for trans students is urgent and persistent. It requires a deeper understanding of the needs and identities of trans students and is outside of the scope of this paper. While the experiences and challenges of young gay and straight men are complex, they are better understood and more thoroughly documented than those of their trans peers.

As I finalised this paper, a new model to address avoidable death amongst LGBTQ+ people, including from suicide, was released. Terrell et al.’s (2021) ‘Tsunamic Model of LGBTQ+ Deaths of Despair’ aims to address many of the traumas identified at the very start of my work, including drug and alcohol dependency, high-risk behaviours, and mental health problems. The researchers depict, with sobering depth, the range of mortality-related factors that make LGBTQ people so vulnerable. Building on Case and Deaton’s (2015) origination of the term ‘deaths of despair’, the authors apply the concept to the never-ending wave of avoidable death amongst LGBTQ people, including young gay men and suicidality. Published almost five years to the day that I started this project, their work highlights how very much we must do to better protect those still marginalised amongst us. For an LGBTQ person to die a ‘death of despair’, to piggyback on Mark Henick’s testimony in chapter 3, is simply not good enough. Despite its title, this latest work does provide some hope. It recognises the changing impact of heteronormativity and toxic masculinity and reflects the momentum for new models of prevention to act transformatively.

6.3.4 The media as an ally (sometimes)

“We really need a media-public health partnership.”
Gould (2001)

The media in various forms has played a central role in this project and in understanding the societal constructs and ontological philosophies in which students live. Much of the growing narrative on improve relations between men of different sexual identities is publicised by the media, as is the outcry against the damaging cultures of traditional fraternities. For every progressive story that aims to enlighten a readership or audience about fluid heteronormativity, healthy masculinity and men’s mental health, there is surely an equal number that aim to defend traditional norms and ensure straight (White) men retain their patriarchal dominance.

In this sphere, the good outweighs the bad. However, we cannot ignore the data. In 2016, the CDC reported that 28% of LGBT students had been bullied online, compared with 14.2% of their straight peers. An increase in cyber-bullying is not surprising when it correlates with exponential increases in the reliance on digital media (Flanagin and Metzger 2008), but it does pose a problem. If, in general, media integration is considered to be a positive part of life¹²², then we need to be acutely aware that negative elements, such as bullying, can add a problematic factor.

Further investigation in this area must be framed in the context of existing knowledge of other media types, namely advertising and marketing. Oakenfull et al (2008) found a high degree of dissonance in media-based marketing related to gay people alongside significant commercial value in adapting heteronormative advertising media to a gay market segment but reluctance from mainstream platforms to embrace this. With the increasing prominence of a heterosexual presence in gay-targeted media, the two media conduits may well experience more relative success if they are merged, including in the health and non-profit spheres.

Discourse with students is critical to the exploration described here, in relation to their interpretation of salient messages in the presented campaigns and in the broader societal contexts in which they consume media. This enables the construction of an understanding of how gay-straight alliances are formed, maintained, and applied.

¹²² The general consensus is that digital media and young people go well together. A slew of research on this matter - McLeod 2000; Slater 2007; Flanagin and Metzger 2008; Ohannessian et al 2014; Shehata 2016 to name a few – find that young people report better self-esteem and confidence when they are positively represented.

6.3.5 A final reflection on masculinities of place

Elsewhere in this paper I discuss the concept of accidental ethnography, essentially unplanned, often serendipitous encounters, that contribute informally to the research. The location of such encounters during the research also gives us some insight into geographic implications.

I spent a lot of time trying to understand the communities and social nuances of each university I visited. The willingness of strangers to contribute, unprompted, to the research topic through casual discourse indicated to me the importance of more understanding around the topic. One encounter stands out as a learning experience and a practical representation of the voices for equality I encountered outside of well-known cities with large gay communities.

I presented interim findings of this research at the annual Midwest Institute for Sexuality and Gender Diversity's Midwest Bisexual Lesbian Gay Transgender Asexual College Conference (MBLGTACC) at Wichita State University in 2019. I remember it well – the contact from a host university that helped more than anyone in getting word out about my research attended and we discussed my early findings. The local police chief and the mayor opened the conference. They welcomed the wonderfully diverse delegation, most of whom were university students, and said Wichita had experienced hate crimes, specifically against the LGBTQ community, and that they wanted us to feel safe, welcome, and secure in the knowledge the city had arranged protections for us. Leaving the conference on the last evening, I booked a taxi to my hotel. The conference centre was centrally located but the streets were empty and there were no people around. I noted on the taxi app that my driver was a male who looked to be in his 60s, with long, grey straggly hair, a long straggly goatee, and driving a pick-up truck.

While every stereotype of midwestern men driving pickup trucks played through my mind, I was most worried they would ask what I was doing at the conference centre. Of note I was wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with a rainbow flag and the conference logo and carrying a tote bag decorated in the same way. I need not have worried. The driver had surmised that I was a visitor and knew about the conference. On discovering I was from some distance away, he remarked, *“What in hell are you doing in Wichita?”* The conversation over the next 25 minutes revealed the driver was well travelled, an LGBTQ-ally, aware of the reputation the Midwest had for bigotry, and had encouraged his son to carry out his degree in Scotland so that he would have exposure to greater diversity. After reaching my hotel, we talked for almost an hour about the Midwest in general and young gay men in particular. He considered my

options for the evening and suggested a move from the hotel bar to a nearby watering hole where he said I would be more warmly welcomed or more able to concentrate on writing depending on what I wanted.

This encounter epitomises the informal conversations I had during the project. Combined with the extraordinarily diverse and rich range of writing I reviewed during the course of the work, I was keen to reflect the position of Bitterman and Hess (2021:xi), “*We begin by humbly recognizing our position of privilege as gay, cis, white males,*” in the preface to a book on gay neighbourhoods and their place in the collective experience. The authors travelled to many different types of cities and towns and recognised they were privileged to do so, in contrast to the experiences and agency of some people they met along the way. I kept this guiding principle at the forefront of my mind as I was made increasingly aware of my own identity as a gay, cis, White man, and the privilege this affords me.

While I am accustomed to being subject to discrimination, victimisation, and restraint of opportunity in the LGBTQ community is nuanced and directed significantly to non-male and non-White members. This is increasingly recognised in the literature and in popular culture¹²³. Arana (2017) and Johnson (2019) attribute the failure of White, gay, cis men to check their privilege as a key factor in the stalled activities of the community to push progressive policies and protections. Citing the rising political reach of Pete Buttigieg, a White, gay, cis politician, Fitzgerald (2019) cautions against the increasing power of the demographic because it has not been harnessed to elevate others in the community struggling with grinding oppression.

Donohoe (2021) extends this narrative and claims White, cis, gay privilege is out of control¹²⁴ and this sub community has established itself as ableist, classist and racist. There is, however, far more complexity to our understanding of relative privilege and its impact on the gay community than simply referring to gay, White, cis men. Those with wealth and disposable income, a powerful passport and a body that reflects the deeply embedded status quo of the gay male body (Tiggemann 2007; Wood 2008; Brennan et al. 2013; Poole 2014)

¹²³ Georgia frequently appears in mainstream and LGBTQ media for its dichotomous sensibilities in LGBTQ rights and protections. A local media columnist called the gay scene in Atlanta “100% segregated” in 2018 after several Atlanta gay bars implemented door policies designed to make the spaces less accessible to non-White people (Mahdawi 2018). Despite scoring 100% on a Human Rights Campaign equality index, many people in the LGBTQ community who were not White, gay, male and cis, felt the rating was not reflective of their experience (Duncan 2018).

¹²⁴ This comment followed an incident in 2020 in which a group of gay men, part of a social media group called *GaysOverCovid*, travelled from the U.S. to a party resort in Mexico despite the Covid-19 pandemic. The gay men were all cis and White and had remarkably similar, if not identical, body types in the photos they posted to online media.

hold significant social currency and privileges. While we can therefore recognise bias intrinsic to certain subgroups within the LGBTQ+ community, causality and contributing factors are layered and deeply complex.

Earlier in the paper I discuss the tensions I needed to overcome between my understanding of masculinity and heteronormativity from a British perspective to better understand an American context. During the research, I had a fortuitous opportunity to observe a manifestation of ‘American masculinity’ when it is transposed to another culture with a different sensibility. I had travelled to Iceland for a break and visited the Secret Lagoon, a hot spring in the small village of Flúðir. To enter the water, hygiene regulations meant each visitor had to first shower fully naked. The showers were segregated by gender and were open plan; there were no single showers in private cubicles.

Whilst showering I observed two American male tourists arguing loudly with staff. They appeared to be in their late 20s and were furious they were required to shower naked with other men, which they said made them feel very uncomfortable. They chose to leave the spring without using the facilities and staff refused a refund. I spoke with the member of staff who had dealt with the situation as I was interested in the voracity of the men’s response. He told me that the facility often received complaints and hostility from American men, who balked at the shower requirement, and who felt threatened by the need to be naked in proximity to other men. There are myriad theoretical implications and avenues for further exploration in this scenario, but the incident added a fascinating empirical element to my work. Notably, Icelandic men tend to have a materially different conceptualisation of masculinity, and gender norms are highly receptive to equality discourse (Jóhannsdóttir & Gíslason 2017).

6.4 Conclusion and implications

The commodification of gay identity in popular culture for commercial status quo purposes is well established. Skover and Testy (2002) identified a dissonance between the validation of LGBT people outside of the commercial sphere, particularly in legal and political settings. They suggest this dissonance has resulted in the fragmentation of gay identities, compounding and reinforcing factors detrimental to mental health that contribute to suicidality. The paper suggests a lack of agency amongst young gay men, caused by structural factors.

Agency and resilience are closely linked in young people (Bohle et al. 2009) and person-centred approaches are typically the most effective methods to empower both in health

and wellbeing scenarios. Students interviewed for this paper identified several people-centred components they considered to be important, including definitive sociocultural inclusion, dependable, meaningful allies, and positive media representation.

In the discussion chapter I tried to structuralise the additional conversations and encounters using an accidental ethnography theoretical basis. The author of the theory summarises as follows (Fuji 2015:537), *“No moment speaks for itself. All require analysis to understand how they inform the larger project. Analysis might involve figuring out how the researcher’s own background knowledge shapes what [they see] ... The process requires reflection, not alchemy, and its potential benefits are significant: more nuanced analyses, sharper arguments, and better theories – the very stuff of good social science.”* Fuji’s framework helped to legitimise the series of encounters and enabled me to incorporate diverse voices into the work.

Accidental ethnography was a new concept for me, and I dealt with it as an emerging theoretical understanding. There is no question it helped to shape my own philosophical standing and, in the nature of phenomenological inquiry. It helped me to develop and apply the final theoretical model, with the knowledge that this could be useful to a wide range of circumstances and communities in which men find themselves in need of support. I started this paper with a reflection on my own philosophical standing, heavily influenced by my own life experiences, on the protective relationships that can form between men of different sexual identities.

While most students were open to alliances and relationships that they might initially find unnatural or uncomfortable, they must be supported to maintain their own identity and to discover this in their own time, safely. Universities must enact and promote the diversity policies they hold dearly on paper. The institutions without multidimensional, highly active resource centres and dedicated staff should consider their place in the otherwise faceless statistics of suicide. Finally, gay men can benefit greatly from friendships with straight men, but they don’t want to adopt homonormativity. *“In essence the gay community has come to adopt its own form of patriarchy, a ‘gaytriarchy’. Gay men perpetuate patriarchy in relation to other identities. This means the LGBTIAQ community comes to enforce power structures rather than disrupting them”* (McLean 2018).

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Appendix

Participant Information Sheet

Ethics approval

Semi-structured interview script and prompts

Student triage form, example

Example of hostile student response, Shreveport, LA.

Participant Information Sheet



Participant Information Sheet

New heteronormativity: the gay-straight tipping point for suicide prevention in Higher Education environments in the United States

Who is the researcher and what is the research about?

Thank you for your interest in this research project on student perspective and experience of suicide prevention and equality campaigns. My name is Scott Ellis and I am a Senior Lecturer in public health at the University of East London and a researcher in the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences at Newcastle University. I am completing research into suicide prevention work and sexual identity as part of a doctoral programme of study.

My study aims to explore the perspective and experience of male students' suicide prevention campaigns in the media. This includes whether or not students think the sexual identity of the spokesperson of each campaign is important in relation to their own. For example, if a student identifies as gay, do they think it matters if the spokesperson of a campaign is gay or straight? I will also ask questions about how students see their own sexual identity in relation to their life at university.

What kind of research is being done?

I will be running an observation of up to five students at four different universities. This is a simple process that involves a small group of students watching three short videos from suicide prevention and equality awareness campaigns. Each video lasts less than one minute and I will observe each person for their reaction, including facial expressions, body language and verbal comments. After the group observation, I will interview each student on a one-to-one basis. Although the formal term is 'interview', this will be a relaxed and informal private discussion in which we talk about how you feel about relations between straight and gay students on your campus, including any differences in the experience of being at university. I will also ask how you feel about suicide prevention work, both nationally and locally. This is very much focused on your own views, experiences and feelings and there are no 'right or wrong' answers.

Who can participate?

Male students who are enrolled at one of the participating universities at the time of the project. There is no restriction on age or programme of study.

When are the observations and interviews scheduled for?

The observations and interviews will be scheduled between February 2016 and April 2016. The observations will last no more than 45 minutes and each interview will last a maximum of one hour.

What will be involved?

The observation will involve you sitting with a maximum of four other male students. We will have a chat together as a group to talk about the research and to discuss any questions that you feel have not already been answered. I will ask your age and your sexual identity to help me

contextualise the rest of the research process. I will then show you three short videos from campaigns about suicide prevention and equality. During the videos, I will be out of your eyesight but watching your reaction to the videos, including body language, facial expressions and any verbal comments you make. After this, we will discuss your feelings about the videos briefly, including what you thought about the messages and the people delivering them. This will take up to 45 minutes in total.

After this, I will interview each member of the group on a one-to-one basis. This could be immediately after the group session or at a time to suit you later in the day or the following day. The interviews will be informal and a chance to talk about your feelings about the gay-straight alliance at your university as well as some other areas important to this project. The interviews will be confidential and although I will digitally record the audio, I will not use video or image recording.

After each stage you will have the chance to ask any questions or voice any concerns.

How will the information be used?

The observation notes and interview audio recordings will be transcribed (typed up), anonymised (anything that could identify you removed) and analysed for the project. Extracts from the notes and transcriptions may be written up in publications that arise from the research. Personal information such as sexual identity and age will be compiled into a table and included in publications that arise from the research. The information you provide will be treated confidentially and personally identifiable details will be stored separately to the data. Newcastle University has a research data management policy and I will provide more details of this on request, including how the data will be stored.

What are the benefits of taking part?

This is an opportunity to participate in a research project on an important social issue. The information you provide will be used to inform future projects to help understand and reduce the risk of suicide as well as to make sure campaigns aimed at improving the health and experience of young people are useful. Educator understanding of how sexual identity influences university life in terms of safety and relationships is relatively new and the information I gather will be used to contribute to more inclusive university structures.

Unfortunately you will not be paid to take part in this research but refreshments will be provided and travel expenses will be reimbursed up to a maximum of \$30.

Can I withdraw from the research?

Yes. Participation is completely voluntary and you can withdraw from the research at any time. I will provide information about the study and give an opportunity for questions at the beginning of the observation session and check that everyone is okay to continue. Likewise you can exit from the interviews at any time with no explanation, or you can ask me to temporarily stop the

observation or interview if you wish to stop participating. If you retrospectively decide you want to withdraw from the research please contact me by email. Please note that there are certain points beyond which it will be impossible to withdraw from the research – for instance, once I have published the results of the research. Therefore, I strongly encourage you to contact me within a month of participation if you wish to withdraw your data.

Are there any risks involved?

The 'risks' of participating in the project are minimal. The observations and interviews will take place on your own university campus. The videos you will be shown are about a sensitive social topic but do not contain any distressing footage. If a discussion or question reminds you of a distressing personal experience, I can arrange a break or I can help you access local student support services.

If you have any questions about this research please feel free to contact me by e-mail in the first instance. I can arrange to call you or to set up a video chat.

If after reading this information sheet you are happy to proceed, please let me know by e-mail so we can work on a schedule.

E-mail: s.a.ellis2@newcastle.ac.uk

Phone: +44 7426 805406

Please note that there will be no cost to you as a participant with regards to communication. The UK contact number listed is available via FaceTime and the e-mail address is available via Skype. FaceTime offers a free communication service and I will accept the charges associated with a Skype call. Please e-mail or send a text message in the first instance to arrange a time to talk.

I look forward to meeting you.

Scott Ellis
School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences
King George VI Building
Newcastle University
NE1 7RU

This project has been approved by the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Newcastle University.

Ethics approval

Ethical approval

Wendy Davison

Wed 19/10/2016 11:00

To: Scott Ellis (PGR) <s.a.ellis2@newcastle.ac.uk>;

Cc: susan pattison <susan.pattison@newcastle.ac.uk>;

Dear Scott

Thank you for your application for ethical approval of your project "New heteronormativity: the gay-straight tipping point for suicide prevention in Higher Education environments in the United States". I confirm that Prof Daniel Zizzo has approved it on behalf of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee.

Please note that this approval applies to the project protocol as stated in your application - if any amendments are made to this during the course of the project, please submit the revisions to the Ethics Committee in order for them to be reviewed and approved.

Kind regards,

Wendy

Wendy Davison
PA to Lorna Taylor (Faculty Research Manager)
and Sue Mitchell (Research Funding Development Manager)
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
5th floor, Daysh Building
Newcastle University
Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU

Telephone: 0191 208 6349
Fax: 0191 208 7001

Semi structured interview script and prompts

Interview schedule (semi-structured)

Key question

How is suicide ideation and attempt amongst gay male university students in the U.S. influenced by gay-straight alliances (GSAs) and preventive services led by men who identify as straight?

Objectives

1. How do university students perceive media-based suicide-prevention campaigns that are led by straight men?
 - a. From the perspective of straight male students
 - b. From the perspective of gay male students
2. How do shifting representations of male sexual identity in targeted health promotion campaigns influence suicide ideation amongst gay male university students?
3. What is the perception amongst male students in HEIs of gay-straight alliances as tools to prevent suicide ideation?

Interview questions

Introduction

Can you tell me a little about your life here at XX University, particularly your social life and how you feel about being here?

Previous knowledge or experience of suicide ideation or attempt

What do you know about suicide risks or attempts on your campus? Have there been any issues or incidents around this?

[Prompt: can you explain a little more about this? Who is mostly affected?]

Do you know if there is a difference between suicide rates for men and women? Why do you think this might be?

[Prompt: can you explain why you think this? Provide CDC data if participant is not aware of the issue]

What do you think are some of the reasons men plan or try to take their own lives?

[Prompt: Do students or staff ever talk about this? What do you personally think about it?]

What sort of dialogue or communication does your university (as an institution) promote with regards to suicide and its prevention?

[Prompt: can you explain how it communicates and what the key messages are?]

What do you think universities can do to reduce the risk of male suicide? What about students and their friends?

Do you and your friends every talk about suicide?

Awareness of and interaction with suicide prevention campaigns

Can you talk about any suicide prevention campaigns you've seen; either at university or elsewhere?

[Prompt: probe for the name/brand of the campaign, key features, target audience and ecological features]

What do you think are the best ways to reach students who might be at risk of planning or taking their own lives?

Campaigns (audio-visual section)

[Audio-visual section prompt: Explain that this study is investigating the links between suicide risk, supportive relationships and sexual identity between men. Tell the participant you are interested in their views on suicide prevention in the context of their own sexual identity and relationships with other men.]

I am about to show you three short video clips that are from suicide awareness or prevention campaigns. I will make some notes about your reactions to each of the videos and after you have watched them we will talk about what you thought of the content.

Show the participant the three video clips. Implement the structured observational framework tool and after the clips ask:

Can you describe whether you think the videos could be effective, including how and why?

Specifically thinking about 'Straight But Not Narrow' and 'The Trevor Project', what do you think about straight men leading campaigns aimed at LGBT people?

[Prompt: explore the reasons for their answer and feelings. Use the observational tool to ask about their reaction and explore their ideas based on sexual identity]

What do you think the benefits could be of having straight men as spokespeople or figureheads for suicide prevention campaigns aimed at gay men?

Can you suggest anything that you think would improve any of the videos or campaigns?

Interaction with GSA

Can you describe any of the clubs or groups your university has that are aimed at bringing together students of different sexual identities?

[Prompt: how much involvement have you had with them? Do you think they are positive examples of groups for socialising?]

Do you think any of the groups you have just talked about are good places for suicide prevention work?

[Prompt: can you example how and why?]

How important is it to have groups such as gay-straight alliances or LGBT resource groups on university campuses?

Experiences of friendships and peer relationships based on sexual identity

Explain that this part of the interview contains some personal questions and remind the participant of the confidential nature of the interview.

Do you have male friends who have a different sexual identity to you?

If yes:

How do your different sexual identities influence your friendships?

Is this ever a topic of conversation between you? If so, in what ways?

How important do you think it is that men have friendships with other men who are different from themselves?

If no:

Do you think your friends influence your current thoughts or feelings on suicide prevention?

[Prompt: can you explain how?]

For either response:

What role do you think straight men have in the prevention of gay male suicide at universities?

[Prompt: can you explain your answer? How important are the differences between gay and straight men?]

Thinking about everything we've talked about in the last hour, what is your perception of how the relationship dynamics between straight and gay men can influence mental wellbeing such as suicide risk?

[Prompt: what do you think straight men can offer in terms of prevention that a) gay men can't provide and/or b) complements what gay men already provide.]

Do you think there could be changes in the approach to LGBTQ suicide prevention in the U.S. following the recent political changes? What could these look like?

Is there anything else you'd like to add or thoughts you want to get across after this discussion?

Student triage form, example



Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research. You have already signed a consent form and read the confidentiality statement. This questionnaire should be completed before your interview and your answers will be used to help us collect an overall idea of the range of people we have spoken with.

Your unique ID is LNK3A and this helps me to make sure your answers stay confidential.

If you have any questions please let me know, otherwise please hand this in before you leave the interview.

Thank you,

Scott

What is your gender?

- Man ☒
- Woman ☐
- Transgender ☐
- Gender fluid ☐
- Other ☐ (please state:.....)

What is your sexual identity?

- Gay ☐
- Straight ☒
- Bi-Sexual ☐
- Queer ☐
- Other ☐ (please state:.....)

What year of study are you in? (i.e. 'second year undergraduate')

4th Year

Please state your age: 23

Please state your ethnicity: Conversion



How would you describe the area you grew up in?

Urban/city ☐
Rural/countryside ☐
Other ☒ (please state: *Army Brat...*)

Is this university in your home city?

Yes ☐ ☒
No ☐

Have a look at the logos below. Each is from a health promotion/awareness campaign.



If you recognise the logo, please circle it. If you do not recognise the logo, please put an 'X' through it.

Example of hostile student response, Shreveport, LA.

[REDACTED] research query

[REDACTED]

Sat 07/10/2017 04:47

To: Scott Ellis [REDACTED]

Dear Mr. Ellis,

Our group is a circle, and as such we have neither leader nor spokesperson. This one, I, provide guidance for the others right now, and as such I am the one with which to speak.

With regards to your research I will participate on one condition: stay the hell away from the other members of our circle.

"I see as much misery out of them moving to justify their selves as them that set out to do harm," he said.

It's true, and your smiley, buttoned down, PhD waiving invitation is acid behind this one's eyes; we won't let you harm them, won't let you objectify and look down your nose at them regardless of the supposed good you claim to speak on behalf of.

Welcome to the G/S Alliance of LSUS. We're glad to have you with us, if only for a moment.

If you need anything please feel free to contact me.

Be easy,

-Ntwadumela-