MEMORABLE MESSAGES IN CAMPUS SEXUAL ASSAULT PREVENTION

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ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines the memorable messages retained by first-year Ball State University students who went through Think About It, an online sexual assault prevention training. A cross-section of first-year students were interviewed and iterative thematic analysis was used to develop themes in response to the research questions. The results suggest that memorable messages can impact individuals’ sense of identity during their socialization to a new university setting. The results also demonstrate the elements of online training design that can help motivate students to complete it. The findings of this study provide practical implications for improving campus sexual assault prevention training not only to comply with federal mandates, but also to better address student needs.
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# Table of Contents

Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 6
    Introduction of the Problem ......................................................................................... 6
    Building a Framework ................................................................................................. 7
    Preview ....................................................................................................................... 8

Literature Review ............................................................................................................. 10
    Rape Culture ............................................................................................................. 10
    Mediated Sexual Violence ......................................................................................... 14
    What is Sexual Assault? ............................................................................................ 19
        Pervasiveness of sexual assault ............................................................................. 20
        Sexual assault on college campuses ..................................................................... 22
        Sexual assault and student attrition ...................................................................... 24
    University Crisis ........................................................................................................ 25
        Image repair discourse ......................................................................................... 27
        Image repair for university crisis ......................................................................... 29
    Campus Prevention Programs ..................................................................................... 30
        Dear Colleague Letter ............................................................................................ 33
        Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (SaVE) Act .................................................... 34
    Organizational Socialization ....................................................................................... 35
        Socialization theories .............................................................................................. 39
    Identity Formation ..................................................................................................... 41
    Memorable Messages .................................................................................................. 45
        Memorable messages and student affairs ............................................................... 47
    Summary ..................................................................................................................... 47

Methods ............................................................................................................................ 49
    Interpretive Paradigm ................................................................................................. 49
    Contextualizing Factors ............................................................................................... 50
        CampusClarity ......................................................................................................... 51
        Sexual assault on Ball State’s campus ..................................................................... 52
    Recruiting ................................................................................................................... 53
    Participants .................................................................................................................. 55
    Procedure .................................................................................................................... 56
        Data analysis ............................................................................................................ 59

Results .............................................................................................................................. 63
    Partying ....................................................................................................................... 63
    Understanding Consent .............................................................................................. 66
        Others don’t know enough about sexual assault ..................................................... 69
    Awareness .................................................................................................................... 71
    Bystander intervention .............................................................................................. 75
Tensions Between Expectations and Experiences .......................................................... 78
  Important vs. uncomfortable......................................................................................... 78
  Control vs. powerlessness............................................................................................ 83
  Redundant vs. enlightening......................................................................................... 85
  Partying as essential vs. partying as unfamiliar.......................................................... 90
Impactful Training Design .............................................................................................. 93
  Convenient compliance............................................................................................... 93
  Diversity....................................................................................................................... 96
Storytelling.................................................................................................................... 98

Discussion..................................................................................................................... 101
  RQ1: What memorable messages do students recall from Ball State’s sexual assault prevention training?................................................................. 101
    Partying is essential to the college experience......................................................... 101
    Sexuality is important to talk about......................................................................... 103
    Being aware of other students will increase safety.................................................. 105
  RQ2: What are the shared themes of students’ memorable messages?....................... 109
    Tensions...................................................................................................................... 109
    Impactful training design......................................................................................... 113
Theoretical Implications............................................................................................... 117
Practical Implications.................................................................................................... 121
Limitations..................................................................................................................... 126
Future Research............................................................................................................. 128
Conclusion..................................................................................................................... 130

Reference List............................................................................................................... 131

Appendix A: Recruitment Email .................................................................................. 142
Appendix B: Consent Form .......................................................................................... 143
Appendix C: Screening Questionnaire ......................................................................... 145
Appendix D: Participant Demographics ....................................................................... 146
Appendix E: Co-Moderator Confidentiality Agreement ................................................ 147
Appendix F: Demographic Questionnaire .................................................................... 148
Appendix G: Focus Group Short Answer Questions..................................................... 149
Appendix I: List of Resources for the Participants....................................................... 153
Appendix J: Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement............................................... 154
Introduction

Introduction of the Problem

Sexual assault and violence on college campuses have been widespread problems in the United States for some time, but these issues have catapulted to national attention in recent years (Stratford, 2014). The chances of a woman being sexually assaulted during her undergraduate career are as high as one in five (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007), or even one in four depending on how far along in her college career a woman is when surveyed (Masters, 2010). Students surveyed as juniors and seniors are more likely to have experienced sexual assault than their freshman or sophomore counterparts (Krebs et al., 2007). Although much of the research surrounding sexual assault on and off college campuses focuses on protecting women (Fisher & Smith, 2009; Koss, 1985), men are not immune to being the victims of sexual assault. Among adult males, up to 14% report experience some type of sexual victimization (Davies & Rogers, 2006).

The issue of sexual assault on college campuses has particularly garnered a great deal of attention following the May 2014 release of a list of 55 American colleges and universities under federal probe for their handling of sexual violence and harassment claims (Anderson, 2014). In the short time since then, that number of investigations has increased to include 85 institutions (Kingkade, 2014). The federal government responded by introducing the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (SaVE) Act, which requires all federally-funded universities to provide comprehensive programming addressing the issues of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking to all new students and employees (Schroeder, 2014). In response to the Campus SaVE Act, Ball State University adopted an online training program called Think About It to be completed by all new students and employees. The program, which won the 2014
National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Gold Excellence Award for Violence Education and Prevention (Griffith, 2013), provided trainees with an interactive program that covers issues of sexual assault, dating violence, stalking, and bystander intervention.

**Building a Framework**

College students receive an enormous number of messages on a daily basis (Orbe, Johnson, Kauffman, & Cooke-Jackson, 2014), yet the majority of these messages slip into short term memory and fade quickly away (Smith, Ellis, & Yoo, 2001). A select few messages are memorable enough that they are retained for an extended period of time and continue to have an influence on a person’s behavior (Orbe et al., 2014). Memorable messages have been studied for their impact on variety of health behaviors, including breast cancer prevention and detection (Smith, Nazione, LaPlante, Kotowski, Atkin, Skubisz, & Stohl, 2009), weight control (Reno & McNamee, 2015), and medical care support (Ford & Ellis, 1998). Communication scholars have previously studied memorable messages in terms of organizational socialization (Dallimore, 2003; Ellis & Smith, 2004), in examining the influence mentors have on first-generation college students (Wang, 2012), in constructions of identity (Holladay, 2002), and as an interpretive lens into how first-time sexual experiences are gendered (Orbe et al., 2014). However, no previous study has explored the role of memorable messages in sexual assault prevention training for first-year students on college campuses. Ball State’s *Think About It* training is designed to deliver messages about sexual assault prevention, bystander intervention, safe drug and alcohol practices, dating violence, and indicators of healthy and unhealthy relationships. University administrators hope that at least some of these messages will be memorable enough that they will
cause students to alter their behavior. The goal of this study is to examine what kinds of memorable messages students recall from sexual assault prevention training.

**Preview**

In this study, I conducted qualitative interviews with eight students to find out if the *Think About It* training they underwent left them with any memorable messages, and how those messages impacted their behavior. Because sexual assault is a highly personal issue, and because attempts to quantify the subject have led to such widely different conclusions (Krakauer, 2015), I used a qualitative approach, which provided me with an appropriate methodology from which to understand the experiences of students. Additionally, because the online training that new students were required to take automatically provided some quantitative output, I attempted to be of more help to university efforts in addressing sexual assault issues by filling in gaps left by the quantitative survey research. I employed a constant-comparative analysis to identify the specific messages students identify as being particularly memorable and to develop categories and thematic patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the next chapter, I will review the literature on rape culture, sexual assault, organizational crisis and socialization, and memorable messages. In the third chapter, I will strengthen the argument for using qualitative methodology to address this issue. I will describe my methods, my participants, my interview design, and my analysis for answering the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** What memorable messages do students recall from Ball State’s sexual assault prevention training?
- **RQ2:** What are the shared themes of students’ memorable messages?

In chapter four, I will share the themes that emerged when I examined the content of the transcripts from each interview and analyze the importance of each theme. Finally, in chapter
five, I will answer my guiding research questions based on my results and explain their connections to the existing literature. I will discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these findings and share the limitations of the current study, providing suggestions for future researchers.
Literature Review

Rape Culture

Central to any discussion about issues of sexual assault and campus safety are the norms and expectations of rape culture. Rape culture occurs in “environments that support beliefs conducive to rape and increase risk factors related to sexual violence” (Burnett, Mattern, Herakova, Kahl, Tobola, & Bornsen, 2009, p. 466). The frequency with which sexual assault occurs indicates that we live in a culture that condones rape and perpetuates rape myths (Earle, 2009). Stereotypes and myths about rape, rape victims, and rape perpetrators create a climate that is hostile to victims of rape (Burt, 1980). Rape myths, defined in a pivotal publication by Burt (1980), are a specific set of attitudes and beliefs that shift blame for sexual assault from perpetrators to victims (Aosved & Long, 2006). For example, individuals who subscribe to rape myths may believe that women who choose to drink or wear revealing clothing are to blame for their own sexual assaults. Social norms can make rape myths seem like normal, plausible belief patterns (Burnett et al., 2009), and these shared beliefs serve to promote rape culture by facilitating the continued tolerance of sexual aggression towards women (Aosved & Long, 2006).

Rape myths simultaneously minimize victim injury and increase victim blame, teaching survivors of assault that their attack took place because of where they were, what they were wearing, or how much they had to drink, placing the onus of responsibility for the assault on the victims (Burnett et al., 2009). Examples of rape myths include the idea that “no” really means “yes,” that women can resist rape if they are willing, that in most cases the victim is promiscuous, and that women falsely report rape to protect their reputations or to punish men (Burnett et al., 2009; Burt, 1980). Despite being false, rape myths are often used to rationalize
and justify sexual violence against women (Bannon, Brosi, & Foubert, 2013). Various studies have reported that many people ascribe to rape myths, regardless of gender identification or socioeconomic background (Aosved & Long, 2006; Burt, 1980; Peterson & Muelenhard, 2004).

When rape myths are culturally accepted and perpetuated, they can create an environment in which victims of sexual assault are silenced. Rape myth acceptance refers to an individual’s support of attitudes and false beliefs that deny or justify sexual aggression (Hust, Lei, Ren, Chang, McNab, Marett, & Willoughby, 2013). The acceptance of rape myths can lead individuals to believe that rape can be legitimate and deserved (Burnett et al., 2009). Rape myth acceptance can also lead individuals to question a victim’s experience if it does not align with culturally accepted scripts of sexual assault (i.e., if women don’t fight back, it’s not rape) (Peterson & Muelenhard, 2004). This is particularly challenging for victims of sexual assault who accept rape myths themselves and are rendered unable to label their experience as “rape” (Peterson & Muelenhard, 2004). Among a sample of women who survived being raped, those who endorsed higher levels of rape myth acceptance were less likely to report their rapes to police (Heath, Lynch, Fritch, & Wong, 2013). Rape myth acceptance is problematic because it perpetuates the rape culture wherein victims are silenced and perpetrators are exempt from legal consequences.

Individuals’ acceptance of rape myths can be predicted from their attitudes toward sex stereotyping, social conservativism, and acceptance of force and coercion as legitimate ways to gain compliance in sexual relationships (Burt, 1980). Sexism has long been identified as a predictor of rape myth acceptance (Burt, 1980). More recently, researchers have found that there are also strong ties between rape myth acceptance and individual adherence to oppressive belief systems, including homophobia, racism, ageism, classism, and religious intolerance (Aosved &
Long, 2006). Oppressive belief systems can be understood as attempts to regain control and express rigid masculinity by overpowering other individuals (Aosved & Long, 2006). Rape myths serve to facilitate adherence to rigid sex role stereotypes.

Despite efforts to dismantle rape culture in America, it tends to remain intact for a variety of reasons (Burnett et al., 2009). One explanation for the acceptance of rape myths is the belief of individuals in a just world (Dalbert, 2009; Lerner, 1980). Individuals who ascribe to a just world assume that good things happen to good people (and, conversely, that bad things only happen to bad people), which impacts their social perceptions. When good people suffer bad fates, like being the victim of a sexual assault, those who hold a conception of a just world may feel their belief system being threatened, which can lead these individuals to instead alter their perceptions of victims to believe they must have done something to be deserving of sexual assault (Stromwall, Alfredsson, & Landstrom, 2012). Such an alteration of perception can feed into victim-blaming rape myths (Burt, 1980).

Another possible explanation for the widespread acceptance of rape myths comes from attribution theory, which explains that people make differing inferences when it comes to understanding their own and others’ behavior (Heider, 1958; LaBelle & Martin, 2014). Attribution theory explains that people tend to assume that when bad things happen to others, it is deserved—but when something bad happens to them personally, they tend to blame their circumstances (LaBelle & Martin, 2014). Researchers who applied attribution theory to attitudes regarding sexual assault found that individuals are likely to give greater assignation of responsibility to victims of sexual assault when they have been drinking but tend to give less responsibility to rape perpetrators when they have been drinking (Richardson & Campbell, 1982).
Many of the rape myths that Americans subscribe to are strongly tied to pervasive attitudes including sex role stereotyping, distrust of the opposite sex, and acceptance of interpersonal violence (Burt, 1980). Sex role stereotypes reinforce a false dichotomy between males and females while dictating “appropriate” performances of gender, demanding that women behave passively, and insisting that men demonstrate their dominance (Hust et al., 2013). Sex role stereotypes imply exaggerated gender differences, reinforcing beliefs that men and women are implicitly different from one another (Hust et al., 2013). Ideas about what it means to be masculine in our society often include being strong, powerful, heterosexual, and part of a majority group as opposed to a minority group (Aosved & Long, 2006). The notion that masculinity requires power can lead individuals to express their oppression and dominance over other individuals (Aosved & Long, 2006). Traditional conceptions of American masculinity alienate men from their emotions and from other human beings (Sanday, 2007). These expectations serve to create a climate where men may feel entitled to express their sexual dominance over others (Sanday, 2007). In a study of male perspective on rape, over one third of a male sample admitted that they would commit a rape if they were guaranteed freedom from any legal consequences (Malamuth, 1981). In a more recent study, researchers found that although men deny their willingness to “rape,” when survey items are behaviorally descriptive (i.e. have you ever coerced somebody to intercourse by holding them down?) rather than explicitly labeled (i.e. have you ever raped someone?) they are still likely to admit to sexually coercive behaviors (Edwards, Bradshaw, & Heinsz, 2014).

Our culture tends to hold a naturalistic explanation of sex and sexuality, assuming that physiology explains the meaning of social existence for both men and women (Butler, 1988). In patriarchal societies, male understandings and expressions of social reality dominate female
perspectives (Burnett et al., 2009). Women are taught to adopt male communicative systems to assimilate to a male-centric society (Burnett et al., 2009). Conversations about rape prevention often overemphasize sexual differences at the expense of understanding the gender dynamics of sexual assault (Murphy, 2009). Attitudes about rape and gender differences are strongly influenced by cultural factors. Changing these attitudes is a difficult task because they are tied so closely to strongly held, pervasive attitudes which are ingrained in individuals starting at a very young age (Burt, 1980).

Problematic beliefs about rape and gender roles are culturally reified. Rape myths are communicated and perpetuated in a variety of ways, creating a culture where victims are blamed for their own rapes and assailants are not made culpable for their actions. One of the ways these pervasive attitudes spread is through mediated portrayals of sexuality and sexual violence. Mainstream mediated portrayals of gender serve to build cultural perceptions about sexual assault.

**Mediated Sexual Violence**

In the U.S., rape culture is perpetuated through mediated messages about sex, gender roles, and consent. For adolescents and young adults, media is a major source of information about sex (Harris & Scott, 2002). Whether the creators intend it or not, media acts as a pedagogical tool, teaching us about race, sex, and class (hooks, 1996). Mediated messages about sexuality and sexual violence come from a variety of sources, including literature, film, music, television, magazines, websites, and videos (Harris & Scott, 2002). These sources have the potential to influence cultural ideas about rape and often serve to perpetuate rape myths.

In the past decade, film and television portrayals of sexual violence against women have increased in frequency (Custers & Van den Bulck, 2013). However, when it comes to news
media coverage of sexual crimes, sexual assault is grossly underreported. Despite the fact that rape rates exceed those of murder rates by 3 to 1, news stories about murder exceed stories about rape by 11 to 1 (Custers & Van den Bulck, 2013). When news sources do cover sexual assault cases, they tend to select shocking examples of extreme violence, such as gang rape and sex crimes that end in murder (Carrabine, 2008; Custers & Van den Bulck, 2013). Both fictional and nonfictional mediated portrayals of rape tend to fixate on cases in which the victim is subjected to extreme physical torture, injury, or murder (Custers & Van den Bulck, 2013). These types of mediated sexual assault depictions can lead individuals to believe that all sexual assault victims will experience dramatic physical injuries and come away with harrowing tales of torture (if they survive the ordeal at all). People who believe these depictions to be the norm when it comes to sexual assault in real life may minimize, trivialize, or tolerate less violent sexual assault cases (Hust et al., 2013).

Stereotypical images of “ideal” victims and offenders are offered by media portrayals of sexual violence and rape (Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000; Custers & Van den Bulck, 2013). In fictional mediated portrayals, victims of sexual violence are generally White, innocent, middle-class women who did not know their assailants and were unable to defend themselves (Custers & Van den Bulck, 2013). Sexual assault offenders in the media are typically poor, uneducated, minority men who choose their victims arbitrarily (Custers & Van den Bulck, 2013). These portrayals are harmful because they perpetuate the idea that there is a proper way to be a victim, indicating that victims who are not middle-class, White, and unacquainted with their assailants must be at fault in some way for their own rape. Additionally, these portrayals ignore the fact that the majority of rapes are committed by an acquaintance, such as a parent, coach, boyfriend, or classmate, rather than by a violent stranger (Masters, 2010). Ignoring the reality of
acquaintance rape serves to further marginalize the experiences of women raped by assailants who are known to them.

These unrealistic portrayals of sexual assault are especially troubling in light of the fact that over 29% of US teens identify television as their most important source of information about sex, as compared with 7% who cited their parents and 3% who cited sex education (Harris & Scott, 2002). Teens are getting the majority of their information about sexuality from mediated sources that do not portray realistic sexual assaults, which can impact the development of their sexual expectations. The types of media from which teens are getting their information can also be cause for concern. Pornography provides large source of information about sex for adolescent boys over the age of 15, of whom approximately 90% have been exposed to an X-rated film or magazine (Malamuth & Huppin, 2005). Recent research indicates that exposure to pornography increases notions of women as sex objects and spreads the belief that women engage in token resistance to sex (Hald, Malamuth, & Lange, 2013). Pornography is sexually explicit media designed for the purpose of sexually arousing the viewer (Malamuth & Huppin, 2005). It can be distinguished from sexual content embedded within mainstream media, although the boundaries can sometimes be blurred (Malamuth & Huppin, 2005).

Pornography exposure among adolescents is widespread and typically facilitated by peers (Malamuth & Huppin, 2005). Watching pornography together is a frequent bonding experience for fraternity members (Sanday, 2007). Whether or not the actors in pornographic materials appear to be consenting or not, fraternity members believe they have a right to watch it (Sanday, 2007). A fraternity brother interviewed by Sanday (2007) described his entitlement to watch pornography: “Once a movie is made, regardless of the circumstances, even if a woman is forced, to tell me that I can’t go see it, that’s going too far, because that’s my decision” (p. 142).
Some fraternity brothers hold the belief that pornography cuts down on rapes by providing a release for sexual frustration (Sanday, 2007). However, these same brothers also admit that pornography creates in them a desire to “get laid,” and that if a girl “happens by” after they finish watching a pornographic movie, they would “like to fuck her” (Sanday, 2007, p. 143), essentially reducing the women they encounter in real life to sexual objects with as little agency as the women they watch in pornographic films.

Treating women as sexual objects is effectively condoned through pornography (Sanday, 2007; Malamuth & Huppin, 2005), but also through more mainstream forms of media. Feminist scholars have adopted Foucault’s notion of panoptic surveillance to explain how women in the media are subjected to a patriarchal gaze (Gibson & Wolske, 2011). Film can often be used as “an instrument of the male gaze, producing representations of women, the good life, and sexual fantasy from a male point of view” (Schroeder, 1998, p. 208). Film and television do not tend to provide women with examples of healthy expressions of female sexuality. Rather, through mediated messages, women are disciplined to see themselves, their bodies, their agency, and their value through a patriarchal gaze (Gibson & Wolske, 2011). Limited media portrayals of gender perpetuate harmful gender role stereotypes (Hust et al., 2013). Media portrayals of women serve to mute them in a variety of ways, including the methods through which women tell stories, the way women’s bodies are portrayed, analyzed, and objectified, and through the censoring of women’s voices (Burnett et al., 2009).

Most mediated portrayals of sex follow a gendered script that encourages an understanding of female sexuality as dangerous, abnormal, and immoral (Gibson & Wolske, 2011). Portrayals of female sexuality that stray from a heteronormative, male-centric script—i.e. portrayals of women enjoying sex, or sex shown from a woman’s vantage point—are effectively
disciplined by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) (Gibson & Wolske, 2011). Sexually explicit and graphic films are more likely to receive a lenient rating from the MPAA if they portray heterosexual and male-centered sex (Dick, 2006) as opposed to homosexual or female-centered sex. The MPAA rating a film receives has a significant impact on its success, as an NC-17 rated film will receive severely limited distribution compared to a PG-13 or R-rated film (Gibson & Wolske, 2011). Although it is common for films depicting sexual assault to receive a PG-13 or R-rating, films that portray women receiving pleasure from sex or experiencing cunnilingus are often slapped with an NC-17 rating (Gibson & Wolske, 2011). Expressions of healthy female sexuality are censored, while expressions of male sexuality that are potentially violent and degrading to women are given ample screen time, indicating that it is more culturally acceptable for a woman to be raped and assaulted for the sake of male pleasure than to receive any pleasure from sex herself.

In media portrayals, sexual violence is often depicted differently than nonsexual violence. Such portrayals frequent suggest that despite initial resistance, the victim secretly desires and enjoys the assault (Malamuth & Briere, 1986). Media portrayals of violence can be viewed as persuasive rhetorical devices with the power to influence audience behavior and beliefs about rape (Malamuth & Briere, 1986). Film and television depictions of rape teach passive viewers that rape is an effective means of patriarchal control, capable of restoring and maintaining male dominance over women (hooks, 1996).

Individuals who already possess high hostility towards women are more likely to choose to be exposed to sexually violent pornography and to accept violence against women as a normal practice (Malamuth & Huppin, 2005). A study by Weisz and Earls (1995) found that when exposed to commercially available films containing sexual violence, males reported an increased
acceptance of interpersonal violence and rape myths, most notably an increase in the perception that women deserve or secretly desire to be raped. These attitudes were fostered not by pornographic material, but by films that are readily available to the public. This is troubling considering that individuals who are not explicitly seeking out sexually violent materials can be exposed to films that foster the same sexually violent attitudes. Mediated violence, whether it comes in the form of news media, mainstream television and films, or pornography, has the ability to shape our cultural attitudes about what is acceptable when it comes to sexual violence. The sexual violence we see onscreen can look very different than reality, leading to confusion about what is and is not sexual assault. Understanding the legal definitions of sexual assault and rape can clear up some of that confusion.

What is Sexual Assault?

The terms “rape,” “sexual aggression,” and “sexual abuse” are often used interchangeably to cover all crimes of sexual violence, but the legal definitions of those terms can vary widely from state to state (RAINN, 2009). Sexual assault is “any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient” (U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.). Sexual assault can be used as an umbrella term to cover a variety of sexual offenses, including forced sexual intercourse, forced sodomy, child molestation, incest, fondling, and attempted rape (U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.).

Rape falls under the umbrella of sexual assault, but has a more specific definition. There seems to be widespread ignorance about the legal definition of rape, particularly among college students. Many students believe that rape is limited to sexual intercourse accomplished either by direct force or by a threat of force (Sanday, 2007). Due to the acceptance and influence of rape myths, the common societal perception of rape is often much more restrictive than typical legal
definitions (Bannon et al., 2013). In 2012, the FBI updated its definition of rape to be more inclusive. The new definition, which went into effect on January 1, 2013, is “Penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim” (FBI, 2013).

The old definition, which had been in effect since 1927 (Choski, 2014), described rape as “the carnal knowledge of a female, forcibly and against her will” (FBI, 2013). The change notably drops a reference to gender and no longer limits rape to penile penetration of a vagina (Choski, 2014). This is important because it expands the types of sexual assault that can be considered “rape,” giving victims the ability to name their experience and to pursue legal action against their assailants. Various state and federal agencies, including police officers and lawyers, interpreted the old definition to exclude many criminal sexual offenses, such as oral or anal penetration, penetration with objects, and rape of males (FBI, 2013). This definition was problematic given that gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals are at increased risk for sexual violence and victimization (Rothman, Exner, & Baughman, 2011). Individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual are more likely to experience hate crime related sexual assault than individuals who identify as heterosexual (Rothman et al., 2011). Under the old definition, these individuals were provided with little legal protection. The implementation of more inclusive definitions for rape and sexual assault is an important step in the right direction because such a large number of individuals are at risk for being victimized.

**Pervasiveness of sexual assault.** Sexual assault is so prevalent an occurrence in the United States that over ten years ago it was declared a public health priority by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Morrison, 2005). There are a number of factors that contribute to defining sexual assault as a public health issue. Namely, there are certain
populations who have an increased risk for becoming victims of sexual assault, through no fault of their own (New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault, 2009). Sexual assaults leave behind a lifetime of psychological damage for survivors (Public Health, 2014). In the U.S., it is estimated that a sexual assault occurs every two minutes, victimizing over 238,000 individuals every year (Public Health, 2014). The burden that sexual assault places on society necessitates the implementation of preventative measures that could alleviate the problem (New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault, 2009). Internationally, sexual assault is such a pervasive problem that the Worldwatch Institute declared violence against women as the most common crime worldwide (Morrison, 2005). Consistently, reports over time indicate that over 20% of women in the United States are survivors of sexual assault (Black, Basile, Breiding, Smith, Walters, Merrick, Chen, & Stevens 2011; Koss, 1993). Women are almost three times more likely to be victims of sexual violence than to be diagnosed with breast cancer, yet the U.S. annually allocates more resources and funds to breast cancer research and awareness programs than to sexual assault prevention programs (New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault, 2009). The fact that our culture is comfortable with victim-blaming rape myths may in part explain why more effort goes into preventing breast cancer even though it is a relatively smaller public health concern than sexual assault.

Despite portrayals of sexual assault perpetrators as strangers who attack arbitrarily selected victims, in most cases of sexual assault, the victim knows the assailant not just as a rapist, but also as a friend, boyfriend, father, employer, or neighbor (Murphy, 2009). Sexual assault committed by persons known to the victim account for between 60 and 80 percent of reported cases (Seligman, 1984; Masters, 2010). Although the majority of sexual assaults are committed by men against women, men also report unwanted sexual experiences (Banyard,
Ward, Cohn, Plante, Moorhead, & Walsh, 2007; Davies & Rogers, 2006). Sexual assault occurs to a large number of individuals in a wide variety of settings, but it occurs disproportionately within the halls of academia.

**Sexual assault on college campuses.** Institutions of higher education are environments with a particularly high risk for sexual assault (Aosved & Long, 2006). The prevalence of sexual assault and relationship violence on college campuses can be partially explained by the heavy population of individuals (Banyard, Moynihan, & Crossman, 2009) and other environmental factors that “support beliefs conducive to rape and increase risk factors related to sexual violence” (Burnett et al., 2009, p. 466). The close quarters in which college students live, aided by the steady presence of alcohol-fueled social interactions, can encourage coercive circumstances (Sanday, 2007). For instance, Sanday (2007) describes a relatively common scenario on most college campuses: “The circumstances in which a single female in the company of a half-dozen drunken males on their premises who demand that she engage in sex with them are inherently coercive” (p. 44).

The Campus Sexual Assault Study (Krebs et al., 2007), funded by the National Institute of Justice, reported that 19%, or one in five, undergraduate women report experiencing completed or attempted sexual assault since entering college; that number rose to approximately one in four (26.3%) when the researchers focused on only upperclassmen (Masters, 2010). The latter statistic, focusing on upperclassmen alone, likely provides a more accurate depiction, as it reflects the experience of individuals who have spent a longer time in college. Even in early reports, roughly one half of all female college students admitted to experiencing some form of sexual assault in a given year (Kanin & Parcell, 1977). The fact that one in five college women will experience a sexual assault does not indicate that one in five college men will perpetrate an
assault—in reality, sexual assault on college campuses tends to be perpetrated by a small number of serial offenders (Lisak & Miller, 2002). Research has indicated that over 90% of campus sexual assaults are committed by serial rapists (Gustafson, 2013).

College women are at a higher risk for being sexually assaulted than their peers who are not in college (Karjane, Fisher, & Cullen, 2005). One potential explanation for this is the presence of men’s athletics on college campuses, which can foster a rape culture because “they are sex-segregated, the nature of sports is to be dominant, and students involved in a college sport, particularly men, gain prestige from being physically dominating” (Burnett et al., 2009, p. 466). Analyses of mediated sports content reveal that it endorses a climate that disrespects and objectifies women (Hust et al., 2013; Messner & Oca, 2005). Men who participate in sports are respected, while women are often ogled and judged based on their appearance (Hust et al., 2013). In NCAA Division I schools, male athletes are more often reported to student judicial boards for sexual assault than any other students (Burnett et al., 2009). Although male college athletes comprise on average roughly 2% of a university’s population, they account for 45% of a university’s sexual assault cases (Koss, 1993). A more recent study demonstrated that higher rates of alcohol use and violence exist in athlete populations compared to that of non-athlete populations (Sønderlund, O’Brien, Kremer, Rowland, De Groot, Staiger, Zinkiewicz, & Miller, 2013).

Another possible explanation for the high rate of sexual assault on college campuses is the presence of fraternity culture (Burnett et al., 2009). Fraternity men report greater adherence to traditional gender roles and support for antifemale behaviors (Bannon et al., 2013). The male-bonding activities that take place within fraternities often include viewing pornography while drinking heavily and holding dehumanizing conversations about women in which they are
referred to as sexual objects (Sanday, 2007). A meta-analytic review conducted by Murnen & Kohlman (2007) found a statistically significant correlation between fraternity membership and hypermasculinity. The term “hypermasculinity” encompasses values embraced in certain all-male groups, including the beliefs that violence is manly, that men are wired to be naturally aggressive and dominant over women, and that the sexual conquest of women is an essential component to masculinity (Murnen & Kohlman, 2007). Because they tend to embrace such hypermasculine values, fraternity men are less likely than sorority women to intervene in a sexual assault (Bannon et al., 2013). Both male and female students involved in Greek life tend to be more accepting of rape myths due to a desire to adhere to the cultural norms of a male-dominated social system (Bannon et al., 2013).

The high occurrence of alcohol abuse and other substance use on college campuses is an additional potential explanation for the alarming number of sexual assaults (Burnett et al., 2009). Almost half of unwanted sexual experiences on college campuses involve alcohol use (Banyard, Plante, Cohn, Moorhead, Ward, & Walsh, 2005). Alcohol can affect college students’ judgment of date rape risk (Burnett et al., 2009), and alcohol related sexual assaults on college campuses are more frequent than forcible assaults (Lawyer, Resnick, Bakanic, Burkett, & Kilpatrick, 2010). The various factors that facilitate the occurrence of sexual assault on college campuses can contribute to student attrition.

**Sexual assault and student attrition.** College students who are victims of sexual assault face a unique set of problems, including close proximity to their perpetrators and difficulty with anonymity (Krebs et al., 2007). When college students experience sexual assault, the impact is devastating and can derail their ability to receive an education (Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Hunt, 2009). Exposure to sexual assault has a number of negative consequences for college students,
including a higher likelihood of substance abuse, increased health and mental disorders, and a negative correlation with student success rates (Acierno, Brady, Gray, Kilpatrick, Resnick, & Best, 2002; Banyard et al., 2009).

Victims of sexual assault may feel uncomfortable on campus or avoid attending class following their experience, which can eventually lead to attrition. Sexual assault can be linked to lower student success and retention (Jordan, Combs, & Smith, 2014). University administrators interested in making every effort to ensure equal access to education should commit to preventing sexual assault incidence among college students. Concern for the well-being of their students aside, university personnel should take an interest in reducing sexual assault—if only from a business standpoint, administrators should seek to reduce student attrition.

University Crisis

With so much recent attention placed on university responses to sexual assaults and their handling of subsequent investigations, many American educational institutions have found themselves in the midst of organizational crisis. When victims of sexual assault speak out about the way their investigations were conducted, universities may find themselves under harsh public scrutiny. Kerry Barrett, a University of Montana student, opened up about her mistreatment by the Missoula police department who questioned whether her rape report was just an excuse for cheating on her boyfriend (Liebelson, 2014). When other women came forward with similar stories, the Missoula police department was investigated by the Department of Justice, who reported that the department’s discrimination of women deprived female sexual assault victims of basic legal protections (Liebelson, 2014). At Columbia University, a senior named Emma Sulkowicz has been carrying a 50 pound mattress everywhere she goes on campus as a physical representation of the burden she carries knowing that her university failed to punish the student.
who sexually assaulted her (Venugopal, 2014). These stories are just two examples of the type
of circumstances that have been normalized on college campuses in America. The media
coverage garnered by the mishandling of sexual assault cases at American universities
(Anderson, 2014; Stratford, 2014) threatens to influence public perceptions of educational
institutions because mediated messages influence what we think and how we think about it
(McCombs & Shaw, 1993).

Organizational crisis can be defined as a major threat to system survival with little time to
respond, involving an ill-structured situation where resources are inadequate to cope with the
situation (Mishra, 1996). Organizational crises have become almost routine in recent decades,
and organizations can choose whether to view crises as negative incidents or as opportunities for
growth (Mishra, 1996). All crises emit warning signals but organizations do not typically heed
these warnings in time to adapt and prevent crises from occurring (Veil, 2011). Often,
organizations are oblivious to warning signals because leaders are focused on achieving goals
rather than avoiding risks (Veil, 2011). In institutions of higher education, administrators may be
so concerned with increasing their students’ academic success that they turn a blind eye to a
campus culture that embraces rape myths.

When a crisis occurs, at least some level of responsibility for the incident is attributed to
the organization itself, which can tarnish its public image (Fortunato, 2008). Because of the
damage it can cause to their reputations, organizations tend to view crisis as a sign of doom. As
the amount of responsibility for a crisis attributed to an organization increases, so does the
likelihood that the public will develop and act upon negative images of the organization
(Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Crisis is often viewed as last stop before the end of an
organization’s life cycle, but could be used as an opportunity for organizational growth if viewed through a positive lens (Mitroff, 2005).

**Image repair discourse.** During times of crisis, organizations must find ways to craft messages to restore the faith of their consumers. Practitioners can use the theory of image repair to help design these messages during crises, and used by critics to evaluate the messages produced (Benoit, 1997; Veil, 2011). Rather than focusing on the types of crises that take place, the theory of image restoration discourse focuses on the different message options that an organization can choose from when addressing the public following a crisis (Benoit, 1997).

There are several existing strategies that organizations tend to employ to restore their images following a crisis: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of an event through varied means, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit, 1997; Benoit, 2000). In the denial strategy, the organization claims that no crisis occurred, simply denying that it had a role in whatever happened (Benoit, 1995). An organization may deny that the act occurred, that the organization performed the act, or that the act harmed anyone (Benoit, 1997). A different form of denial is to shift the blame and claim that another individual or firm is responsible for an act (Benoit, 1997).

When organizations evade responsibility, they can use one of four subtypes: admit that the crisis occurred, but claim either that 1) they were forced into the crisis by another culprit, 2) that they made a mistake, 3) that they had good intentions, or 4) that they did not have the ability to prevent the crisis from occurring (Benoit, 1995). An example of an organization blaming another culprit for the crisis might be a company claiming that it moved its plant to a different state because of state regulations, a move that might seem reasonable to the public (Benoit, 1997). The second type of evasion occurs when organizations allege a lack of information about
or control over a situation (Benoit, 1997): for example, an employee might cite not knowing about a meeting as his or her reason for not showing up. The third type of evasion takes place when an organization stresses its good motives over the crisis that took place, ensuring the public that the crisis was not intended to harm or offend (Benoit, 1997). The fourth and final type of evasion takes place when an organization claims that the offensive action occurred by accident and that the company should not be held accountable for an honest mistake (Benoit, 1997).

When reducing the offensiveness of an act, an organization attempts to reinforce its positive traits, creating a more complete context within which the organization can be evaluated (Benoit, 1995). There are six versions of reducing offensiveness (Benoit, 1997). First, a company can use bolstering to strengthen the public’s positive feelings towards it by emphasizing its positive qualities or the positive things it has done in the past (Benoit, 1997). A second tactic organizations can use is to minimize the negative feelings associated with its wrongful act (Benoit, 1997). The third method, differentiation, occurs when an organization draws attention to how an act is distinguished from—but similar to—more offensive actions (Benoit, 1997). Fourth, organizations can use transcendence to place the act in a more favorable context (Benoit, 1997). Those accused of wrongdoing may also choose to respond by attacking their accusers (Benoit, 1997). The final form of reducing offensiveness is to offer compensation (Benoit, 1997).

When an organization takes corrective action, it employs steps to ensure that the problem does not occur again (Benoit, 1995). In this strategy, a company promises to correct the problem by either restoring the situation to its previous state or by taking steps to prevent the offensive act from recurring (Benoit, 1997). For example, a university may experience increased media coverage after being labeled an unsafe place for young women. To address this negative press,
administrators may begin providing sexual assault prevention training to reduce the risk of its occurrence in the future.

In the mortification strategy, an organization accepts responsibility for an act and apologizes (Benoit, 1995). This strategy, based in Burkean theory, is for organizations to confess and beg forgiveness (Benoit, 1997). Mortification involves self-sacrifice and penance for one’s guilt (French & Brown, 2011). Mortification is the process of inflicting physical or mental pain on oneself to regain worthiness (Burke, 1970). Universities may feel pain when admitting their problem with sexual assault and subsequently losing the esteem of the public, but accepting their responsibility can help a university to ultimately regain trust (Fortunato, 2008).

It is extremely important for organizations to report plans to correct or prevent the recurrence of a problem in order to maintain the confidence of consumers (Benoit, 1997). Although consumers appreciate when organizations accept responsibility for mistakes, it is more reassuring for consumers and productive for the organizations themselves to take steps to eliminate or avoid future problems (Benoit, 1997). Institutions of higher education seeking to maintain the confidence of students, parents, and community members should take steps to eliminate sexual assault on campus.

**Image repair for university crisis.** The reputation of a university is created by public perceptions, which are shared by its constituents over time (Sung & Yang, 2008). Students choose universities based on “diverse emotional needs, such as love, power, safety, and belonging”; if institutions seek to increase enrollment and retention, they should consider how to make prospective students feel safe and valued (Sung & Yang, 2008, p. 361). Allowing sexual assault to occur with little or no response from university administration serves to create an
unsafe environment for students and reifies rape culture by delegitimizing the experience of victims, which has the potential to prevent students from staying.

Most universities are prepared for physical disasters, like earthquakes and tornadoes, but far fewer have plans for managing reputational crises (Mitroff, Diamond, & Alpaslan, 2006). Organizations should analyze their potential areas of crisis and create contingency plans for crises that are likely to arise (Benoit, 1997). Benoit (1997) provides airlines as an example: because airlines are aware of the risk for a crash, they anticipate the problem and prepare passengers for emergency landings. Similarly, because university environments are at high risk for sexual assault and risk behaviors (Banyard et al., 2009), administrators should prepare contingency plans for how to move forward and communicate with the public when they occur. Judicious planning can reduce response time and potentially save organizations from making early missteps in their initial response to a problem (Benoit, 1997).

**Campus Prevention Programs**

Because college campuses are high-risk environments for sexual assault, there is a demand for innovations in prevention tools and training (Banyard et al., 2009). Early prevention programs served to perpetuate the idea that women are most likely to be victimized by strangers, resulting in prevention efforts focused on architectural design such as the installation of blue emergency lights and security phones (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). A popular method that universities have utilized to increase campus safety is to provide women with advice on precautions to take, including suggestions to avoid isolated or dark areas, to take self-defense courses, and to never walk home alone. These approaches were problematic not only because they ignored the reality of acquaintance rape, but also because they place the onus for rape prevention on victims. Additionally, rather than increasing safety on campus, teaching women to
avoid being alone mainly served to reduce the value of their college experience, preventing them from participating in some extracurricular activities or from attending night classes (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). In recent years, there has been greater variability in the extent to which colleges and universities in the U.S. have sought to prevent sexual assault (Karjane et al., 2005).

One tactic enacted by universities has been to create visual campaigns focused on sexual assault prevention (Masters, 2010). Following a high-profile investigation of mishandling sexual assaults on its campus, the University of Montana in Missoula responded by creating a notable visual campaign called “Make Your Move, Missoula!” (Szpaller, 2012). The creators of Missoula’s campaign designed posters with messages promoting bystander intervention to be displayed around campus and in the community. There is a rising trend among the creators of such visual campaigns to target men, largely inspired by a well-known visual campaign called “My Strength is Not for Hurting” created by Men Can Stop Rape (MCSR) in the early 2000s (Murphy, 2009). This campaign’s popularity led it to be distributed in every single U.S. state and in over 20 countries (Murphy, 2009). Visual campaigns can raise awareness and potentially bring rape myths to attention, but they are less effective than other models in creating attitude change (Rodriguez, Rich, Hastings, & Page, 2006). A visual campaign can raise awareness of an issue, but it relies entirely on the viewer to adopt prescribed attitudes without providing any further support or guidance.

The majority of sexual assault intervention models utilized by college campuses consist of didactic lectures and passive forms of learning, such as online training modules or guest speakers (Rodriguez et al., 2006). Although this type of intervention model is typically efficient in terms of cost and time for universities, didactic teaching negates education and knowledge as a process of inquiry (Friere, 1993; Rodriguez et al., 2006). Students who received a performance
intervention as sexual assault prevention training reported significantly greater empathic concern, higher perceived ability to comfort, and higher levels of perspective taking as compared with students who received a lecture intervention (Rodriguez et al., 2006). Educators seeking to enact real and lasting social change should break the tradition of banking or transmitting information from teacher to student, focusing instead on dialogic pedagogy (Friere, 1993). The need for participation and engagement in training for sexual assault is clear, as programs with these features tend to have longer lasting effects.

More interactive efforts to prevent sexual assault on college campuses include bystander intervention training, acquaintance rape workshops, and interactive performances (Earle, 2009; Karjane et al., 2005; Rodriguez et al., 2006). Bystander intervention occurs when individuals speak up and act if they witness a situation they perceive could lead to a sexual assault (Hust et al., 2013). Bystander intervention moves the focus of prevention efforts to peers and community members, placing emphasis on changing peer and community interactions, norms, and behaviors (McMahon & Banyard, 2012). Programs that utilize a community approach to teach bystanders appropriate ways to intervene have reported a high level of success with multiple groups on college campuses, including fraternity members, sorority members, and athletes (Bannon et al., 2013). These programs are especially beneficial for reaching those populations with a higher risk for sexual assault.

Unfortunately, prevention programs in general have not significantly reduced the number of sexual assaults or influenced the reporting behavior on college campuses (Bannon et al., 2013). Although bystanders have the ability to help victims by directly intervening to prevent sexual assault and by advocating for behaviors that do not support sexual violence, there are still personal factors that can decrease the likelihood of a bystander to intervene (Hust et al., 2013).
For example, individuals with higher acceptance of rape myths are less likely to identify the potential for sexual assault and more likely to blame victims (Hust et al., 2013). Studies suggest that the lack of sexual assault reduction may be a result of the type of program implemented or the lack of continuous support from university officials (Bannon et al., 2013).

Despite the fact that sexual assault prevention programs are not always successful, universities are more interested now than ever before in implementing prevention training for their students and employees. New federal requirements have mandated that universities take action against sexual assault or face the loss of federal funding. This move toward prevention training was facilitated by two key documents: the Dear Colleague letter and the Campus SaVE Act.

**Dear Colleague Letter.** In April of 2011, the U. S. Department of Education released the Dear Colleague letter from the Office for Civil Rights, addressing the interference that sexual harassment and violence can produce for college students (Ali, 2011). The Dear Colleague letter outlined Title IX’s regulations that prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex in educational programs and activities run by recipients of federal financial assistance (Ali, 2011). The letter specified requirements for colleges and universities to take immediate action to eliminate the recurrence of sexual harassment, and to address its effects (Ali, 2011). Schools were also required to ensure that their employees are trained to identify and report sexual harassment and violence, to respond to any student-on-student sexual harassment—even if it takes place off school grounds—and to investigate any complaints independent of law enforcement investigations (Ali, 2011).

The Dear Colleague letter further specified that universities must develop and implement training materials on what constitutes sexual harassment and violence, what to do if a student has
been the victim of sexual harassment or violence, how to file a complaint and contact the school’s Title IX coordinator, and provide contact information for counseling and victim services (Ali, 2011). The letter alerted institutions that failing to handle sexual assault properly could cost them their federal funding (Smith, 2014). The Dear Colleague letter gave universities an idea of how serious the sexual assault situation had become and gave them a hint that sexual assault prevention training might become a requirement. Shortly after the Dear Colleague letter arrived, the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act was passed.

**Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (SaVE) Act.** The Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (SaVE) Act was a 2013 addition to the Jeanne Clery Act\(^1\). The Campus SaVE Act required colleges and universities participating in federal aid programs to go a step further by providing comprehensive, campus community-wide prevention education programming that includes an institutional statement prohibiting sexual violence, and providing information on domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, bystander intervention, and risk reduction (Schroeder, 2014). The educational programs recommended for universities include more information about acquaintance rape than many previous campus prevention plans, which focused solely on stranger rape prevention with blue lights, self-defense training, and cameras (Schroeder, 2014). The Campus SaVE Act applies to all postsecondary institutions that participate in federal student financial assistance programs, including Pell Grants, Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, federal work-study programs, federal Perkins

\(^1\) The Clery Act is an existing landmark federal act which requires colleges and universities to disclose publicly information about crime on their campuses (Fisher, Hartman, Cullen, & Turner, 2002). The Clery Act requires universities to report campus statistics on criminal homicide, sexual offenses, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, arson, motor vehicle theft, and arrest for liquor law violations, drug law violations, and illegal weapons possession (Fisher et al., 2002). The Clery act broadened the types of crimes that colleges and universities are required to report, providing a safer space for students (Schroeder, 2014).
loans, direct loan programs, and Leveraging Educational Assistance Partnerships (CampusClarity, 2013).

In conjunction with enforcing the letter’s new Title IX regulations, the Obama Administration also established the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault on January 22, 2014 (Chappell, 2014). The task force created guidelines to help victims of sexual violence and to help schools improve their protocol for handling cases (Chappell, 2014). The guidelines suggest disallowing any questioning of a survivor’s sexual history with anyone but the perpetrator, providing the survivor with the opportunity to speak with a trained advocate, conducting a climate survey to understand campus-wide beliefs about sexual assault, and promoting bystander intervention to prevent sexual assault (Chappell, 2014). The Campus SaVE Act makes a notable shift from the pattern of merely reporting campus crimes and instead places emphasis on preventing the crimes from occurring in the first place. By requiring universities to take a more proactive approach toward reducing sexual assault, the Campus SaVE Act shows an attempt to break the dominant cycle of rape culture on college campuses. University personnel can use the training required by the Campus SaVE Act as an opportunity to socialize new students to reject rape culture.

**Organizational Socialization**

Organizational socialization is the process by which individuals become indoctrinated, trained to fulfill their organizational role, and taught what is important to an organization (Schein, 1968; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). New members of an organization must find ways to learn their tasks, develop communication channels, create relationships with others, and understand the organization’s culture (Kramer, 2011). Individuals who are new to an organization engage in acquiring, sharing, and processing information (Bullis, 1993).
Organizational socialization, when viewed with a focus on information exchange, allows scholars to investigate the stories, proverbs, norms, values, and culture that are shared between individuals (Bullis, 1993). Stories, proverbs, norms, cultures, and values come from a variety of sources worth exploration, including media, family, peers, supervisors, work groups, managers, and corporate texts (Bullis, 1993).

Some scholars argue that socialization is just one aspect of a larger process, called assimilation (Jablin, 2001; Kramer, 2011). Assimilation occurs in phases and is the general process of joining, participating in, and leaving organizations (Kramer, 2011). Assimilation is the interaction of socialization, including the efforts of an organization to teach individuals to meet its needs, and individualization, the process by which individuals change organizations to meet their own needs (Kramer, 2011). In socialization, organizations work to civilize or “make fit” the autonomous individuals who might otherwise act against their societal structure (Bullis, 1993). In individualization, active individuals work to shape society in ways that meet their personal needs (Bullis, 1993). While the concept of organizational socialization has been around for a long time, it has grown in salience due to the increased mobility of organizational members and the increasing tendency for individuals to change jobs more rapidly than in the past (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007).

Assimilation does not occur solely in the encounter phase when individuals formally join an organization, but can be understood as a developmental, longitudinal communicative process (Bullis, 1993). The stages of assimilation include an anticipatory phase, an encounter phase, a metamorphosis phase, and a disengagement or exit phase (Kramer, 2010). Each of these phases occurs through communication between organizational members and nonmembers (Kramer, 2010). Individuals acquire information about organizations beginning as early as childhood and
focus on more specific information as they anticipate entering organizations (Bullis, 1993). New college students begin receiving messages about college life from their families and mentors early in life, and these messages aid them in assimilating to university culture (Wang, 2012). Jablin (2001) described the anticipatory phase of socialization, which occurs before individuals join an organization. During this phase, individuals learn about organizations in order to select which one they would like to join (Jablin, 2001). For college students, this occurs when students select the universities to which they will apply. The information gathering process can vary for students and can include making visits to universities, researching the institutions online, and asking their friends, mentors, and family members for more information about how to select a college.

The encounter phase of assimilation begins when an individual formally becomes a member of an organization (Kramer, 2010). For college students, this might take place during orientation and during the first few weeks of classes at their new institution. Being a newcomer to any organization can be intense (Kramer, 2010), and one could argue that the transition to college is especially stressful because it is often the first time an individual is living away from home. Newcomers must learn the particulars of their individual roles, such as how to perform tasks, as well as learning an organization’s cultural norms (Kramer, 2010). For college students, the tasks that must be learned can include classroom behaviors, such as studying for an exam or writing in a particular style, as well as outside-class behaviors, like how to navigate a party setting. This can require extra work when an organization’s official culture differs from the reality of its social culture (Wang, 2012). For example, if a university is advertised as a dry campus when in reality most students keep alcohol in their dorms, newcomers must find ways to deal with these discrepancies.
The next phase of assimilation, metamorphosis, is difficult to pin down in terms of when it occurs (Kramer, 2010). Individuals enter this phase when they make the switch from being newcomers to considering themselves as established members of their organizations (Kramer, 2010). The metamorphosis phase can last anywhere from weeks to decades (Kramer, 2010). In the case of most university students, the metamorphosis phase might last during the four years following matriculation, although some students remain very tied to their alma mater through alumni associations. During the metamorphosis phase, individuals are cooperative and innovative as they go through ongoing changes during their time of membership (Kramer, 2010).

The final phase of assimilation is organizational disengagement, which occurs when individuals leave their organizations, whether voluntarily or involuntarily (Kramer, 2010). College students typically disengage from their universities following graduation. Disengagement is comprised of four moments, according to Jablin (2001). It begins with preannouncement, which includes any cues or signals that indicate an individual’s readiness to move on. Next, individuals make an official announcement to indicate their plans to move on from the organization, effectively reducing any uncertainty experienced by their coworkers (Jablin, 2001). Following the official announcement, individuals make their official exit step and leave the organization (Jablin, 2001). Finally, the post-exit step occurs when remaining organizational members must figure out what to do to deal with the individual’s absence (Jablin, 2001). For college students, the disengagement phase is built-in: most students complete their degrees in approximately four years, and the graduation ceremony serves as an official exit step. Students who leave school early due to the emotional and social trauma of surviving a sexual assault must make the decision to move through the four moments of disengagement.
Models of socialization are not without limitations (Bullis, 1993; Kramer, 2011). Organizational socialization models have a tendency to treat the organization as a container with clearly defined boundaries (Kramer, 2011). By examining the discursive formations of organizations, scholars can question these boundaries (Bullis, 1993). Scholars have argued that organizational socialization theories fail to account for the experiences of women and other marginalized individuals (Bullis, 1993; Kramer, 2011). Feminist standpoint theory can provide an alternative understanding of socialization for historically marginalized “others” who have not fully participated in dominant systems and practices (Bullis, 1993). By focusing on muted voices, feminist standpoint theory offers a perspective that focuses on both understanding and changing current practices (Bullis, 1993). This could be a useful perspective for administrators interested in creating safer campuses.

**Socialization theories.** Two theoretical perspectives frequently used to study the socialization process include uncertainty management and sensemaking (Kramer, 2010). Uncertainty management has its roots in uncertainty reduction theory (URT), an interpersonal communication theory that explains how individuals seek to reduce the level of uncertainty they experience in interactions with new individuals by gathering information (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Kramer (2004) expanded on URT with his theory of managing uncertainty (TMU) and added two important aspects to the existing theory: first, that individuals sometimes manage their uncertainty through cognitive processes rather than through information seeking; and second, that if individuals have various motives in an interaction with a newcomer, the impact of uncertainty may be lessened. URT assumes that uncertainty produces anxiety, but there are some situations in which individuals might prefer to maintain their uncertainty, particularly when assessing the probability of a negative event (e.g. an individual avoiding a medical diagnosis in
In a university setting, an individual might choose to maintain uncertainty and effectively perpetuate rape myths. For example, a student who does not want to explicitly ask for consent might infer that a classmate’s dress implies that she is interested in having sex (Burt, 1980).

Sensemaking theory, like URT, explains how newcomers understand and assimilate into their roles (Kramer, 2010). Sensemaking theory focuses more on how individuals retrospectively create and assign meaning to events and experiences (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking can be understood as a cycle of events that occurs over time, beginning as individuals form anticipations and assumptions about their organizations (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking occurs when social actors put stimuli into frameworks, enabling them to explain, understand, and infer what just happened and to predict what might happen next (Weick, 1995). Organizational sensemaking is distinct from everyday sense-making in that organizational life is more frequently challenged, debated, and defended (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is a central activity in the construction of an organization, particularly for open organizations, which are susceptible to greater influence from the environment (Weick, 1995).

Newcomers to organizations use sensemaking as an interpretive process that is necessary for sharing understandings of what an organization is about, what it does well (or poorly), what problems it faces, and how it ought to resolve them (Feldman, 1989). New students go through this process when they make sense of their university experience, using their environmental and social cues to understand what college life is all about and how their university keeps them safe—or fails to do so. Organizations with access to more varied images will engage in sensemaking that is more adaptive (Weick, 1995). Phrases that evoke a more vivid, graphic image can mobilize outrage and action (Weick, 1995). Following this line of reasoning, when
individuals are able to more exactly and explicitly describe their experience as “rape” rather than as just a regular experience of college culture, universities have the ability to take action and change a harmful culture. Individuals can be provided with vocabulary for naming their experiences through the memorable messages they receive.

**Identity Formation**

Scholars interested in the identity formation that takes place when individuals become socialized to a new organization can use the social identity theory and the communication theory of identity as a framework. One component to identity formation during the college socialization process can be explained by Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT focuses on how individuals behave according to their membership in a group (Trepte, 2006). SIT explains that people categorize themselves and others as belonging to different social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Identification with a particular group can influence an individual’s self-conception, behavior, and group process (Hughes, Kiecolt, Keith, & Demo, 2015). Belonging to a group can impact an individual’s propensity to discriminate against those who do not belong to the same group, and can also increase positive or negative emotions associated with group membership (Trepte, 2006). A person’s social identity is comprised of his or her awareness of belonging to a social group and the emotional significance of belonging (Hughes et al., 2015). Being able to identify other in-group members can help increase an individual’s sense of belonging when joining a new organization.

Communication theory of identity (CTI), another approach to identity formation, draws a layered perspective of identity, integrating community, communication, social relationships, and self-concepts into identity formation and identity management (Hecht & Choi, 2012). Compared to identity theories within the disciplines of sociology and psychology, CTI focuses more on
mutual influences between identity and communication, asserting that identity is stored within
the communication between relational partners and group members (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau,
2003). CTI posits that communication helps to build, sustain, and modify one’s identity (Hecht
& Choi, 2012). Because of CTI’s ability to influence identity, which can in turn influence
beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, it can be used to construct and deliver targeted messages (Hecht
& Choi, 2012). CTI identifies four frames of identity—personal, enacted, relational, and
communal (Jung & Hecht, 2004)—that interact with and are influenced by each other (Hecht &
Choi, 2012). Before discussing how these layers interact with each other, I will define each of
them.

The personal layer of identity is an individual’s self-concept or self-image (Jung &
Hecht, 2004). It includes a person’s self-cognitions, feelings about the self, and a spiritual sense
of being (Hecht & Choi, 2012). This layer is the reflection of how an individual sees himself or
herself.

The enacted layer of identity is enacted in communication through messages (Hecht &
Choi, 2012). This layer includes an individual’s performed or expressed identity (Jung & Hecht,
2004). Identity can be performed through social behaviors, social roles, and symbols (Hecht et
al., 2003). For instance, a student athlete can wear a uniform, a symbol of belonging to the team,
and by doing so enact his or her athletic identity.

The relational layer of identity is jointly negotiated and mutually formed within
relationships (Hecht et al., 2003). There are three aspects of the relational layer. First, an
individual forms his/her identity based on the views of others through social interactions (Hecht
& Choi, 2012). For example, an individual may form a relational identity as a “good student” or
“party girl” through being described this way by parents or friends. Second, an individual creates
identity through being viewed in light of his or her relationships with others such as professors, romantic partners, or coworkers (i.e., I am a student, girlfriend, retail worker, etc.) (Hecht & Choi, 2012). Third, an individual creates relational identity in light of a specific relationship unit, and the relationship itself takes on an identity (Hecht & Choi, 2012). This is easiest to understand when looking at couples, who can be seen as “happy” or “dysfunctional”—in both cases, the individuals are understood through a single relational identity. To maintain such identities, individuals need to remain in relationship with others—for instance, a mother needs children, a professor needs students (Hecht et al., 2003). When people lose or switch their relational identities, they can be more likely to engage in negative health behaviors, such as binge drinking or drug use (Hecht & Choi, 2012). Hecht and Choi (2012) assert that the changing of relational identities can occur as a result of major life changes, providing death and divorce as examples. We can infer that going to college for the first time can have a major impact on individuals’ relational identities, as students move out of their parents’ homes and often leave most of their familiar relationship roles during this period.

The communal layer of identity deals with how collective groups define their identities (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Communal identities are shared by group members with mutual characteristics, histories, and shared memories that transcend individuals, resulting in universally held identities (Hecht & Choi, 2012). Such identities are sometimes represented through negative stereotypes, but can also be understood as cultural codes for how group members behave and exist (Hecht & Choi, 2012). For example, membership in a fraternity can sometimes be tied to negative stereotypes regarding drinking and sexual assault behaviors; however, such a membership can also provide an individual with a social identity and sense of belonging.
Central to any discussion of CTI are two important concepts: interpenetration and identity gaps (Hecht & Choi, 2012). The four layers described above are not conceptualized as separate from each other but rather as *interpenetrated*, meaning that identity layers can be identified independently, but together make up a whole (Hecht & Choi, 2012). For example, an individual interested in examining gender identity (which is a personal identity) must also consider how society defines gender roles (communal), or how others view a person as a man or a woman (relational) (Jung & Hecht, 2004).

These layers operate collectively and in some situations, individuals’ varying layers of identity may contradict each other (Jung & Hecht, 2004). In such cases, *identity gaps* can occur as a result of inconsistency between the levels of personal, enacted, relational, and communal (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Identity gaps are defined as “discrepancies between or among the four frames of identity” (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 268). Identity gaps are “almost an inevitable result of communication and social relations” because people are not always transparent or consistent, which results in communication imperfections (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 268). For example, the way in which a person communicates and expresses an enacted identity can differ from his/her own self views. Such gaps can demonstrate the dialectical tensions between contradiction and coexistence of identity layers or frames, which can help us to understand the dynamic and fluid nature of identity (Jung & Hecht, 2004).

CTI can help higher education administrators to develop messages to promote healthy behaviors during organizational socialization. CTI provides developers with a framework for message design by helping them to reflect on the target individuals’ salient identity/ies (Hecht & Choi, 2012). Identity gaps can serve as a motivator in behavior change messages by arousing cognitive dissonance (Hecht & Choi, 2012). Cognitive dissonance occurs when people are
exposed to information that is inconsistent with their beliefs, provoking individuals to find behavioral solutions or approaches to reduce the inconsistency (Festinger, 1962). Higher education administrators interested in risk reduction programming can use CTI to analyze the identity gaps that exist for new college students and design messages to encourage the development of healthy behaviors.

**Memorable Messages**

Organizations can use memorable messages during the socialization process to influence behavior and attitudes. Memorable messages are “verbal messages which may be remembered for extremely long periods of time and which people perceive as a major influence on the course of their lives” (Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981, p. 27). These messages enable organizational members to understand ongoing organizational events and provide them with a guide for appropriate behavior (Stohl, 1986). New college students can reflect on the messages they have received from family members, mentors, and peers as they prepare to join the culture of their university (Wang, 2012). Memorable messages are worth examining because they can provide us with information about ourselves, our society, and our ways of communicating (Knapp et al., 1981; Orbe et al., 2014). Memorable messages about the college experience could have the ability to either perpetuate or diminish rape myth acceptance in individual students.

Although memorable messages have traditionally been identified as direct, oral injunctions, memorable messages can also exist in the form of “ambient” messages, which are indirect and implicit socializing messages received by newcomers (Dallimore, 2003). Whether received directly or ambiently, messages are considered memorable when they provide an answer to an internal conflict or personal problem, provide a means for self-assessment, or lead individuals to a greater understanding of self (Orbe et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2001). Students
could use the memorable messages they receive from a variety of sources to make decisions about how to behave or intervene in a case of sexual assault.

College students, when faced with troubling situations, are able to recall memorable messages from mentors and family members (Nazione, LaPlante, Smith, Cornacchione, Russell, & Stohl, 2011; Wang, 2012). Internalized, memorable messages have the potential to remain salient throughout a student’s college experience and postcollege career (Wang, 2012). Those messages can result in explicit action from students to better their situation or correct their behavior (Nazione et al., 2011). For example, a student who is struggling with his classes might recall that his mother recommended attending tutoring sessions to keep his grades up, and then choose to act on that advice.

However, college students report memorable messages that lead them in competing and sometimes opposing positions. First generation college students can struggle to manage competing discourses and memorable messages related to their commitments to home and college (Wang, 2012). The memorable messages these students receive from their families about college do not come from firsthand experience, leading them to feel confused about what their priorities should be. Students whose parents did attend college can also struggle with conflicting memorable messages. For example, two common themes for college students’ memorable messages include “do your best in school and try hard” as well as “enjoy your life” (Nazione et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2001; Wang, 2012). If a student’s method for enjoying life includes heavy drinking and staying up late every night, it might be difficult for that student to do well in class. Additionally, a fraternity brother or male student athlete may receive conflicting messages from university personnel who promote bystander intervention and from their fraternity brothers or teammates, who promote the sexual conquest of women.
Memorable messages and student affairs. Although the majority of memorable messages reported by students tend to come from family members (Kranstuber, Carr, & Hosek, 2012; Smith et al., 2001), over a quarter of memorable messages college students receive come from academic personnel, including professors, student affairs personnel, and residence hall directors (Nazione et al., 2011). Overall, the memorable messages students receive from important figures in their lives are indicators of student success (Cauce, Hannan, & Sargeant, 1992; Kranstuber et al., 2012).

A sample of college counselors and advisors responding to findings from Nazione et al. (2011) reported that the results made them more aware of their ability to impact the lives of students and more cognizant of the messages they were sending. This finding has the ability to be empowering for university personnel, who can send messages not only to inform their students about important campus resources, but also to potentially influence students’ acceptance of rape myths. In this way, university personnel have a chance to lessen the impact of rape culture on their individual campuses. Members of groups with a higher social acceptance of rape myths, like fraternities and athletic organizations, can benefit from student affairs-led programmatic interventions that provide these students with accurate information and personal relevance (Bannon et al., 2013). To address the needs of students and promote crisis prevention, it could be helpful for universities to plan and convey consistent messages about significant issues throughout the course of a student’s college career (Nazione et al., 2011), starting during training requirements offered during organizational socialization.

Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined what we know about rape culture and the effect it has on society. Rape culture is perpetuated through mediated messages and gives rise to the tolerance of
sexual assault. Sexual assault is a pervasive health issue worldwide, but it has a particularly strong hold on college campuses. Recently, universities have been scrutinized for their mishandling of sexual assault cases, giving rise to the need for image repair. In 2013, the United States federally mandated the inclusion of sexual assault prevention as part of university training. As these training programs are implemented, it is important to discern whether they have an impact on the socialization and identity formation of new students. To determine the impact of these programs, it will be worthwhile for universities to look at the memorable messages that students retain from them. In the next chapter, I will describe my methods and procedures for examining these messages.
Methods

This study examined the memorable messages that students recall from sexual assault risk reduction training provided by their university. I facilitated six individual interviews and one dyadic interview with students to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What memorable messages do students recall from Ball State’s sexual assault prevention training?

RQ2: What are the shared themes of students’ memorable messages?

I approached these questions through semi-structured interviews, using iterative thematic analysis to analyze their feedback. From data gathering to analysis, my methodological choices were informed by an interpretive perspective.

Interpretive Paradigm

An interpretive approach allows the researcher to analyze and make sense of social action (Glesne, 2006). From an interpretive point of view, reality is constructed and reproduced through communication (Tracy, 2013). Interpretivists argue that what is classified as “reality” is contextually situated and can differ from person to person (Tracy, 2013). Interpretive researchers understand a given social world as having multiple potentials for reality depending on the subjective positions of each individual (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). Because of this subjectivity, it is important to view social action from the actor’s point of view (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Further, interpretive researchers examine how and why people talk and act out their culture (Tracy, 2013).

The interpretive paradigm stands out because of its ability to analyze how culture is symbolically constructed and reconstructed (Geertz, 1973). Interpretive researchers take a descriptive rather than prescriptive approach to understanding culture (Zoller, 2014). Descriptive
work centers on what *is* happening in a particular context, as opposed to prescriptive work, which focuses on what *should* happen. The interpretive paradigm allows for meaning to be understood across a social scene and the action in it, rather than conceptualized as a simple effect of an individual’s mind (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). The concept of constructing and reconstructing culture is particularly salient when applied to a study of organizational socialization, like the socialization that occurs when students are oriented to a university’s culture. Interpretive work is needed to describe the complex processes involved in organizational socialization (Bullis, 1993). Interpretive researchers generally focus on the achievement of cultural consensus rather than conflict (Zoller, 2014). Shared rituals and practices can reveal the larger values and priorities of a culture (Tracy, 2013). When researchers provide rich details about these rituals and practices, they are able to construct a thick description, which can help to clarify difficult concepts (Tracy, 2013).

In keeping with the interpretive paradigm, I used a responsive interviewing model as proposed by Rubin and Rubin (2005). This model of interviewing suggests that researchers are responsible for building a reciprocal relationship with interviewees, for honoring interviewees with respectful behavior, and for openly acknowledging their own biases (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Tracy, 2013). To this end, I acknowledged that my position as a white, educated, middle class woman influences my own perceptions of reality and, in turn, my data analysis. I understand that my own social position may influence how my participants perceive me and my research goals.

**Contextualizing Factors**

Before describing my procedures, I will provide a description of the online training program that I investigated in this study. I will also describe Ball State University’s specific situation regarding campus safety and treatment of sexual assault cases.
Think About It artifact description. Think About It is a comprehensive online training program produced by CampusClarity, a provider of compliance training for nearly 200 universities, including Ivy League schools like Yale, as well as large public schools, like Temple University (CampusClarity, 2015). Think About It is a collaborative training program designed by the University of San Francisco’s Division of Student Life and LawRoom, an online training provider (CampusClarity, 2015). Think About It presents students with information about various campus problems including substance abuse, relationship violence, and sexual assault. It also provides administrators with insights into the climate of their campus through the use of anonymous polls. CampusClarity has created training programs for students, faculty, and staff to cover topics required by the Campus SaVE Act and Title IX (CampusClarity, 2015). Incoming Ball State students are required to complete Think About It: Turning Points. In this training program, students are presented with four modules covering sex in college, partying smart, sexual violence, and healthy relationships. University employees (including graduate students) were also required to complete a Think About It module, and some participants in this study completed both programs. The employee program was considerably shorter, taking about 30 minutes, than Think About It: Turning Points, which took around three hours to complete for most students.

The program, which uses sleek design and animated branching stories, follows four students through their first few weeks of college, allowing students going through the training with scenarios in which to practice good decision-making (CampusClarity, 2015). The four students, whose bios are accessible at any point in the training, are diverse in their backgrounds. There are two female students and two male students. The students are majoring in sociology,
art, electrical engineering, and cognitive science, respectively. One of the students is Filipino and identifies as a gay man.

The program also makes use of incentives and achievements. As students go through the training, they can earn badges and awards for completion and for answering questions correctly on the first try. These game-like interactions can help motivate students to complete the training and provide them with opportunities for making decisions about real-life issues in a judgement-free space (CampusClarity, 2015).

**Sexual assault on Ball State’s campus.** Ball State University reports the number of sexual offenses and violent crimes that take place on campus each year as mandated by the Clery Act. Between 2011 and 2013, there were 58 reported forcible sexual offenses (Ball State University Campus Security Report, 2014). The number of reported sexual offenses jumped from 14 in 2011 to 27 in 2013 (Ball State University Campus Security Report, 2014). In 2013, the Department of Education announced that domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking crimes were to be added as new crimes that universities would be required to report under the category of “violent acts against women.” Mandated reporting of these acts was not to be enacted until November 2014, but institutions were asked to make a good-faith effort to provide statistics regarding 2013 incidence of such crimes. For 2013, Ball State University had 25 reported acts of violence against women (Ball State University Campus Security Report, 2014).

Researchers have demonstrated that sexual assaults are grossly underreported, especially on college campuses (Kilpatrick, Resnick, Ruggiero, Conoscenti, & McCauley, 2007). Fewer than 5% of completed and attempted rapes of women in college were reported to law enforcement officials, and that number drops still lower for other forms of sexual assault (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). We can infer that this is likely also the case at Ball State University,
and that the number of actual sexual assaults may be higher than the number of assaults reported to officials. In a 2015 interview with the Ball State Daily News, Ball State history professor Yaron Ayalon expressed the urgency for providing open forums for discussing sexual assault on campus, sharing that “Women on this campus are getting raped every year. This is my second year at Ball State and I already know 12 women who have been assaulted” (Berg, 2015).

Students and faculty acknowledge the existence of sexual assault on campus. Because this is the first year that students are required to take part in Think About It, it is an opportune time to get fresh feedback from students who completed the training, including incoming freshman, graduate students, and transfer students. I will now describe how I recruited those students to participate in my study.

**Recruiting**

I used maximum variation sampling to access a wide range of participants with diverse experiences (Tracy, 2013). Researchers who use maximum variation sampling specifically recruit participants with varied lifestyles and backgrounds, being careful to include participants who are underrepresented or marginalized (Tracy, 2013). Maximum variation sampling allows researchers to access a wider range of experience, providing complexity and breadth to the phenomena under study. Maximum variation sampling “taps into a wide range of qualities, attributes, situations, or incidents within the boundaries of the research problem” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 123). I sought sample of participants with variation in age, sex, and educational level. To ensure that I achieved a maximum variation sample, I monitored the demographic variance among my participants and adjusted future interviews accordingly.

I recruited participants using a recruitment email (see Appendix A) to incite interest in the study and an online consent form (see Appendix B) and screening questionnaire (see
Appendix C) to ensure that volunteers were eligible to participate and to find out when they were available to meet. In this email, I also provided a transparent overview of my research goals. After students confirmed their interest in participating, I emailed them a digital copy of the online consent form for their records, detailing the procedures, confidentiality, and research goals of the study. I used Ball State University’s Communications Center to reach all students who were subscribed to receive its emails.

After students completed their online consent forms and screening questionnaires, I assigned them to a homogenous focus group that best fit their availability, contacting them at the email address they provided. The rationale behind this method of grouping was that participants must feel comfortable talking to each other, and wide gaps in social background or lifestyle can defeat this (Morgan, 1988). Productive focus groups strategically combine participants with shared experiences (Tracy, 2013). It is important to note, however, that the goal was “homogeneity in background and not homogeneity in attitudes” (Morgan, 1988, p. 46). If all participants shared virtually identical perspectives, it could lead to a flat and unproductive discussion (Morgan, 1988). Because of the gendered nature and treatment of sexual assault, I divided my participants into homogenous groups based on the gender with which they identified. I also attempted to place participants into groups with their academic peers, so graduate students and undergraduate students would be placed separately.

In general, the goal for researchers interviewing in focus groups is to recruit participants for only as many groups as are required to provide an adequate answer to the research questions (Morgan, 1988). Taking into account both practical and substantive considerations, it appears that four is the smallest appropriate size for a focus group, and the upper boundary appears to be around twelve (Morgan, 1988; Tracy, 2013). Researchers with little experience are advised to
aim for smaller, more manageable groups (Tracy, 2013), so I recruited for three groups—one group of undergraduate males and two groups of undergraduate females—aiming for four to six participants in each group. The number of groups was impacted by the diversity of responses. Conducting smaller groups offers some benefits to researchers, including greater observational opportunities, more emphasis on the topic rather than crowd management, and lower costs for researchers (Edmunds, 1999). No matter the size of the group, overrecruiting is suggested in order to cover for no-shows, and the general rule of thumb is to overrecruit by at least 20% (Morgan, 1988; Edmunds, 1999; Tracy, 2013). Following these guidelines, for each group I recruited for a minimum of seven qualified participants to guarantee a group size of four or more (Edmunds, 1999). I did not receive responses from enough interested graduate students to fill a focus group, so I invited male and female graduate students to participate in individual interviews.

**Participants**

The eligibility criteria for participant selection were guided by the topic of research. To be eligible for participation in this study, participants had to have completed Ball State’s new *Think About It* training program and be at least eighteen years of age. Both full-time and part-time students were eligible for participation in this study.

I recruited participants using purposeful sampling to achieve maximum variation. Researchers who use purposeful sampling intentionally choose data that fit the parameters of their project’s research questions, goals, and purposes (Tracy, 2013). Because this was the first year that new students were required to complete Ball State’s *Think About It* training, I sampled exclusively from first year graduate students, incoming freshmen, and new transfer students.
I conducted six individual interviews and one dyadic interview with a total of eight participants from varying demographic backgrounds (See Appendix D for table of participants’ demographics). Five participants identified as female and three identified as male. All participants self-identified as White or Caucasian, except for Speedo\textsuperscript{2}, who self-identified as Latino/Hispanic. The ages of my participants ranged from 19 to 36, and I had equal numbers of graduate and undergraduate students (4 of each). Of those undergraduate students, three were freshmen and one was a senior transfer student. All four graduate students were in the first year of their respective programs. Participants were asked to self-identify for sexual orientation. Lance and Speedo identified as gay or homosexual, Sydney identified as bisexual, and the remaining five participants all identified as straight or heterosexual. Each of my participants completed the entirety of the *Think About It* training before or during their first semester at Ball State University.

**Procedure**

To examine the memorable messages that students recall from their sexual assault prevention training, I conducted six individual interviews and one dyadic interview with a total of eight participants from varying demographic backgrounds. I received 105 responses to my online survey. I sifted through those responses and invited only those students who agreed to participate, who met my inclusion criteria, and whose schedules coincided with one another’s to participate in focus groups. I invited a total of 23 students with corresponding scheduling availability to participate in three separate, homogenous focus groups. I also invited four graduate students to take part in individual interviews because their availability did not line up with other students’.

\textsuperscript{2} All names have been replaced by pseudonyms to protect participants’ identities.
For each of the three scheduled focus groups, I enlisted the help of a moderator who would be on site to help control the flow of the group and to take memos during the interview. I requested help from moderators who had completed Ball State’s Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative for research with human participants, and they were included as co-researchers on my Institutional Review Board application. Moderators were required to sign a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix E). I also assigned a member of the Sexual Threats Oppression Prevention (STOP) Team to be present at each group. The STOP Team is comprised of graduate level counseling students who are specially trained to provide education about sexual violence prevention. STOP Team members were on site to provide help to any students who might have been triggered by the discussion. During the group, they were seated on the opposite side of a two-way mirror in the campus focus group lab so they could see what was going on in the group.

Despite these efforts, recruiting for focus groups was nearly impossible without incentive for participation. For the first female undergraduate focus group and the male undergraduate focus group, zero participants attended. Two participants attended the second female undergraduate focus group. Because of the difficulties I faced in recruiting enough students to fill each focus group, I turned to individual interviews as the primary method for data gathering. I invited students who were unable to attend the focus groups to participate in individual interviews and conducted one dyadic interview with two students who attended their scheduled focus group. At the start of each interview, participants were provided with a hard copy of the consent form they earlier filled out online. Before moving forward, I assured all participants of the voluntary nature of my study and reminded them that they were not required to respond to any question that made them uncomfortable. I asked each participant to fill out a short
demographic survey prior to the interview’s start (see Appendix F). The dyadic interview participants were also presented with additional questions about their training experience to help jog their memories before the group discussion began (see Appendix G). Although there is some argument that conducting questionnaires before the start of an interview can unintentionally prime participants and direct the discussion (Morgan, 1988) getting at least a few background items is a virtual necessity to provide “an accurate sense of who is participating and to allow group differences to emerge” (Morgan, 1988, p. 63).

Following the questionnaire, I facilitated a discussion using a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix H). Using an interview guide is beneficial for analyzing data because it organizes each participant’s discussion around the same set of topics in the same order, facilitating later comparisons between groups and ensuring that the researcher remembers to ask important questions (Morgan, 1988). In addition to providing researchers with the ability to compare and contrast the data across participants, using an interview guide can also keep researchers themselves focused on asking questions that line up with their research questions and goals (Tracy, 2013). However, an interview guide should not be so rigid that it guarantees that all discussion of a certain topic occurs at one and only one point in each focus group or interview (Morgan, 1988). To allow for spontaneous, lively, emotional, and unexpected answers from participants, I used an interview guide that was semi-structured, rather than strictly structured, with questions broad enough to allow the participants to guide the discussion (Tracy, 2013). At the end of each interview, participants were sent home with a handout containing useful resources, including contact information for on-campus counseling services, in case participants felt any discomfort in discussing issues related to sexual assault (see Appendix I). Before participants left, they were also given the opportunity to later serve as a member check. Member
checking involved taking summaries of the findings back to key participants to see whether the findings accurately reflected their experiences (Creswell, 2007).

Interview lengths ranged from 18 minutes to 48 minutes, with an average length of 32 minutes. Following each interview, I created memos (Tracy, 2013), noting descriptions of each interviewee and the physical setting as well as my initial impressions. For the dyadic interview, I had secured a moderator in anticipation of a larger group of participants, and we held a short debriefing session immediately following the interview. During this session, I took notes on her impressions and observations. These interviews resulted in 108 pages of single-spaced transcriptions and eight pages of hand-written memos. I transcribed three of the interviews myself, and then hired three freelance transcriptionists to assist me in transcribing the remainder of the interviews. Transcriptionists were required to sign a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix J) before I hired them. I stored each digital recording and transcription on a password protected computer, and kept all hard copies in a locked room.

Data Analysis

After transcription, to provide verification for my transcripts, I carefully listened to each audio recording while simultaneously reviewing them to ensure that each transcript was accurate, stopping to input corrections or modifications (Tracy, 2013). During the data immersion phase, I reserved judgment by using open-ended questions to stay receptive to multiple meanings (Creswell, 2007).

Following the transcription verification process, I began coding procedures. As I moved through initial coding, I enlisted a thematic iterative analysis to identify and develop categories and thematic patterns (Tracy, 2013). I compared and contrasted categories against each other for similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). When I found differences, I added new
categories. During this open coding process, I combined and revised coding categories until they needed no further modification (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). While I coded, I kept in mind my research questions and looked for ways in which the data might illuminate responses to those questions. As I moved into secondary-cycle coding, I critically analyzed the existing codes and began to organize, synthesize, and categorize them into larger-order concepts (Tracy, 2013). In this phase, I borrowed from existing theoretical models, including identity formation theories, to explain the content of my field notes and transcriptions.

Traditional statistical measurements of reliability and validity are not part of the interpretive-analytical process (Manning & Kunkel, 2014); rather, I focused on validating data. This is due in part to the nonrepeatable nature of interviews, and because “in the paradigm of multiple, constructed realities, a single representation cannot serve as the criterion for an accurate measurement” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 240). Validation for interpretive research comes instead in the form of triangulation, defined as the use of “multiple types and sources of data, diverse methods of collection, various theoretical frames, and multiple researchers” (Denzin, 1978). This includes collecting data from diverse participants, and using diverse methods of data collection (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). The converging interpretations of various methods—i.e. field notes, interview transcripts, multiple researchers, and documents—can provide researchers with triangulation, strengthening the credibility of a study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). I used several means for achieving validation in my study.

First, I enlisted the help of a moderator for the dyadic interview to take notes and provide me with her impressions of the interview. Prior to her participation, I asked my moderator to practice following the interview protocol. I asked my moderator to take notes on nonverbal communication during the dyadic interview to enhance my transcriptions (Tracy, 2013). Morgan
(1988) suggests that research partners should collect data and share memos via a debriefing interview immediately after each session. Following the dyadic interview, my moderator and I took time to share our initial impressions and to discuss our perspectives.

Second, following the completion of my coding analysis, I asked four of my participants to provide respondent validation through member checks (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). Keeping participant diversity in mind, I asked for member checks from one male undergraduate, one female undergraduate, one male graduate student, and one female graduate student. Member checks require “taking findings back to the field and determining whether the participants recognize them as true or accurate” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 242). In addition to providing validity, asking for member reflections can provide space for additional insight and credibility (Tracy, 2013). I used these member checks to inform my writing. In keeping with a responsive interviewing model (Rubin & Rubin, 2005), providing member checks allows participants and researchers to work together to create a narrative that can benefit the group (Tracy, 2013). Through member checks, I made sure that I understood any cultural terminology used by my participants and reconsidered any inaccurate assumptions I may have made about the data (Manning & Kunkel, 2014).

Third, I kept analytic memos during the process of coding as a way to focus on the meaning of my codes and the connections among them (Charmaz, 2006). I used these memos to reflect on the linkages between my codes and how they related to one another. I also used them as a way to recreate and describe my analysis process (Tracy, 2013).

In this chapter, I have provided support for the interpretive paradigm and given a detailed description of my interview procedures. I have described my data analysis process, including the
considerations I will take to provide validation for my analysis in order to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What memorable messages do students recall from Ball State’s sexual assault prevention training?

RQ2: What are the shared themes of students’ memorable messages?

In the next chapter, I will share the results of my findings, including the themes that emerged from my analysis. In the final chapter, I will answer the research questions based on my findings.
Results

After examining the content of the transcripts from each interview, I coded for central themes, using the language of the participants to guide me. Several themes emerged from the data, including *partying, understanding consent, awareness, tensions between expectations and experiences,* and *impactful training design.* I will explain how participants articulated the importance of each theme and any corresponding subthemes below. In the final chapter, I will use the findings to answer my research questions.

**Partying**

The first theme that emerged from the interview content was the concept of partying. Instances of this theme included references to alcohol-fueled environments, familiarity with drinking practices, and expectations for how often drinking occurs on college campuses. According to participants, a significant portion of the training was centered on how to stay safe at parties by drinking in moderation. Segments of the training demonstrated standard drink measurements and how to spot signs of alcohol poisoning. All participants noted that the training emphasized the existence of party culture during the college experience. Thomas, a 23-year-old graduate student, explained how media influences contribute to the perception that all college students engage in binge drinking and party culture:

There’s still the idea that like if you go to college and a good part of that, especially if it’s a larger state university, is partying and, like, *Animal House* kind of stuff. It’s an idea that’s everywhere in fiction and in movies. We like to share stories about it ourselves and so it seems so engrained in a lot of this.

In this example, Thomas shared the impact that mediated messages have on impressions of how frequently drinking occurs on campus. Depictions of partying in *Think About It* provided support
to the cultural expectation that college students partake in binge drinking and recreational drug use. Thomas admitted that even as a graduate student, he felt the pressure to drink more while socializing with his peers. He noted that the module about drinking in moderation was the one he remembered most vividly and found to have the most practical application.

Overall, participants agreed that it was easiest for them to recall information from the module on alcohol. This could be due to the placement of the alcohol module towards the beginning of the training. Primacy effect is a cognitive bias that explains why people are more likely to recall information presented early in a series better than information presented later on (Murdock, 1962). Initial items are more likely to be stored in long-term memory than items presented towards the end. This might help to explain why participants remembered information about alcohol, which was included early in the training, with more vividness than they did other portions of the training.

Other participants shared that the instances in which they were most likely to recall the information from the training were at parties or when they were in environments where alcohol was present. Speedo, a 36-year-old, nontraditional transfer student, spoke about the training’s depiction of party culture. When asked whether the portrayals of college parties seemed accurate to him, Speedo acknowledged that the parties described in *Think About It* reflected his own personal experiences, both from his time at Ball State and from the institution he attended prior to transferring:

> I’ve been to college parties in the past back on the east coast and uh, no, it’s pretty much the same, typical, you know. Dancing and music and the smoking weed or drinking and the keg stands and all that, and different vodkas and liquors and hard liquor and uh, wine
coolers and such…It’s pretty much the same, just different generations. Just different kids.

Speedo provides support here for the idea that Think About It’s portrayal of partying during college was realistic and relatable. He also asserts that substance use during parties is a long-standing cultural norm, spanning generations and geographic locations, continuing on with each new class of college students.

When asked which messages were most important for college students, Lance, a nineteen-year-old freshman, described knowledge about drinking and partying as requisite for all students: “[Drinking] was kind of like basic knowledge I feel like everyone should know, like if you’re coming to school, you should know this.” In this explanation, Lance described being knowledgeable about substance use as requisite for all students coming to college, regardless of their life experiences.

Flower and Sara, both nineteen-year-old freshmen, echoed Lance’s sentiments and acknowledged that the training primed them to expect partying and drinking to happen, regardless of the legal drinking age. Flower expressed, “It is just like acknowledging that yeah, you know, you are a freshman, you won’t be able to legally drink but there will be house parties and stuff and just, you know, like this is sort of reiterating the point like this is how much you should drink, just to be knowledgeable of it.” Like other participants, Flower acknowledged that the training treated underage drinking as a given, demonstrating the existence of contexts in which underage drinking is deemed acceptable, like house parties.

Sara explained that the training’s emphasis on party culture and safe drinking practices made it seem like the university assumed that it is the norm for all students to binge drink, even before they are of legal drinking age: “Because we had to do it before we even came, it was like,
‘Well, clearly you are going to drink before you are supposed to and it was a lot of what you should do in this situation.” The program’s treatment of partying as a necessary part of college may send a memorable message reifying harmful social norms. Such messages can serve to encourage underage drinking (Neighbors, O’Connor, Lewis, Chawla, Lee, & Fossos, 2008).

Participants all spent a good deal of time talking about how the training presented partying as a lifestyle. The most memorable and recognizable portions of the training, according to my participants, were the videos with bartenders explaining standard drinks and the interactive map of a house during a party. When asked which messages they found to be most memorable from the training, each of the eight participants described the information covering alcohol consumption before making mention of any other portion of the training. Overall, participants who went through Think About It were left with stronger impressions regarding the drinking information than the information about sexual assault prevention.

**Understanding Consent**

Participants agreed that the training’s coverage of sexual behaviors, both healthy and unhealthy, was worthy of their attention. This theme is encompassed by participants’ comments about the frequency with which sex (both wanted and unwanted) occurs on college campuses, as well as the impact that experiencing sexual assault can have on an individual’s life. Participants identified the importance of being able to talk openly about sexual assault and understanding what consent looks like. This theme also includes the subtheme that others don’t know enough about sexual assault. Thomas, a graduate student, provided a broad explanation for why he considers sexual assault to be a topic worthy of discussion, noting that it is important to break down misconceptions:
I think [sexual assault] is important in its own right. Like, it’s sort of self-evidently important to me. And … the part that’s really important about that is, like— some people might have misconceptions. In fact, I would expect most people to have misconceptions about it. And maybe if they can’t, like, personally relate to it or if they don’t like know somebody who’s…been raped or been sexually abused or something like that, um, especially … in a college context, I think it would be harder for them to relate some, like really, to these courses or take them as seriously so … I think that’s why it’s important. Like at least to sensitize people to these issues as much as you can, even if they—you know, don’t personally connect.

It is made clear by Thomas’ comments and is worth noting at this point that the participants who were willing to speak with me about sexual assault are subject to self-selection bias. These particular participants may find sexual assault to be “self-evidently important,” but there are likely other students who were unwilling to speak with me about sexual assault who do not believe it to be an important topic for discussion. In his explanation of the topic’s inherent importance, Thomas notes that being able to personally relate to sexual assault can have an impact on how an individual approaches risk reduction training. Talking openly about sexuality and sexual assault can increase an individuals’ ability to relate to the emotions and feelings experienced by a sexual partner (Mallet & Herbe, 2011). One can infer that talking about sexual assault can also give individuals a greater ability to empathize and to understand what it might be like for someone who has survived a sexual assault.

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3 I will address this limitation in greater depth in chapter five.
Other participants agreed that generally, sexual assault is a topic worth discussing if only because it is something that happens and people should be aware of its existence. When asked why discussion of sexual assault is important, Sara said, “I think people should know about it and be aware of it, and know that it can happen and that they should watch out for it.” In this example, Sara describes sexual assault as something that could happen. There is a notable shift in tone as contrasted with how participants earlier described partying, which was portrayed in the training as something that definitely does happen.

Flower also spoke about why she thought it was important to share information about sexual assault with incoming students: “I think it is good to have it be required because as uncomfortable as it is, it’s better to have it preemptively than have to go through that whole sort of thing… for most people, because it is not something that they might get otherwise or have to, I guess, really think about.” Here, Flower indicates the possibility that students who are not required to go through sexual assault prevention training might never be otherwise confronted with a discussion about the reality of sexual assault. At another point in our interview, Flower relayed that she was familiar with the fact that one in four college women report surviving rape or attempted rape in their lifetime (Fisher et al., 2000), but simultaneously asserted that most people might never have to think about sexual assault. College students may refute the prevalence of sexual assault because they are unlikely to label unwanted sexual experiences as sexual assault if they do not fit the narrow confines of a traditional culturally-defined rape script (Karjane et al., 2005). This demonstrates an incongruent understanding among participants, which can be linked to a cultural refusal to acknowledge the reality of sexual assault, including the frequency with which it happens. If it is true that one in four college females will survive (attempted) rape, then we should recognize that a wide swath of the population will indeed be
forced to think about sexual assault, whether through firsthand experience or because they know someone who has been sexually assaulted. A possible explanation for the assumption that most people will not be impacted by sexual assault is the belief of participants in a just-world (Dalbert, 2009; Lerner, 1980). This belief system posits that good things happen to good people and impacts the social perceptions of those who adhere to it. Occasions in which good people suffer bad fates threaten the conception of a just world and may lead people to alter their perceptions of victims, which can feed into victim-blaming and acceptance of rape myths (Stromwall et al., 2012).

Participants identified the importance of talking openly about sexuality in general as one of the most memorable portions of the training, but framed it as less central than the coverage on drinking. They further identified specific reasons for talking about sexual assault in particular, including the idea that others do not know enough about sexual assault, which became a subtheme.

**Others don’t know enough about sexual assault.** A common explanation participants provided for why talking about sexual assault is so important was that, overall, other people do not know enough about it. This subtheme includes instances in which participants identified others as ignorant about sexual assault, references to common misconceptions about sexual assault, and portrayals of themselves as more knowledgeable about sexual assault than their peers. Some participants told me that other people do not have a grasp on how frequently sexual assault happens, especially on college campuses. Sara, a freshman, explained that most people don’t recognize the prevalence of sexual assault:

People can be like ‘Oh well, that happens on other campuses but not mine. That doesn’t happen here,’ and it is easy to kind of, like, push it to the back of your head. Because ‘it
doesn’t happen here,’ you can easily convince yourself. But if you say like “one in four Ball State students this happens to,” or “one in every girl at a party this will happen to you,” it will bring out more like, all this is real life and this is something I should be concerned about.

Sara expresses here that other individuals with whom she has spoken do not acknowledge the frequency with which sexual assault occurs. She identifies that it is important to engage in conversations about sexual assault with such individuals because talking about it, particularly in regard to the statistical evidence for how often sexual assault happens, will help people realize that sexual assault is a “real life” concern that could impact them personally. Acceptance of rape myths can be linked to a belief in a “just world” (Lerner, 1980) in which individuals view victims as being somehow responsible for their attacks (Hammond, Berry, & Rodriguez, 2011).

In addition to not recognizing the prevalence of sexual assault, participants also described misconceptions that their peers have about the definition of sexual consent and in which situations consent cannot be given. Speedo, a nontraditional transfer student, shared the general disinterest that some of his peers have for gaining sexual consent, particularly when alcohol is involved: “Sexual assault, you know, that’s very important because a lot of people—you know, they don’t care and it’s, you know, they’re so oblivious to that. It’s like, if I say no, no. Walk away. But they think drunk sex is okay.” Here, Speedo illustrates that his peers are “oblivious” to the fact that when an individual is drunk, he or she is not capable of giving legal consent to any sexual activity.

Speedo’s example illuminates the acceptance of rape culture and describes the unfortunate reality that many college students possess an unclear understanding of what constitutes legal consent (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013). Misinterpretations of sexual consent
exist in part because of confusion over the difference between verbal and nonverbal responses to sexual initiation behaviors (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999). He went on to explain that, if pressed, his peers would probably not be able to properly define sexual consent: “People say they know but then when you like—until you actually sit them on the hot seat and interview them, ask ‘What do you think is sexual assault?’ What do you think this is and how?’ They’re like, ‘I don’t really know.’”

Speedo differentiates himself from his peers, indicating that he understands that no means no, but asserts that many of his peers lack this understanding. Such an assertion might be a result of self-selection bias. Alternatively, Speedo’s position might also be understood through attribution theory, which explains that people assume different causes for their own behavior than the behavior of other people, ascribing more responsibility for negative behavior to others than to themselves (LaBelle & Martin, 2014). He explains that while his peers may have been presented with information about what consensual sex looks like, they still may not be able to explain what constitutes legal consent if pressured to do so.

In this theme and subtheme, participants shared their personal experiences with discussions about consent and also pointed out the differences they believe exist between themselves and their peers. Participants were likely to identify themselves as more knowledgeable than other students about consent and also indicated that sexuality is important to talk about. Participants emphasized the ability of conversations about sexuality to normalize healthy behaviors and generally regarded such conversations as beneficial and desirable.

**Awareness**

Across the board, participants talked about how being aware in social situations, especially when alcohol and/or drugs are present, can help increase safety on campus. Instances
of this theme included references to sharing responsibility for the well-being of other students, making sure your friends get home safely at the end of the night, and keeping a watchful eye over your drinks. Participant comments about raising awareness also revealed a subtheme, *bystander intervention*, which is a specific method taught by *Think About It* designed to increase campus safety. Overall, participants were pleased to receive information about keeping one another safe and believed it was a sign that the university had their best interests in mind.

Sydney, a 23-year-old graduate student, explained why she believed that it was important for all students to share the responsibility staying safe by being aware of one another, explaining:

> Education includes many facets. Some of it is about how to be like a basically decent human being and how to keep track of your fellow adults as they’re becoming adults. And I think that if somebody really openly discussed with you what this training is about and how you can help people and help yourself, I’m not sure why you would skip it.

In this statement, Sydney indicates that the role of education is not merely to train individuals for work in a specific field, but also to implore the ethical treatment of other human beings. She builds a link between education and social responsibility, implying the role that higher education plays in the moral development of students (Cooper, Liddell, Davis, & Pasquesi, 2012; Trow, 1976).

There was a general enthusiasm among all participants for the usefulness of the information regarding awareness and prevention. Speedo, a nontraditional student, shared that the training sent him a strong message about how important it is to watch out for himself and for other students:

> You know, not everybody’s gonna be honest about what’s going on and you know, so I mean just basically it’s up to the student to make sure they know what’s going on and
you know, like I know that, um, video in the training, it said you know, go in groups and make sure, you know, you have someone watching out for you.

Here, Speedo identifies that it is important to raise awareness so that students are able to look out for one another. He explains that it is important to go in groups and be able to protect each other from predators. He went on to summarize what he thought was most important for his fellow students to learn from the training:

  Being careful with who you hang with. Um, be aware of your surroundings. What’s go—you know, who’s handing you the drink, how the drink is being poured, um, also you know, I mean sex is great but I mean, if you’re not all with it mentally, if you’re not right there, if you’re impaired, make sure you’ve got a backup who’ll say, “uh-uh.” You know, have a game plan to like, you know, let’s say it’s me and you and you’re saying, “you know, tonight I’m looking for”—and you’re sober first—you say, “I’m looking to hook up” or whatever. Okay, great, you’re looking to hook up. But I mean if you’re not in your right mind and somebody pulled you away—you know, just having a pre-game plan. Just being preventative.

Other participants shared similar sentiments to Speedo’s, noting how important it is to watch out for one’s friends and emphasizing the practicality of traveling in groups, having a designated sober friend to watch out for the group, and assuming that they should be defensive when going out and drinking. These ideas reflect a belief that preparation will lead to increased safety on campus. Participants indicated that the training emphasized the agency of individuals over the occurrence of sexual assault. Such an emphasis could serve to reify victim-blaming rape myths (Burt, 1980), attributing sexual assault victimization to a lack of preparedness and perpetuating the idea that rapists are strangers to their victims.
When asked what was most beneficial about the training, Ana, a 24-year-old graduate student, told me that it made her aware of the reality of unsafe partying practices among other students, something she had not previously considered:

I think it just made me aware that perhaps a lot of the people may struggle with that a little more or that it happens more often or that, you know, it is something to be aware of. I just have always, whenever I’ve been drinking somewhere, it’s always within safe environments. So just being aware of that, it probably doesn’t always happen like that, and there’s high chances of sexual harassment or ending up at a place that you don’t know. So yeah, it just kinda opened up that side of like, “oh you know, maybe that just happens very often.”

The training served to open Ana’s eyes to the experiences of her peers, making her more aware of how often students are in situations in which they may be at risk for sexually assaulting others. Arvada, a 23-year-old graduate student, explained that for her, the information about awareness was the most important message overall that she retained from Think About It:

I would say the overall point of the training was to prevent these kind of things from happening, like, um, just keeping people safe and especially at parties and ‘cause I think just being aware of things, like what could be going on can help students prevent like bad decisions and things that could affect them for the rest of their lives… I think that all of them had this general theme of ‘be aware of what you’re doing’ and the risks involved when people are pressuring you…and to keep yourself safe, to keep other people safe.

Participants responded positively to the idea that they had some control over keeping their friends safe. Individuals like to think they can prevent sexual assault from happening by
controlling a given situation, but it is important to note that placing the responsibility for preventing sexual assault onto bystanders may serve to perpetuate a rape culture wherein perpetrators are not considered responsible for their actions (Foubert, 2011).

**Bystander intervention.** A subtheme that emerged from this particular memorable message was that being an active bystander is a useful way to keep other students safe. This theme encompassed references to making decisions about whether to intercede in social situations, recognizing a situation that could turn into a sexual assault, and gaining the confidence to speak up to keep another student out of a dangerous situation. Bystander intervention is one of the more practical and effective methods for preventing sexual assault on college campuses (Rodriguez et al., 2006), so the fact that participants recalled this message is encouraging. Sydney, a graduate student, talked about how the training modules covering bystander intervention would be useful for students who might be unsure of how to intervene in real life situations:

> If you do run into somebody who has had something happen to them in terms of sexual assault…[bystander] intervention is really, really good too and I think that was really well-illustrated, like how to step in and feel comfortable doing that because that is something people like to think they would do and they thought about doing maybe or they don’t realize they can. And I thought that was really important, to give people a model of what that might look like in a way that makes sense to them.

Sydney identifies here the importance of teaching bystander intervention, explaining that participants may not realize their potential for stepping in to prevent their peers from being harmed. She expresses the importance of having a model to follow with practical instructions for
being an active bystander. Some of the practical lessons imparted by bystander intervention training include teaching participants to speak out against social norms supportive of sexual violence and preparing them to provide support to survivors (Burn, 2009). Some participants shared stories about being in real-life situations when they recalled the training’s instructions. Flower, a freshman, described a scenario during a party she attended with friends:

I kind of, with the bystander, it did stand out to me because I once went out to a party and there was this girl who I didn’t know and she was having like a discussion with a boy and he was like trying to I guess like, grab her to pull her away. And I sort of just kind of, stepped in, and I just like asked her “are you okay?” and she said “No.” … I didn’t really know the situation so it could be that I’m reading more into it, but I mean, I know it happens so it’s just hard to look out for that and know when it is something like that.

In this illustration, we see Flower recall the importance of bystander intervention during a night out at a party. She recalled the intervention model from Think About It, which influenced her behavior in the situation. Here, we see the memorable directives that bystander intervention training can retain on the behavior of students (Banyard et al., 2005).

Lance, a freshman, also shared that he has recalled the information about bystander intervention while out at parties with friends. He shared:

So like, I learned [about bystander intervention] and so like at parties or whatever, like I’m—if I see someone that’s drunk and someone that’s not, or like even if they’re both kind of drunk, I’m like, we learned about this in Think About It and I don’t think this is good and I should say something.
Lance recalled the training’s instruction to intervene to prevent sexual assault from occurring, but it is unclear whether he actually stepped in to take preventative action. According to the literature, students often struggle with reacting to ambiguity after learning about bystander intervention (White & Malkowski, 2014). Flower’s hesitancy and heavy use of filler words suggest that she likely experienced such a struggle to overcome ambiguity at the party she attended when she wondered whether to intervene. Bystander intervention training can teach students to recognize dangerous situations and to give consideration for the safety of their peers, but they may be hesitant to actually take action in a given situation (White & Malkowski, 2014).

In my interview with Sydney, a graduate student, she shared a concern over the sexual assault scenario provided in the training and the fact that it might have caused more confusion than instruction because it displayed a sexual assault in which the victim had been drinking and knew her assailant:

And when they did the sexual assault part… I wasn’t sure if I really liked the example that they provided, like I thought—well, they picked a gray area on purpose, and I understand why they did that, but part of me was like, people, I think, are going to argue about that and I think they’re going to spend too much time trying to suss it out and not enough time learning from it…I just wasn’t sure how the audience was going to take it and how they were going to side with things.

It is possible that dealing with such a “grey area” as the example for how to prevent sexual assault could stir up confusion among students who might struggle to understand why and how to intervene in a similar situation. Students are less likely to intervene in a situation where they do not know if the individual who appears to be at risk desires their intervention or not (White & Malkowski, 2014).
In this theme and subtheme, participants talked about the impact of being aware in social situations, especially when alcohol and drugs are present, and the potential for bystander intervention to increase campus safety. Participants shared their personal experiences related to becoming aware of risky situations and thinking about taking action to intervene.

**Tensions Between Expectations and Experiences**

At several points during their interviews, the participants expressed various tensions between the messages they retained from the training and their actual lived experiences. Tensions included references to conflicting or contradictory experiences and feeling a sense of otherness from in-groups. Participants identified that while the messages provided by the training might be useful or important, there were sometimes significant differences between their expectations that resulted from their participation in *Think About It* and their personal experience with those topics. I found four main tensions throughout my discussion with each participant: (a) important vs. uncomfortable, (b) control vs. helplessness, (c) redundant vs. enlightening, and (d) partying as essential vs. partying as unfamiliar. I will explain each of these subthemes and provide examples of how participants framed the tensions they experience.

**Important vs. uncomfortable.** One of the memorable messages that students expressed when looking back on their experience with the *Think About It* training was that it is extremely important to hold discussions about sexual assault. However, the participants themselves expressed a level of discomfort when it comes to holding these discussions and identified that, in general, people are unmotivated to talk about sexuality, no matter how important it is to do so. One of the major themes that arose from these comments is the tension that exists between the participants’ understanding of how important it is to talk about sexual assault, contrasted with their admittance that sexuality is too uncomfortable to talk about openly. Instances of this theme
include references to the awkwardness and discomfort that occurs when sex comes up in conversation and the avoidance of conversations about sex, especially with important figures in their lives. Arvada, a graduate student, spent some time talking about how often students find themselves in casual sexual encounters, while also admitting how difficult it is to talk about those sexual experiences:

I would say [hookup culture] is more prevalent here. It seems like it’s more of an issue here. And I also think it’s still not talked about very much. I think [talking about it] would help normalize it too, and just not everyone’s wanting to hook up. And just being clear when we state what our expectations are when people want to have a relationship.

Arvada went on further to explain that being able to talk about sexuality and sexual assault was important:

[Talking about sexuality] helps to normalize what’s going on with students’ experience and it helps them to be able to talk about it and see what behaviors may be maladaptive, and what other—then, you can just get more feedback from how to have healthier relationships, or to really get what they want…like to do what they want in a relationship and being clear about expectation and what happens like, at parties and whatnot.

Arvada explains here that talking about sexuality would help normalize the sexual experiences that students encounter during their socialization to college culture, and would also help them to identify what types of behaviors are unhealthy. Being able to name and identify unhealthy sexual behaviors can be liberating for those who have survived a sexual assault and can also help build a culture that is intolerant of rape myths.
At the same time, Arvada expressed a difficulty in being able to talk about sexuality in general. She said that while she was growing up, sexuality was not something she was comfortable talking about with her family. When asked to provide a suggestion for what might make the training program more beneficial, she expressed a desire for more instruction on approaching sexuality in conversation. She was left desiring a module that would teach students, “how to talk about [sex], and how to validate what other people are going through, and not just judge them or get defensive about what you’re doing if people are judging you, and just trying to understand, like, the other person.” Clearly, participants argued that there is a greater need for overall fluency on the topic of sexuality than just coverage of sexual assault.

Responses from participants indicated that not only are people uncomfortable talking about sexuality with family, but that in general, discussing sexuality with other people is an unpleasant and awkward experience. Participants offered that while they thought it was important to share information about sexual assault and they felt comfortable doing so in the online setting, they did not think it would be a good idea to share that same information in a seminar or group setting. Thomas articulated the tension he felt between believing that a discussion would be very impactful for students while still acknowledging that sexual assault is an extremely painful topic to talk about:

If it’s in person, it’s a little bit easier I think to like connect the people and to communicate…I think the impact, too, would be like way more powerful than it would be just like reading it online. On the other hand, it could be uh, like, sensitive, a sensitive issue for some people. Sensitive like, it could be also like a lot more difficult to get through…Like I could just imagine if somebody’s been
raped or something like that…it might be like more difficult or—I don’t know, it’s like more emotionally problematic for them.

Here, we can see Thomas struggling to grapple with the fact that, while face-to-face communication is a “way more powerful” method for conveying information about sexual assault (Rodriguez et al., 2006), talking about such issues in person can be a source of discomfort, particularly for someone who has been raped. Face-to-face communication about sexual assault may feel awkward or uncomfortable for students, but researchers have found that face-to-face communication is more likely to lead individuals to consensus and to incite political action (Baek, Wojcieszak, & Carpini, 2012). Computer-mediated training modules may bring important topics to the attention of students, but they may be less likely to encourage students to collaboratively act on such information.

Ana, a graduate student, indicated she would not suggest talking about sexual assault in groups because it is extremely sensitive in nature. She noted, “Those are just very sensitive topics that you don’t wanna put anyone in that awkward situation of, I don’t know, I mean like those situations—like if they would have had the relationship part, or talking about sexual harassment, if people have had that, it could have been uncomfortable.”

Reinforcing the awkward nature of discussions about sexuality, Sara shared that it would be very difficult to get students to talk about sexual assault in groups because the topic is culturally taboo, expressing some frustration along the way:

It is… like it is such a taboo topic to most people that it is hard to get that motivated to like, want to know more. I mean, the people that I know that want to know more either were or know someone who has been sexually assaulted, so that motivated them to learn more: like, what can I do? What should I do if this happens?
Here, Sara expresses the extent to which sexual assault is an off-limits topic of conversation for most people. She shared that when people want to learn more about sexual assault, it is usually as a result of a personal experience with the issue. Sexual assault is treated as such a taboo topic that the only feasible motivation for learning more about it, according to Sara, is to know someone who has experienced it or to have experienced it yourself. This is a troubling reality because if people refuse to hold conversations about what sexual assault is, there is a high chance that as a culture, we will not fully understand what consent looks like.

In another part of our interview, Sara told me that she was personally interested in sexual assault prevention because her mother had been sexually assaulted, and the topic hit close to home. After hearing about her mother’s experience, she became passionate about learning to help other victims. Despite her personal interest in the topic, she also believed that if she were to go through the training alongside her peers rather than doing it alone, it would be hard to treat the topic seriously. She told me, “I think that if you did it with a friend it would be more of a joke. Not necessarily awkward, but it would be like ‘this would be funny’ or like ‘what if this actually happens’ like, it will be…you would want to make it more of a light-hearted conversation and would end up being a joke and you wouldn’t take it as seriously.”

Sara’s prediction that going through the training with a friend might lead to it being taken as a joke can be linked to the use of humor to diffuse awkward or uncomfortable conversations. People often use face-saving and humor to overcome discomfort associated with talking about sex (Miller-Ott & Linder, 2013).

Flower further expressed a particular tension in the way that the training itself presented sexuality differently from how it presented drinking or drug use:
On drinking it said ‘don’t drink—but if you do, here is how you do it safely. Don’t do drugs—but if you do, here is how you do it safely. But then it just said, ‘don’t have sex.’ Like it didn’t get into any—any…Like, they got into the consent part of it but it didn’t have any like, birth control type of thing which I know is a very touchy and controversial topic but I felt that was sort of a hole in the training.

Our cultural opposition to talking openly and frankly about sexuality seems to be so deeply engrained that even in a risk-reduction training, sexual activity was presented with more caution and fewer practical suggestions than the other topics. While partying and drinking were normalized through the training, participants felt that the training still handled sexuality as a taboo topic. Despite participants’ open acknowledgement that talking about sexual issues would be helpful, they all felt some type of aversion to discussing these issues.

**Control vs. powerlessness.** Another tension identified by participants was the idea that individuals can take control of their safety, contrasted with remarks about the powerlessness of individuals to prevent sexual assault from happening. In this tension, participants used victim-blaming language, indicating that victims might have been able to take steps to prevent sexual assault from occurring, and also described sexual assault as something that “just happens” regardless of what steps one might take to prevent it.

Sara, a freshman, told me that sexual assault often happens precisely because people assume it won’t and fail to educate themselves on how to take preventative measures:

But I think just this, like, this does happen basically because some people are like ‘well, it doesn’t happen, that won’t happen to me’ and I am like, I’ve heard that so many times, like ‘oh well, that won’t happen to me’ but if you are putting yourself in that situation—
you don’t even have to put yourself in the situation, it can happen anywhere, anytime
like, and it is not your fault, but you have to be knowledgeable about what to do or what
you can do to maybe prevent it or stop it or something.

Here, we can see Sara struggling with the idea that sexual assault is “not your fault” but
still maintaining that if individuals took time to properly educate themselves, they could “maybe
prevent it or stop it” from taking place. Although she acknowledges that a victim should not be
blamed for being sexually assaulted, she also ascribes some level of responsibility to an
individual who was not vigilant in taking action to stop an assault from occurring (Burt, 1980;
Deming, Covan, Swan, & Billings, 2013). We see Sara grappling with the idea that a person
might be responsible for putting themselves in a situation, then backtracking to clarify that it can
even occur is someone does not put themselves in a precarious situation. Sara does not fully
ascribe to common rape myths, but maintains a delicate balance between victim blaming and
asserting that it is important for individuals to be aware of the reality of sexual assault.

Ana, a graduate student, explained the complicated role that alcohol can play when it
comes to making sure that sexual activity is consensual. She asserts that if an individual is
intoxicated, he or she cannot fully claim to have resisted a sexual encounter:

When you put yourself in a situation where you’re not being fully aware of what’s
happening around you, that’s like putting your control out of your hands…I think
because of that, it’s very easy for people to assume like, “oh, this is when I can
get what I want from this person because they’re finally gonna say yes to me,
because they’re not really thinking clearly anymore.” And sometimes alcohol, you
know, makes you—you know, it lets you just do whatever and not really deal with
the consequences of—you know, after. And I think that’s why it’s so confusing,
when it comes to rape. It’s such a blurred line because even if both parties are drunk, how does anyone know who said yes or not?

Like Sara, Ana spends some time grappling and backpedaling over her words, careful not to fully place blame on a victim of sexual assault, but also failing to blame the aggressor and instead attributing the cause of the assault to alcohol. Although it is true that alcohol is used to render victims more vulnerable to an assault (Lisak & Miller, 2002), Ana’s position is a culturally endorsed rape myth (Burt, 1980), asserting that cooperation equals consent. When we place the blame on victims for choosing to use a controlled substance, we eradicate the responsibility of a perpetrator.

**Redundant vs. enlightening.** Another theme that became apparent as I analyzed the content of my transcripts was the tension participants experienced in viewing the training as being redundant versus enlightening. Within the theme, participants emphasized how redundant and unnecessary the training was. This theme included participants’ insistence that *Think About It*’s messages did not fit their lifestyles, assertions that the training was designed for people with less life experience, and, contrarily, descriptions of new information that these participants were exposed to as a result of the training.

Graduate students claimed that they had already become accustomed to the college experience during their undergraduate years, and therefore did not see the need for taking part in the training. Similarly, the undergraduate students seemed to think that they had already learned most of the material covered by the training before they arrived on campus, whether through personal or educational experience. Thomas, a graduate student, explained that, “it seemed to be targeted more toward like, a younger audience. And it seemed to be like, more appropriate for
like, incoming freshmen or like new students to college…I found it like a little redundant coming out of college, for like already having done a bachelor’s degree.”

Ana, also a graduate student, echoed Thomas’s aversion to going through a training that seemed unnecessary: “I don’t know if it’s that useful for graduate students who have already gone through undergraduate and you know, now they’re—to me, I would think more like adults—I would think that they’d be more careful, at least my perception would be that. So for me, I didn’t really find it necessary.” In this statement, Ana differentiates herself from undergraduate students, whom she believes should not be considered adults. Ana is not the only graduate student to assert this differentiation. A recurring theme among graduate students was the idea that their life experience makes them inherently different, wiser, and more experienced than undergraduate students. Such an assumption implies that the number of years a person has lived automatically makes them more informed and experienced, disregarding the possibility that very young people can sometimes have experience with drinking, drugs, and sex.

Some graduate students described partying as something that they had done in the past, but that was not part of their current reality. Ana expressed that information about how to party safely might be important for undergraduate students, but because she had already gone through a partying phase as an undergraduate, she did not see the need to retread information about safe party practices:

I wouldn’t want to go on partying and put myself in that awkward situation, when that could result in not remembering what happened or anything like that. So I like the idea, but I think it should be geared towards specific, like especially freshmen coming in, so that they’re mindful of what could happen, or anyone
that’s had—you know, just—I think being a graduate student, for me, and being 24 at that time, I just didn’t think it was necessary for me.

Here, we see that Ana differentiates graduate students as more experienced and knowledgeable than undergraduates, asserting that as a 24-year-old, she has no need to learn about safe ways to drink and use recreational drugs. Ana and her fellow graduate students privilege their status as older, wiser, and more mature, but it is important to note that the human brain does not fully develop until around the age of 25 (Holloway & Roux, 2015). Adults over 25 tend to make decisions using the prefrontal cortex, while individuals under 25 are still more likely to use the emotional center of the amygdala for their decision-making (Holloway & Roux, 2015). The implication of this is that while graduate students privilege themselves as being more fully-formed, developed human beings, many of them are actually in the same brain development stage as their undergraduate counterparts.

Graduate students may not be as dissimilar from undergraduate students as they assume, not only in terms of brain development but also in life experience. For some graduate students, partying may be a completely foreign scenario. Arvada, a graduate student who attended a small, Christian school for her undergraduate degree, told me that she had never been immersed in party culture at her previous institutions. She noted that at certain points, the training warned students about placing themselves in precarious positions, with which she struggled to relate. She expressed, “I don’t go out to parties ever and so… it’s just like, ‘oh, am I in those positions anyway?’ And so—so it didn’t seem relevant, I guess.” In describing her own lack of experience with partying, Arvada demonstrates that graduate students are not necessarily better informed or experienced when it comes to drinking habits and subsequently may not be equipped to keep themselves and others safe.
Although the graduate students thought the information covered in the training was most appropriate and useful for undergraduate students, participants in undergraduate programs did not agree. Despite being new to college, these students still felt that they had enough life experience to render the training material unnecessary. Flower, a freshman, noted that, “a lot of it was like something having been covered in health class in high school and I mean, it’s not something you have forgotten… it seemed like there was a lot of going through stuff that didn’t seem as important to me.”

Apart from their emphasis on how redundant and inapplicable the training material was, participants frequently identified that they had, in fact, gained new knowledge from the training. A number of participants referred to the recovery position for alcohol poisoning as something they had not previously been aware of. Arvada, a graduate student, told me, “The new part was like, like the—like position to put unconscious people in.”

It is especially important to note that some of my participants discovered new information about the nature of consent, which is a commendable accomplishment for the training program. Lance, a freshman, shared that he had not previously realized that consent cannot be given by someone who is intoxicated: “I learned a lot about like the sexual assault portion because like I didn’t know certain, like—if they’re drunk, or like, whatever, like you can’t do that. That’s against the law. I didn’t know that.” In this statement, Lance demonstrates that, despite protestations from participants about how redundant and unnecessary the training is, it actually imparted some very important and brand new information. When participants talked about the training, they consistently referred to it as something that might be a helpful refresher for others, but here we see that the training was responsible for teaching Lance a very important aspect of what consensual sex really looks like.
Correspondingly, Arvada shared that she gained clarification on alcohol’s bearing on an individual’s ability to give consent: “And that if people have been drinking, then they can’t consent to, like, sexual activity...I think that was more clear than it had been in the past.” In this instance, Arvada contradicts her argument that *Think About It* was not edifying for graduate students by sharing that she learned an extremely important fact about the inability of drunk individuals to give consent to sexual activity.

Sydney, a graduate student, seemed to have a good pulse on what the tension between wanting to be seen as experienced versus finding new and helpful information in the training felt like. She explained the general direction that conversations about the training tend to take when she has discussed it with her peers:

I think there’s some degree of that, to feel like we’re above all this because we went through undergrad and most people got their ridiculous party streaks or their problem streaks out and so they don’t need this anymore, like “Oh I know like how to watch my drink and stuff,” but when I have brought up positive aspects of it, they do admit that they’ve been pretty impressed with that...and they admit you can always learn more stuff. But I feel like the initial impression, they can’t relate, it’s like rolling your eyes.

Her summation of this tension was emphasized by what my other participants expressed. No one wanted to present himself or herself as a novice, and there seemed to be a cultural expectation that everyone should already know the information covered in the training by the time they arrived at Ball State. Self-serving bias can help explain why participants focus on their own knowledge and give themselves credit for being more informed than their peers (Miller &
Ross, 1975). This bias helps to perpetuate self-esteem but can be harmful because it also perpetuates illusions and false attributions for success and/or failure (Miller & Ross, 1975).

**Partying as essential vs. partying as unfamiliar.** Related to the theme of redundant vs. enlightening is the theme of partying as essential vs. partying as unfamiliar. As indicated in an earlier theme, when asked what they remembered most from Think About It, the participants made multiple references to partying, including the idea that partying is an expected and even required occurrence for all college students. When talking about their own experiences, however, the participants claimed to have little personal experience with such situations. This tension came up frequently during the interviews I conducted. This theme includes references to partying as something that others do, making conscious choices not to drink during college, and not even really knowing other people who drink or party on a regular basis.

Sara, a freshman, expressed that she did not intend to go to parties at all, which made portions of the training irrelevant to her own experience. She shared, “A lot of it was party stuff like if you had a party, the bystander stuff like, I am not going to be there so it doesn’t really matter. I did read some of that just in case but it was more of I am not going to do this and like saying like oh alcohol poisoning – well, I don’t plan to drink.” Here we see that students may be selective about which information is actually important to know. If students approach the training with the assumption that the information presented does not and will never apply to them, it is likely that they are not paying close attention. Assuming that the information will not impact their lives may be especially harmful if students apply such an approach to the training portions covering sexual assault.

Additionally, framing sexual assault so narrowly as something that only happens within the context of party culture might not adequately prepare students for other situations where
sexual assault happens. Alcohol can increase the likelihood of sexual assault (Mohler-Kuo, Dowdall, Koss, & Wechsler, 2004), but sexual assault does not occur exclusively when one or both parties are intoxicated. In fact, sexual assault is most likely to be perpetrated by someone known to the victim (Clay-Warner & Burt, 2005). Portraying rape as a scenario that only takes place at parties could prevent students from being prepared in other real-life situations, such as dates in dorm rooms or late-night work sessions with other students or graduate assistants.

Flower, another freshman, mirrored Sara’s response to the training and also told me that she had no plans to party during her time in college. Because of this, she felt that portions of the information covered by the training were not important for her to know. Even as she went through the training, she acknowledged that, “A lot of stuff is not something I may remember for a really long time, and like, because a lot of it didn’t necessarily apply to me because I don’t do drugs, I don’t drink—I don’t want to not be able to be a teacher, so it seemed like there was a lot of going through stuff that didn’t seem as important to me.” Flower’s explanation indicates that there may be a stigma towards some of the information covered by Think About It for students pursuing certain career paths. Flower is an elementary education major and mentioned during our interview that students pursuing such degrees tend to be more careful about not drinking, as being charged with public intoxication or a DUI would prevent her from being able to pursue her career goals.

None of the participants talked about partying as something they did routinely or that was a major part of their college experience. Lance, a freshman, had the most moderate view on partying, explaining that he thought he had a fair view of parties because of the range of friends he had made:
I guess, like, most of the people that are involved on campus don’t really like, go off campus. So like I see both sides of it and I have friends that are like all about the partying and like nothing about campus and then I have friends that are all about like, let’s get involved on campus and no partying, so I guess I have a good perspective on like different reaches of people.

The other participants I interviewed treated partying as something that they did not engage in or relate to, despite the fact that one of the most memorable messages they took away from the training was that partying is a requisite part of being in college. A consistent disparity arose during interviews with participants when they described the training’s emphasis on party culture as being difficult for them to identify with or relate to.

These tensions experienced by participants reveal the differences between the expectations Think About It created for them and the experiences they went through upon arrival at Ball State University. In the tension important vs. uncomfortable, we see participants describing the importance of communicating about sexuality but also expressing a lack of motivation or desire to hold conversations about sex with the people in their lives. When participants touched on the tension of control vs. powerlessness, they argued that sexual assault is not the fault of the victim, but also placed blame on uncontrollable situational factors, declining to place the onus of responsibility onto the aggressor. In the tension redundant vs. enlightening, participants argued that the training was unnecessary for them while also admitting that it exposed them to new and useful information. Finally, in the tension partying as essential vs. partying as unfamiliar, participants expressed that the training’s emphasis on drinking was accurate, while also claiming that they did not partake in parties or find information about partying to be useful to their situations. Some of the tensions participants identified exemplify
the desire of individuals to appear more knowledgeable and superior to their peers. These tensions also highlight some of the ways in which students endorse rape myths.

**Impactful Training Design**

Outside of the impactful messages participants received from *Think About It*, they also described several aspects of their shared experience going through the training program. This theme included references to the design of the training program and the elements of the training that motivated them to complete it. These aspects can be categorized into three subthemes: (a) convenient compliance, (b) diversity and (c) storytelling. These elements have more to do with the experience of the training itself than with real-life consequences of the material presented.

**Convenient compliance.** Although my participants generally seemed to agree that the information covered in *Think About It* was important, they did not complete the training because they thought it was relevant or useful; instead, they did it as a means of compliance with university standards. This theme came up when participants described the tediousness of the training, their lack of interest in some of the topics presented, and the experience “clicking through” the online modules just to get it over with. The theme also emerged through participants’ feedback about the training’s user-friendly interface and the ease with which they were able to complete it. Lance, a freshman who described himself as the type of person who tries to stay on top of things and make sure that he has his bases covered, described going through the training as something that was not desirable, but not entirely unpleasant. He noted, “It was like, ‘dang, I don’t really wanna do this, but like, since I am doing it, it’s not that bad.’ I think most people were like, ‘oh, it’s a burden’ but it wasn’t like, horrible.”

Lance went on to describe how it felt to trudge through the training, particularly as he approached the end and became mentally fatigued. He shared, “In the beginning you’re like
[upbeat] ‘okay, okay, okay,’ and then in the end you’re like [groaning] ‘alright…alright…alright, I get it…’ so I think that was the issue.”

Participants noted that as they went through the training, they paid little attention to portions that did not seem relevant to their experiences. They would complete the modules by clicking their way through, but they would not really pay attention to the messages being shared. Sara talked about how she approached the drug and alcohol sections of the training. She told me, “I would just click, click, click. I don’t need to know this, so I am not going to read it.” Sara reveals one of the major downsides of online training, which is that participants sometimes give their attention selectively and there is no real way to measure whether they are fully engaged with the training or simply clicking through just to complete it.

Ana shared that for most of the training, she felt forced into completing something she was not interested in. She shared that for her, completing the training was really about going through the motions so that she would stop getting reminder emails. Ana stated, “Even when I did it, I didn’t really want to do it…I ended up doing it at work, so I let it kind of fade and just answered the questions in there. So I didn’t really pay a lot of attention to it.” Ana completed the requirements of the training but admits that she did not engage with it or pay close attention.

Participants openly admitted to only complying and finishing the training because it was mandatory, and not because they were interested in learning more about the topics presented. When asked whether she would have completed this training voluntarily, Arvada told me, “I may have started it and—but probably would not have completed it.” She went on to say that it did not seem fair for the training to be required of all students, noting that “it’s more fair to make like, new college students do it, so that they’re aware of the college culture, because they haven’t been a part of it yet. But I don’t think it was fair for graduate students to do it.”
Overall, even the participants who seemed to think that the training was useful and well-designed claimed that they probably would not have invested their time into completing it if they did not think it was mandated for them to do so. None of my participants expressed a desire to complete the training for their own personal enrichment. Flower shared that she assumed the training was a “mandatory thing” and that she finished it mostly because “once I start something I always feel I need to finish it, so I couldn’t have just stopped halfway through, like it would have been this nagging thing in the back of my mind.” For most students, completing *Think About It* was a matter of being compliant with the university’s demands.

Participants described some elements of the training that made it more bearable and convenient to comply with, and one of the most important elements they identified was the game design. Participants talked about some of the games within the training, referred to how games helped them retain information, and gave positive feedback regarding their ability to interact with the training material. Lance, a freshman, described the interactivity of the training:

> It was kind of like testing your knowledge… it was like a game, I guess. You went in different rooms and had to see what the situation was… the way it was visually was good…there were little games where you had to pick like, which [drink] is five ounces. You don’t get that kind of thing in a class…and that’s the part that really made me, like, think about it.

Here, Lance explained that the game-oriented aspects of the training were what made the material stand out in his mind and caused him to pay attention more attention to the information presented than he might if he were sitting in a traditional classroom.
Sydney, a graduate student who went through the training at the same time as her roommate, described how they were motivated to compete against each other in the game portions of the training:

But some of [the games], when we were looking at it, we were like, “That's actually really smart.” We're like, “I hadn't thought about that that way.” And when we did challenges, we kind of compete against each other, it was fun.

Sydney and her roommate used competition to motivate one another towards completion of the training. Game design can help motivate students to change their future behaviors (Hamari, Koivisto, & Sarsa, 2014). Games can create a space for complex social learning and also provide participants with the ability to experience simulations of risky situations without actually endangering them (Russell & Shepherd, 2010).

**Diversity.** Another subtheme that emerged from the interviews was the importance of reflecting campus diversity in training materials. Examples included under this theme are remarks about the inclusion of characters with differing cultural identities and the ability of participants to identify with characters in *Think About It*. Participants thought that the training’s treatment of diversity was praiseworthy. I asked each participant whether they thought the representation of different types of students was fair or accurate when compared with Ball State’s campus population. Lance, a freshman, was especially enthusiastic when responding to this question. His tone of voice raised and he excitedly described the diversity as, “…something I actually noticed. I was like, ‘Oh, okay, they’re boyfriends, or like girlfriends’ or, ‘oh, there’s like a bunch of races, a bunch of different names.’ I thought that was actually like, really good. I think I remember tweeting about that.” In this instance, Lance became more animated than at any
other point during our interview. He reacted with positive regard to seeing examples of gay and
lesbian couples, which might have something to do with the fact that he identifies as gay.

Speedo, a nontraditional transfer student, also felt that the training shared a variety of
student experiences that resonated with him. He told me, “It was good because it wasn’t just
straight students. It wasn’t just, you know, um, one gender or one sexual orientation or one race.
It was a mix of races and different situations as well. It did cover sexual assault, dating violence
both for straight, gay, bigendered students.” He praised the way that the training did not shy
away from showing gay characters growing closer in intimacy and felt that most students would
be able to relate to the characters in the vignettes.

Sydney, a graduate student, also thought that the training gave an accurate and positive
representation of different minority group members. She shared, “I like that there were a wide
range of minority characters whether because they were from out of state or they were in the
LGBT community or they were in the [racial] minority community. I thought they did a really
good job being inclusive.”

Arvada, a graduate student, thought that the representation was overall good, but did have
concern over the fact that the training followed undergraduate students exclusively. She
explained, “I think it left out like, non-traditional students and how they may encounter these
pressures, and how graduate students may encounter them differently as well.” Each of the
graduate students that I interviewed expressed that the training did not seemed designed in a way
that spoke to their experience, and the lack of representation might have something to do with
that.

Arvada’s comment brings up an important critique of the training’s handling of diversity.
Despite the program’s attempts to showcase demographic diversity in terms of race and sexual
orientation, it did not reach for experiential diversity. The scenarios presented in *Think About It* did not cover every type of student experience and showed only plots that would be familiar to traditional undergraduate students. Most of the action in the training took place in dorm rooms, at house parties, and in common spaces on campus including the library and dining halls. All of the vignettes followed characters who were young, traditional undergraduate students, and graduate students expressed a difficulty in relating to the scenarios in which these characters found themselves. Diversity is not placing a girl in a hijab at a frat party; it is instead developing programming that covers various scenarios where multiple students might realistically find themselves. When participants are unable to relate to the scenarios demonstrated in training materials, they tend to tune out and disengage.

Despite these critiques, diversity was something that all participants embraced and viewed as a positive aspect of the training, despite the fact that all but one of my participants identified as White or Caucasian. The participants who identified as straight or heterosexual were still pleased to see LGBT representation in the training. Overall, it seemed that students were not interested in following characters who were exactly like them, but instead appreciated that the training seemed to match the diversity that exists on most college campuses.

**Storytelling.** The final subtheme indicated by participants was the importance of storytelling to spur motivation to complete the training. This theme encompassed participants’ descriptions of which portions of the training stood out to them, and the frequent references to the narrative elements of *Think About It*. Flower talked about the student character vignettes in the training as being helpful for maintaining her attention and providing a sense of reality regarding the different scenarios in which the characters found themselves. She shared, “I did feel like it did, I am like, no one is going to be able to relate no matter what, but it was a nice
way to give it some of the storyline so it is not just hypothetical examples.” In the first half of her statement, Flower identifies that there is no realistic way for the training developers to create storylines with which all students at all times will be able to identify, no matter what. However, she then indicates that having a character to follow did give the training’s information and advice some context that helped her imagine how it might apply in her own life.

Additionally, when prompted to provide suggestions for how to motivate future students to learn about sexual assault, participants frequently brought up storytelling as a persuasive tool. Lance, a freshman, told me that he would be especially impacted by personal experiences, explaining that the training might be more effective “if they had someone—I know it’s really hard for people to come and speak about those things but like—if someone was there speaking about it and like their experience and like how it had like changed their life or however it affected them, um, that would really, like, touch me.”

Speedo, a nontraditional student, echoed Lance’s desire to hear more about what it is like to experience sexual assault. Both seemed to think that hearing from victims would be particularly impactful and had the potential to enlighten listeners who had a hard time sympathizing with victims. Speedo explained, “If they actually had, um, victims of it talk to them and say this is what happened to me. Um…or even say hey this is what happened to me, this is what you’ve gotta look out for… you know. Don’t let it happen to you. That kind of thing.” One of the reasons that male participants may have desired to hear personal stories from victims of sexual assault could be that most mediated portrayals of rape and sexual violence victims are female. Men can have a hard time identifying with female victims (Foubert, 2011). Illustrations featuring male victims can help men understand what it might be like to experience sexual assault and provide a strong impression on male participants.
Arvada, a graduate student, spoke broadly about the impact of storytelling, expressing that “I think it was important that it was like, told through a story, and it had the different parts or different people’s information being thrown at you, it was just kinda like, trying to put yourself in the story and how to react to other people.” Through the use of narrative, prevention programs can give students and employees the opportunity to put themselves into a story and imagine what their outcomes might be without actually compromising their safety.

Within the theme of impactful training design, participants gave feedback on the design and user-friendliness of the training. They also described elements of the training that were meaningful to them, including diverse representation and the use of narrative. Such elements may help to facilitate clearer messages, and they can also create interest and motivation in training participants.

In this section, I have unpacked the results and overarching themes, using quotations from the interviews I conducted. I uncovered five themes, including partying, understanding consent, awareness, tensions between expectations and experiences, and impactful training design. Participants expressed important messages they took from the online training and also identified some of their shared experiences related to going through the training. In the following section, I will answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What memorable messages do students recall from Ball State’s sexual assault prevention training?

RQ2: What are the shared themes of students’ memorable messages?

Then, I will demonstrate the theoretical and practical implications of the results of my interviews. Finally, I will share the limitations of my research and provide suggestions for future scholars to expand upon this work.
Discussion

The results of this study presented five major themes related to the experience of completing Think About It, an online risk reduction training offered to first year students. After reviewing all of the main themes and their subthemes in the last chapter, I will move on to a discussion of these results and their implications for theory and practice. First, I will answer the two guiding research questions based on my results and their connections to the existing literature. Then, I will share the theoretical and practical implications of these findings. Finally, I will share the limitations of the current study and provide suggestions for future researchers.

RQ1: What memorable messages do students recall from Ball State’s sexual assault prevention training?

After examining the five themes that emerged from the data, I found three memorable messages shared by my participants. Memorable messages are messages which may be remembered for extremely long periods of time and which allow organizational members to understand ongoing events (Knapp, et al., 1981; Stohl, 1986). Answers to this research question were found in the first theme, partying, the second theme, understanding consent, and the third theme, awareness. The three memorable messages identified by participants were a) partying is essential to the college experience, b) sexuality is important to talk about, and c) being aware of other students will increase campus safety.

**Partying is essential to the college experience.** The first memorable message, that partying is an essential part of the college experience, was identified by each participant. Most of the participants claimed not to have much personal experience with the partying culture, but also identified that it was a big part of the college experience, particularly at Ball State. According to the participants, Think About It portrayed campus partying as a requisite part of the college
experience. It is worth noting that while Lance proclaimed drinking habits as “basic knowledge” for everyone coming to college, he did not make the same judgment regarding knowledge about sexual assault. Participants consistently described information about drinking as more frequently referenced, more practical, and more relevant to their lives than they did the information about sexual assault.

The idea that partying is an essential part of the college experience could be harmful for a number of reasons. In their study on determinants of underage drinking, researchers found that perceived injunctive norms are strongly related to underage drinking (Paek & Hove, 2012). If students going through *Think About It* perceive that partying is an essential part of the college experience because of the messages it shared, they may be more likely to believe that it is necessary to engage in that culture and to assume that their peers are doing so as well. Students who follow such injunctive norms might engage in more risk-taking behaviors such as drinking, thus compromising their own safety, which is certainly a cause for concern. Additionally, when students are under the influence of alcohol, their judgment is impaired and the risk for unwanted sexual experiences can increase (Banyard et al., 2005). Although *Think About It* provided students with strategies for staying safe and taking care of their friends in alcohol-fueled environments, it also may have served to create a perception that partying and binge drinking is requisite for all students. Depictions of drinking as a necessary part of the college experience may reify harmful social norms that encourage underage drinking (Neighbors et al., 2008).

On the other hand, the training provided students with useful information about how to conduct themselves in situations where drugs and alcohol are present. Frequent, heavy episodic drinking is tied to an increased risk of sexual assault for female college students (Mohler-Kuo et al., 2004). Moreover, perpetrators of sexual assault use alcohol to deliberately render their
victims more vulnerable to attack (Lisak & Miller, 2002). Giving students practical advice for how to use drugs and alcohol safely could provide them with more control over their own conduct in party environments.

**Sexuality is important (but uncomfortable) to talk about.** The second memorable message, that sexuality is important (but uncomfortable) to talk about, was demonstrated when participants expressed the impact that holding conversations about sexuality—or not holding conversations about sexuality—can have on college students. Participants identified that sexuality can be uncomfortable or awkward to talk about, but overall expressed that they valued such conversations and identified that conversations about sexuality, especially with important figures in their lives, can be very impactful. Participants who grew up in an environment where it was acceptable to talk about sexuality were appreciative, and participants who shared that their families discouraged conversations about sex expressed a desire for more open conversations.

Despite indicating the importance of talking about sexuality and sexual assault, participants indicated a reluctance to do so. People have various reasons for avoiding conversations about sexuality (Anderson, Kunkel, & Dennis, 2011). Sex-negativity, the belief that sex is inherently bad, is one of the deepest-rooted convictions of Western culture (Glickman, 2000). In the context of a romantic relationship, sometimes individuals conceal their sexual histories for fear of perceived threats to their relationships (Anderson et al., 2011). Individuals may fear comparison to past lovers or believe that talking about past sexual experiences could make their partner feel less special and loved (Anderson et al., 2011). Parents sometimes avoid conversations about sexuality with their children for fear that talking about sex will incite adolescents to engage in sexual behaviors. However, researchers have found that family communication about sex is not associated with higher levels of sexual activity (Zamboni &
Silver, 2009). In fact, teaching adolescents about sexuality is likely to make them more receptive to prevention programs that aim at changing their attitudes, especially regarding sexual violence (Mallet & Herbe, 2011).

Sexual offenders tend to have a very difficult time empathizing with their victims (Farr, Brown, & Beckett, 2004). When young adults are not given information about sexuality, it can be difficult for them to develop empathy for the typical feelings and emotions experienced by a sexual partner (Mallet & Herbe, 2011). Holding conversations about sexuality can provide young people with useful information for understanding the physical and emotional consequences of sexual activity. Having conversations about sexual assault can be especially important for adolescent males who may not be able to easily empathize with victims of sexual violence.

Sexual assault prevention programs with high success rates tend to be empathy based (Foubert, personal communication, March 9, 2015).

Higher education administrators should provide opportunities for discussion about sexuality and facilitate conversations about sexual consent based on the insights from the participants in this study. Prior research has demonstrated the impact that communicating about sexuality can have on individuals’ ability to relate to victims of sexual assault (Farr et al., 2004; Mallet & Herbe, 2011). By talking more openly about sexuality, we can provide young people with opportunities to gain sexual knowledge and promote clearer understandings of what legal sexual consent looks like. Online training programs like Think About It may bring issues like sexual assault to the attention of individual students, but researchers have also found that online training is less effective than face-to-face communication when it comes to spurring individuals to action (Baek et al., 2012). Programs like Think About It leave participants desiring more
opportunities for face-to-face conversations, which have a stronger ability to shape organizational culture.

**Being aware of other students will increase safety.** The third memorable message, that raised awareness can help increase safety on campus, places the responsibility for sexual assault prevention on the entire campus community, shifting blame away from victims (McMahon & Banyard, 2012). Participants identified information about bystander intervention as particularly memorable and impactful. Bystander awareness and intervention can be useful tools in preventing sexual assault on college campuses, but should be used in conjunction with other approaches that address rape myths to increase efficacy (Foubert, 2011). I will describe the benefits and disadvantages of bystander intervention approaches to preventing campus rape.

Prevention efforts that adopt a community-centered approach are among the most successful programs for a variety of student groups, including athletes and Greek students (Bannon et al., 2013). In selecting a program that emphasizes bystander intervention, Ball State chose a strong method. Bystander intervention training has been demonstrated to successfully influence student behavior (McMahon & Banyard, 2012). Bystander intervention is comprised of five separate steps: first, bystanders must notice the event; then identify whether intervention is needed; next, they must take responsibility for acting; then decide how to help, and finally, act to intervene (Latane & Darley, 1970). Situational barriers at any of the steps of bystander intervention may halt the process (Burn, 2009). In the case of sexual assault prevention, such barriers can include misunderstanding of what consent really looks like, social pressure to support a friend’s sexual conquest, or adherence to victim-blaming rape myths (White & Malkowski, 2014). Researchers have identified that it may be difficult for students to decide if
they should intervene, especially if it is unclear whether an individual in an at-risk situation desires their help (White & Malkowski, 2014).

Bystander intervention programs are admirable for their influence on student behavior, but some remaining issues exist regarding *Think About It*’s emphasis on bystander responsibility. Bystander intervention programs have not been shown to significantly influence reporting behaviors on college campuses (Bannon et al., 2013). Rape is still the least reported of all violent crimes (Rand, 2009). The presence of a bystander can significantly reduce the likelihood of a completed rape (Clay-Warner, 2002), but when sexual assault does take place, students are still reluctant to disclose their experiences to authorities. Bystander intervention can be an impactful method for reducing the likelihood of sexual assault on campus, but once a sexual assault has taken place, the impact of bystander intervention education does not impact reporting behaviors among students. To truly change campus cultural norms regarding rape tolerance, students should receive training with carefully crafted messages regarding how to support victims of sexual assault, both at the time of the trauma and afterwards, including detailed information on how to report a sexual assault. University administrators who intend to help students who have already survived an assault should seek to provide programming capable of increasing reporting behaviors on campus, such as presentations during orientation, print materials distributed frequently through campus, and presentations with university police to demonstrate the steps for reporting a sexual assault.

Bystander intervention programming can influence students enough to ensure that they are thinking about keeping each other safe, but “safety” is an abstract concept (White & Malkowski, 2014). The abstraction of “safety” can lead students to be unsure of when it is appropriate to intervene in a given situation. Students who are concerned with the general
concept of “safety” may not be equipped to enact specific strategies for keeping their friends out of harm’s way in risky situations, like when others are engaging in substance abuse or sexual assault. Without enough information or practical suggestions for how to increase safety, students may be hesitant to approach the task of intervention (White & Malkowski, 2014). Sexual assault prevention training could be made more effective by providing participants with more practical tools and reinforcement for how to intervene in risky situations and how to support survivors of sexual assault.

Sydney’s concern over the type of sexual assault depicted in the training (in which a girl got drunk and went home with a guy she knew) speaks to the uncertainty that some students might experience when presented with a “grey area” in real life. Even when students are presented with instruction for how to intervene in risky situations, there are still personal factors that can inhibit an individual’s likelihood to do so (Hust et al., 2013). One of the most telling factors is the extent to which an individual accepts rape myths (Hust et al., 2013). Without breaking down rape myths alongside bystander intervention information, students may be less likely to empathize with victims of sexual assault (Hust et al., 2013). None of the participants identified messages from the training related to rape myths as being particularly memorable. In fact, some of the participants’ comments provided support to rape myths, like the idea that sexual assault is something that can be controlled and prevented by victims and bystanders. This is especially problematic given that rape myths are culturally ingrained in students long before they even arrive on campus (Aosved & Long, 2006; Burt, 1980; Peterson & Muelenhard, 2004). Acceptance of rape myths can prevent students from being willing to step in to prevent a sexual assault. Receiving training on how to intercede to protect a fellow student from a compromising situation can only go so far without also dispelling the rape myths that perpetuate victim
blaming. Based on feedback from the participants in this study, any information regarding rape myths was not particularly memorable for students who went through *Think About It*, indicating that the degree to which these students accept rape myths may not have been impacted by the training, thus reifying campus rape culture.

The results of this study support existing literature on the ability of bystander intervention training to increase awareness of other students and, in turn, increase campus safety. However, bystander intervention programs do little if anything to address the limited reporting of sexual assaults on college campuses. Given the prolific nature of (attempted) sexual assaults on college campuses, it is important for students to be aware of how to help one another not only *before* a sexual assault takes place, but also *after*. Training should demonstrate how to support victims of sexual assault and give clear instructions for how to report a sexual assault. These messages should not be limited to an online training, but consistently and frequently shared with students. Bystander intervention training might be more effective in a face-to-face setting than in an online module (Foubert, personal communication, March 9, 2015) because such a setting would give participants ample opportunity to ask questions and gain clarity on how to intervene in unclear situations.

Students indicated that these three memorable messages influenced their decision-making and behavior during the initiation phase of their socialization into Ball State University. The message that *partying is essential to the college experience* may serve to reify harmful social norms related to substance abuse, but may also provide students with useful knowledge about safe partying practices. The message that *sexuality is important to talk about* is supported by the literature (Anderson et al., 2011; Mallet & Herbe, 2011; Zamboni & Silver, 2009) and demonstrates how impactful it can for students to have open conversations with their peers about
sexual behavior (if these conversations happen). The message *being aware of other students will increase safety* demonstrated some of the strengths and limitations of bystander intervention prevention programming. Organizational leaders interested in changing their culture (for instance, university administrators who want to decrease campus sexual assault) can use memorable messages during the socialization process to influence behaviors and attitudes (Orbe et al., 2014; Wang, 2012). Later, I will turn to organizational suggestions to unpack these ideas further.

**RQ2: What are the shared themes of students’ memorable messages?**

After analyzing the themes that emerged from participant interviews, I identified the shared overarching ideas. Two shared themes emerged from this analysis: *tensions* and *impactful training design*. I will explain each of these themes and their corresponding subthemes in more detail below.

**Tensions.** At multiple points, participants identified competing discourses related to their experience with *Think About It*. They identified this training as important for other participants, but not for themselves. Participants also expressed tension between the expectations imparted from *Think About It* compared to the reality of their experiences at Ball State University. Some of the tensions experienced by participants revealed struggles to form new identities while simultaneously maintaining their individuality. When entering new organizations, individuals are encouraged to develop self-images and work orientations that are congruent with organizational objectives (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Institutions of higher education are also concerned with socializing their students (Weidman, 2006) and strive to create links between individual and organizational dimensions of student identities. However, problems can arise when organizational identification creates tensions between the self and central messages. The tensions
felt by participants who shared their experience with *Think About It* can be understood through communication theory of identity (CTI) (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Individual identities are comprised of four layers—personal, enacted, relational, and communal—which interpenetrate each other (Hecht & Choi, 2012; Jung & Hecht, 2004). Conflicts in these layers of identity result in identity gaps, which can cause cognitive dissonance for individuals. Participants in this study described identity gaps when describing the tensions between their expectations and experiences.

In the tension *important vs. uncomfortable*, we can see a gap between the participants’ personal and relational identities. Navigating conversations about sexuality can be difficult for anyone (Anderson et al., 2011), and participants identified that despite their acknowledgement of the importance of talking about sexuality on an individual level, they still have difficulty discussing it with other people in a relational context. The need to maintain relationships with their peers and family members can prevent individuals from breaching such taboo topics as sexual assault and sexuality in general. Universities can help to bridge this gap by offering face-saving opportunities for students to engage in conversations about sexuality without having to initiate the discussion themselves. For instance, universities could invite expert speakers to host a panel on sexuality and sexual assault. Students desirous of the opportunity to learn more about such topics could attend and later share their impressions of the event with friends or family members.

When discussing the tension of *control vs. powerlessness*, participants identified a gap that existed between their personal and enacted identities. In this tension, participants described a struggle between enacting social behaviors that allow them to feel agentic and in control of their fate (like bystander intervention and keeping track of their drinks), while feeling personally powerless and at-risk for being sexually assaulted. Although individuals may enact social
behaviors like bystander intervention, they also admitted to feeling helpless and out of control when it comes to being able to prevent sexual assault. University administrators can address this identity gap by providing students with consistent programming focused preventing rape tolerant behaviors. These programs should educate students on how to identify and combat rape myths. If educational efforts are focused on stopping aggressors from engaging in predatory behaviors, there will be less pressure on victims for not preventing their own assault—and subsequently, less of a tendency for victims to feel responsible for not controlling their assailant.

In the tension redundant vs. enlightening, participants expressed a gap that existed between their personal and communal identities. Participants who viewed themselves as experts with no need for additional training on issues of sexuality and substance use had a difficult time identifying with the community of students as learners. By maintaining their personal identity as experienced and world-wise, these students rejected the idea that they still need to learn about risky behaviors including sexual assault, despite the fact that as a community, college-aged students are at a high risk for sexual assault (Aosved & Long, 2006; Banyard et al., 2009). Universities can frame sexual assault prevention education as a tool for protecting ones’ friends, which allows individuals who gain new information to save face, enabling them to still view themselves as experts, but also gain the ability to better protect their peers in risky situations.

In the tension partying as essential vs. partying as familiar, we can see participants struggle with another identity gap between their personal and communal identities. *Think About It* provided these students with the narrative that partying is a requisite part of the college experience and should be an expected behavior for all individuals who identify as members of the college community. Participants who expressed their failure to personally identify with this narrative revealed how difficult it can be for an individual to feel a sense of belonging in their
new environment if they fail to identify with a widely shared cultural narrative. Students who do not partake in drinking may be led to question whether they really belong at Ball State University if they fail to identify with the narrative of *partying as essential*. Administrators should be concerned with this not only because such a failure to culturally identify could lead to increased student attrition, but also because students may tune out training information that feels irrelevant to them.

As described in Chapter Two, Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) can be useful for designing messages to spark community-level change. Individuals interested in community-level change can use CTI to develop messages to promote healthy behaviors. However, it can be difficult to develop such messages for an audience as wide as a university because messages aimed at the communal level are most useful for close-knit groups or communities with clear ingroup/outgroup distinctions (Hecht & Choi, 2012). Using CTI to create cognitive dissonance can be a means for administrators and organizational leaders to promote behavior change during organizational socialization (Hecht & Choi, 2012), but messages should be crafted carefully to avoid reifying harmful social norms. For example, individuals who personally do not identify as drinkers may feel cognitive dissonance when they attempt to identify as members of the college community, because they recognize that part of the communal college student identity includes the social behavior of engaging in binge drinking. Such dissonance could prompt an individual to start engaging in unhealthy behaviors in order to fit into his/her social environment. Communal efforts to increase healthy behaviors often target individuals, relationships, and enactments, treating individuals as parts of a whole, collective community (Hecht & Choi, 2012). Practitioners interested in using this approach should analyze identity formation of their target
audience at all four levels, using a variety of individual appeals to enact a wider community change.

**Impactful training design.** In interviewing the participants, their shared experiences with various impactful design elements of the training emerged. These aspects of the training may not have imparted direct memorable messages, but they provided participants with motivation to complete the training and helped them to relate more strongly with the information being presented to them on the screen. These elements included *convenient compliance*, *diversity*, and *storytelling*. I will explain how each of these elements link to the existing literature and explain the impact of my findings.

**Convenient compliance.** Participants shared that certain design aspects of the training, especially the gaming portions, helped them to comply with the university’s demand to complete the program. A game, which can be understood in the context of online training as a “constructed situation in which players make efforts to win within defined rules” (Russell & Shepherd, 2010, p. 994) can be used to teach academic and social skills. Games are particularly helpful for teaching students about how to behave in risky situations because they allow the students to envision what being in a risky situation might feel like without actually having to compromise their safety (Russell & Shepherd, 2010). One of the most effective ways to impart learning about social situations is to use virtual role-play, particularly if students are involved in creating a character description (Russell & Shepherd, 2010). Although *Think About It* did not provide students with the opportunity to create their own character, they were able to follow four main characters through their first year of college, allowing them to virtually navigate various social situations without compromising their physical safety.
Participants in this study praised this portion of the program’s design, but it is possible that none of them play video games regularly in their free time, and may be more easily impressed by the game elements of *Think About It*. Researchers have found a slight but significant negative correlation between students who play online games privately and their attitudes toward educational gaming systems (Mayer, Warmelink, & Bekebrede, 2013). Frequent gamers may be more critical of online learning games than students who do not frequently spend their private time playing games. While the majority of students tend to have positive or neutral feelings towards online learning games, there are certain students who dislike the use of online gaming (Mayer, et al., 2013) and for whom it might be important to consider creating alternative learning opportunities.

**Diversity.** Participants who talked about the impact of diversity in *Think About It* as a positive element were happy to see different types of students represented in the various vignettes and stories. The inclusion of diverse characters in *Think About It* may have helped participants with varying backgrounds to identify more strongly with the culture of Ball State University. Participants described the representation of diverse students in the training as being a positive aspect that helped them relate to the material.

Social identity theory (SIT) can explain the importance of being able to view oneself as belonging (Trepte, 2006). SIT is a multifaceted theory of how people’s self-conceptions as members of social groups can influence their behavior and group processes (Hughes et al., 2015). Lance, Speedo, and Sydney were especially enthusiastic about the diversity of characters in *Think About It*, which may be noteworthy because those participants identified as gay or bisexual. Other participants regarded the diversity as a positive element but spent less time discussing their appreciation for the inclusion of LGBT characters and relationships in *Think*
About It. A person’s social identity is comprised of his or her awareness of belonging to a social group and the emotional significance of belonging (Hughes et al., 2015). Including LGBT characters in one of the first stages of socialization at Ball State University could have indicated to LGBT individuals that they were entering a welcoming and accepting environment where they would be able to find belonging.

Emphasizing demographic diversity can be an important step in making individuals from varying backgrounds feel welcome and included on campus, but it is also important for administrators and training designers to remember the importance of experiential diversity. Feedback from graduate students indicated that even though characters with different racial, gender, and sexual identities were displayed in the training, without placing those characters into scenarios which are realistic and relatable to participants, they may not find the messages contained within the training to be applicable. It is important to consider all the different scenarios and academic stages in which students might find themselves at risk for sexual assault when developing training materials.

Storytelling. Participants routinely identified the storytelling and narrative elements of the training as being particularly memorable and important to their experience with Think About It. Narratives have the ability to provide social presence, which is important because it aids in giving students the motivation to complete training (Richardson & Swan, 2003). A lack of face-to-face interactions can make it hard for students to learn in an online format, but narrative elements can help increase satisfaction in computer-mediated learning systems (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Students assume that online learning formats are dry and impersonal, but this attitude can be combated by the use of storytelling in information design (Moldenhauer, 2003). When presenters and trainers use stories, their messages become more memorable, clear, and
compelling (Craig & Yewman, 2013). When training programs share examples, anecdotes, and analogies, audiences are more motivated to engage and ask questions (Craig & Yewman, 2013). Participants’ feedback on Think About It supported the idea that storytelling is a particularly memorable method for engaging participants and providing them with rich messages to guide their future behaviors.

Storytelling can also be a practical tool for organizational socialization (Mumby, 1987). Narratives help individuals to understand the unique qualities of the organizations with which they identify, and also allow them to see how well their lived experiences fit with the organization’s ideology (Mumby, 1987). Narratives can impose a specific sense of order on reality, privileging certain interests over others and serving as a symbol of organizational ideology (Mumby, 1987). For example, by sharing stories that focus on undergraduate experiences and party scenes, the creators of Think About It privilege the idea that sexual assault takes place when young, inexperienced individuals are under the influence. Such a position can help these individuals to become aware of the risk of sexual assault at parties, but may also serve to alienate students who do not identify with those scenarios, including victims whose sexual assaults did not follow a culturally accepted script (Custers & Van den Bulck, 2013; Masters, 2010).

Gendered differences came up in relation to participants’ desire to hear stories from victims of sexual assault. Men tended to want to hear directly from victims, while women were more concerned with protecting victims from being placed in an uncomfortable situation. This may speak to the inability of many men to empathize with victims of sexual assault (Foubert, 2011). When viewing mediated portrayals of sexual assault, women are able to identify with female victims, while men have trouble understanding what it might be like to be on the
receiving end of a sexual assault (Foubert, 2011). Providing narratives addressing the experience of male-on-male rape can help males understand the emotions and experiences of individuals who are sexually assaulted. Storytelling is a strong method for gaining attention and increasing motivation in participants.

The shared themes that emerged from participant interviews, *tensions* and *impactful training design*, revealed how students struggle to maintain a sense of identity and demonstrated how important it is for students to be able to relate to training programs. I will next explain the theoretical implications of these findings.

**Theoretical Implications**

The results of this study have several theoretical implications that add to current understandings of memorable messages in student socialization. First, this study provides evidence that memorable messages can be delivered from online training. Researchers interested in memorable messages have traditionally examined the various messages that individuals recall from communication with important figures in their lives, including family members, coworkers, and friends (Dallimore, 2003; Kranstuber et al., 2012; Orbe, et al., 2014). Participants who went through *Think About It* identified three memorable messages that influenced their behavior and perceptions of college once they arrived on campus: *partying is essential, sexuality is important to talk about*, and *being aware of other students will increase safety*.

This evidence indicates that memorable messages can also be shared through computer-mediated communication. *Think About It’s* design aligned with media-richness theory (Lengel & Daft, 1989), using videos, games, and interactive software to deliver memorable messages. Media-richness theory explains that the more ambiguous or uncertain a message is, the need for richer media increases (Lengel & Daft, 1989). Rich and personal forms of communication are
generally more effective than leaner media. For instance, face-to-face communication is considered extremely rich because it provides individuals with the ability to read visual and vocal cues while offering opportunities for clarification and asking questions (Lengel & Daft, 1989). Other forms of communication, like telephone or email messages, may offer fewer opportunities for clarification and are therefore considered to be leaner media. Though not as rich as face-to-face communication, Think About It provided participants with opportunities to interact, to watch videos, and to take part in live social-norming polls. Individuals interested in innovative approaches to sexual assault prevention might consider using online formats with rich formats, but should take into consideration that computer mediated communication cannot compete with face-to-face interactions in terms of richness.

The findings of this study suggest that organizational socialization can occur in part through online training. Organizational socialization is the process by which individuals become indoctrinated, trained to fulfill their organizational role, and taught what is important to an organization (Schein, 1968; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Typically, researchers interested in organizational socialization have investigated stories, proverbs, norms, and values handed down from various organizational members, such as peers, supervisors, work groups, and managers (Bullis, 1993). Organizations take various efforts to “make fit” the autonomous individuals who might otherwise act against their societal structure through formal training and informal instruction (Bullis, 1993; Kramer, 2011). Participants identified that particular messages from the training impacted their behavior and perceptions later on during their first year at Ball State University. These findings are supported by prior research, which has found online training and electronic communication to be capable of fundamentally reshaping professional development in individuals (Barnett, 2002; Delfino & Persico, 2007). Since organizational socialization can
happen online, it is important for organizational leaders to provide consistent messages utilizing this powerful format for adapting cultural norms and facilitating socialization. Such messages can be shared on social media, including official university Facebook and Twitter accounts, which can serve to provide students with consistent messaging and easily accessible information regarding sexual assault prevention on campus. Those responsible for creating online training materials should use rich, interactive media tools.

This study’s findings also demonstrate the impact of attribution theory and self-serving bias. Attribution theory focuses on the inferences people make regarding the cause of their own and others’ behaviors (LaBelle & Martin, 2014). Participants demonstrated attribution theory in their explanations of why sexual assault takes place, expressing that individuals should exert control and preparedness to prevent sexual assault from taking place. For instance, in the tension of control vs. powerlessness, participants indicated that individuals should prevent sexual assault by not drinking or putting themselves into compromising situations. As a result of attribution theory, individuals are likely to give greater assignation of responsibility to rape victims when they have been drinking (Richardson & Campbell, 1982). Interestingly, individuals are likely to give less assignation of responsibility to rape perpetrators when they have been drinking, instead attributing the assault to uncontrollable situational factors (Richardson & Campbell, 1982). This speaks to a troubling but unsurprising cultural acceptance of rape myths (Burt, 1980). It is important for university administrators and other organizational leaders to understand attribution theory in order to craft messages that avoid reifying problematic situations. Leaders should use impactful training elements like narrative to help training participants empathize with victims of sexual assault to combat the impact of attribution theory.
Participants were not comfortable identifying themselves as being less knowledgeable than their peers, despite the fact that they did glean new information from the training. This can be explained by self-serving bias, which occurs when cognitive or perceptual processes are interrupted to maintain self-esteem (Miller & Ross, 1975). Participants, desiring to appear knowledgeable and informed, described themselves as not fitting in with other members of campus who needed this training. Self-serving bias allows individuals to maintain self-esteem and positive self-regard but can also perpetuate false attributions for knowledge (Miller & Ross, 1975), which can be problematic because a lack of accurate information or adequate education can have devastating effects, particularly when it comes to a public health problem like sexual assault. Demonstrating the influence of self-serving bias, participants differentiated themselves from others who are ignorant about sexual assault and safe drinking, asserting frequently that they themselves did not really need the training. Participants were likely to assume that others were more ignorant about sexual assault and safe drinking practices than they were, and to identify themselves as being in a privileged position of knowledge. When giving praise to the training program, participants often spoke of how it was beneficial for their peers, but not necessarily for themselves.

This method of othering can also be explained by the third person effect (Davison, 1983) which states that when people are exposed to mass media messages, they tend to see it as having a greater effect on others than on themselves. Prior research indicates that the third person effect is a robust phenomenon (Davison, 1996; Perloff, 2002; Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008). This effect can be seen in the participants’ insistence that the training was difficult to relate to and redundant for them, but beneficial for other students. Participants described the training as helpful for students with few real-life experiences in a college or partying environment. The reluctance of
participants to admit that they learned anything from *Think About It* can potentially be attributed to the undesirability of influence and a desire for self-enhancement (Shen, Palmer, Kollar, & Comer, 2012). Organizational leaders can combat the impact of the third person effect by offering face-to-face training programs, which provide information through interpersonal interactions rather than mass media messages. Now that I have described the theoretical contributions of this study, I will turn to the practical implications.

**Practical Implications**

In terms of practical implications, participants provided useful feedback for developers of future sexual assault prevention training. Participants gave positive and negative feedback regarding their experience with *Think About It*. First, they offered multiple points of praise for the current system, which future developers of online training programs can use to guide their program development process.

Of particular importance to participants was the design of the online training program. The design of an online training, including its usability and its aesthetic value, can have a large impact on how engaged students become with the material and how much they retain after completing the training (Cercone, 2008). Some helpful design aspects include a variety of graphics, images, and tables, practice feedback and self-tests, clear menu structure, frequent entry and exit points, and record keeping (Cercone, 2008). If administrators intend to continue using online training rather than face-to-face programming, they should seek to provide as much media richness as possible to make up for the loss in subtle social cues. Online programs with richer media like the animations and interactive games used in *Think About It*, can help reduce uncertainty and provide aid in negotiating ambiguous situations (Sun & Cheng, 2007). According to participants, *Think About It* provided a well-styled interface for the students who
took part in the training. Participants were consistent in their praise of the program’s use of interactive, well-designed games as a teaching device. Participants routinely mentioned the games as a memorable aspect of the training. Gaming is an effective means for engaging online learners and keeping motivation levels high (de Freitas & Griffiths, 2007). Levels of motivation among online learners are especially important. Researchers have found that as motivation increases, so do levels of learning expectations and satisfaction (Mayer et al., 2013). Additionally, students who anticipate that an online training will be fun also tend to have higher levels of learning expectations and satisfaction (Mayer, et al., 2013).

Another positive element of this training that organizational leaders should consider continuing in the future is the inclusion of diverse character narratives. Participants who identified as LGBT expressed that the inclusion of LGBT characters helped them feel included and know that they were welcome members of Ball State’s campus. Individuals who belong to specific social groups can benefit by seeing their groups represented in training programs like this (Hughes et al., 2015). Conversely, students who do not feel that they were represented in the training materials may have a difficult time relating with and paying attention to Think About It. For this reason, future training programs should seek to represent more diverse student experiences, including graduate and nontraditional students. During the 2013-14 academic year, graduate students accounted for nearly 20% of Ball State’s student population, and the university enrolled more than 675 international students (Ball State University, 2014). Sexual assault prevention training should provide scenarios that are relatable to these large student populations.

Another element of the training that participants identified as aiding their ability to comply with Title IX and Campus SaVE requirements was the convenience of online learning. Participants regarded the online setting of the training (as opposed to training sessions held on
campus) as a big benefit and appreciated convenience it afforded them. Participants liked being able to start and stop the training whenever they felt like it, and they thought it was important to be able to take the training at their own pace. This feedback is in line with one of the principles of adult learning, which maintains that adult learners are autonomous, self-reliant, and self-directed toward their goals (Cercone, 2008). It is worth mentioning, however, that not all adult learners do well with self-directed learning and that some structure from a facilitator could benefit these students (Cercone, 2008). Some of my participants, while generally in praise of the convenience of the online training, identified that they tend to prefer more interaction with instructors.

Students also identified several negative aspects of the training, and their feedback in the following areas will be important for administrators to be aware of when considering whether to use Think About It in the future. Returning to the theme of talking about sexual assault, participants frequently identified that Think About It left them desiring more opportunities for dialoguing about the various topics, particularly about sexual assault. Although Think About It may have introduced students to important safety information and exposed them to new concepts, it did not provide them with an opportunity to talk with their peers about what they went through. This is a disappointment considering that the bulk of socialization takes place through communication and social interaction (Dallimore, 2003). Memorable messages, when consistently shared, can help new students to make sense of their environments by giving them structure and guiding appropriate behavior (Dallimore, 2003). Sydney, a graduate student, remarked that she and her roommate motivated one another by completing the training together, competing against one another in the games and comparing their experiences. Future developers of sexual assault prevention training should consider the benefits of providing students
opportunities to engage in the material alongside their peers.

Memorable messages that students receive from important figures in their lives (i.e. family members, friends, academic personnel, etc.) tend to have the longest lasting impact (Cauce, et al., 1992; Kranstuber et al., 2012). Students can certainly gain important information from online learning modules, but the participants I interviewed indicated that the training would have been more impactful if it had come in the form of a class or conversation with an instructor. Arvada, a graduate student, spoke on this issue:

I think you lose a part of the relationship between like, who’s teaching the material and then the students… it’s—because, like, that relationship and what’s going on in the classroom could be very impactful. You can talk to a professor, you know, when they need to expand on things or something to move on.

The participants I spoke with also identified that in general, the campus conversation surrounding sexual assault prevention started and stopped with Think About It. This goes against the suggestion that memorable messaging should be consistent throughout the course of a student’s career (Nazione et al., 2011). Limiting the discussion about sexual assault to an online training prevents students from being able to confront rape myths and tease out new social norms. Participants shared the importance of talking about sexuality as being one of the central memorable messages from the training, but this training did not give them the opportunity to create discursive formations about the sexual climate on campus. Students were left desiring opportunities to talk about sexual assault. Administrators interested in sparking lasting social change should focus on dialogic pedagogy (Friere, 1993), which was missing from Think About It. A training approach with greater focus on dialogic exchange would provide incoming students with opportunities to ask questions and gain clarity, and would give trainers and administrators a
greater opportunity to connect with students.

One of the most troubling pieces of feedback I received from participants was that the location of the information about sexual assault within the training program made it more difficult to remember than any of the other sections. According to the participants, the module on sexual assault and unhealthy relationships was towards the end of the training, following the information on alcohol and drugs. By the time students reached this module, most of them were fatigued and unable to pay as much attention to what they were clicking through. It is important to note that when it comes to creating compelling presentations and training programs, the most poignant content should be delivered at the beginning, when participants are most actively engaged (Craig & Yewman, 2013). By placing the sexual assault portion towards the end of the training, developers almost guaranteed that participants would retain fewer memorable messages about sexual assault prevention than about any of the other topics presented.

As noted in the previous chapter, participants are less likely to hold long term memories of information presented towards the end of the training due the cognitive bias of the primacy effect, which explains that individuals are more likely to retain information presented early on (Murdock, 1962). Developers might argue that the sexual assault information was presented towards the end of the training instead of in the middle to achieve the recency effect, another cognitive bias which explains that people are able to keep recently presented information in their working memory better than information presented in the middle of a series (Murdock, 1962). However, the recency effect is more useful for short-term recall and less useful in promoting long-term memory than the primacy effect (Murdock, 1962). If Think About It was designed with the intent to change social norms regarding sexual assault, placing it towards the end of the training instead of at the beginning seems to be a poor design choice.
The serial position of sexual assault information towards the end of the training is especially problematic considering the reasoning behind Ball State’s adoption of *Think About It*, which was to meet the federal mandate for all universities to provide comprehensive sexual assault prevention training, as required by the Campus SaVE Act. Future developers should keep these principles in mind when designing training about sexual assault.

It is important to note, finally, that despite the various benefits of online training (i.e. affordability, instantaneous access, and convenience) face-to-face training still holds advantages over digital learning platforms (Bejerano, 2008). Universities can use online learning to maintain compliance with federally mandated sexual assault prevention training, though it may not be the most impactful or effective method (Banna, 2014). A report created by the American Collegiate Practitioner’s Association (ACPA) Sexual Violence Task Force called for postsecondary institutions to “move beyond reactionary, compliance-focused mandates to innovative and inclusive initiatives to prevent sexual violence” (Presidential Task Force on Sexual Violence Prevention in Higher Education, 2014, p. 3). Instead, we should focus on creating active, dialogic sexual assault prevention programming and offer consistent opportunities for students to learn about consent throughout their academic careers. Such prevention efforts should include targeted memorable messages that address students’ interpenetrating layers of identity.

**Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study. One of the biggest limitations was that in my initial design, I planned to use focus groups as my primary means of gathering data. Following advice from the literature on focus groups (Morgan, 1988; Tracy, 2013) I over-recruited by at least 20% for each of my focus groups, inviting between seven and twelve participants to meet a goal of four to five participants per group. I sent online calendar invitations to students who
volunteered to participate in a focus group, and then sent email reminders, text messages and phone calls to reach out to the students who confirmed their availability to participate in my focus groups. Each student was sent an online calendar invitation to participate at least two weeks prior to the date of the focus group to provide ample time for him or her to plan to attend. Despite these efforts, focus group attendance was nearly nonexistent, a setback I had not anticipated. At my first two focus groups, I had zero attendees, and at my last focus group, I had only two attendees. There could be various reasons for the low focus group turnouts, including a lack of incentive and the sensitive nature of sexual assault as a topic of conversation. Another potential reason for low focus group turnout may be an increase the diffusion of responsibility among participants (Morgan, 1988). When participants know that they will be meeting with a group of peers, they may assume that their own absence will be less noticeable than in an individual interview, where it is obvious that their absence would be felt. Diffusion of responsibility occurs in group settings because it is easy for participants to conclude other members of the group will take care of whatever needs to be done, and that their participation is not vital (Morgan, Krueger, & King, 1998). To deal with this major setback, I focused on collecting data from individual interviews in addition to the dyadic interview I was able to conduct with Flower and Sara.

There were a few notable limitations related to my sample. First, all but one of the participants identified as White or Caucasian. This is fairly representative of the population at Ball State University, but my analysis would have benefited from a more diversified sample. Participants with wider variety in life experiences may have had different reactions to the training. Including more diverse participants in the sample may have provided additional insights and useful feedback. In the sample, undergraduate students were underrepresented. I interviewed
an equal amount of undergraduate and graduate students when, in reality, there are significantly more undergraduate students on campus. Additionally, there was a self-selection bias at play regarding the type of students who volunteered to be interviewed about their experience with sexual assault prevention training. The students I interviewed all seemed to believe that sexual assault was an important issue to address on campus, but it is likely that students who were unwilling to volunteer might hold differing views on the issue.

None of my participants were affiliated with an athletic team, and while one of my participants shared an interest in eventually joining a fraternity, none of my participants were currently involved in Greek life. Because the literature suggests that students involved in athletics and Greek life have different experiences with alcohol and sexual assault than nonaffiliated students, my examination of Think About It could have benefitted from interviewing students involved in those organizations. Future researchers should consider incentivizing participation, particularly for members of Greek life and athletics, whose experience of the training may provide greater insight for how to better reach this segment of the campus population.

**Future Research**

The findings and limitations of this study suggest several areas that should be of interest to future researchers. First, researchers should look into the ability of computer-mediated communication to provide individuals with memorable messages. A good amount of support exists for the influence of verbal communication exchanges (Cauce et al., 1992; Kranstuber et al., 2012; Orbe et al., 2014), but there is less existing literature regarding memorable messages from online sources. Because computer mediated training may be less likely to incite collaborative group behavior changes than face-to-face interactions (Baek et al., 2012), future
practitioners should craft messages using CTI as a framework to influence the communal identity of new students, thus inciting university-wide shifts in behavior, then work to assess the impact of these messages in comparison to the existing training program. If universities intend to use online modules to impart important messages to incoming students, it is worth investigating how differently online messages influence behavior. Such research could also serve to benefit health practitioners, who could use online training to share memorable messages with patients.

One of the reasons I set out to use focus groups as a means of data collection was to observe the interaction that takes place among students when they talk about sexual assault. Future researchers interested in observing discursive interactions should consider using strong incentives, like gift cards, technological devices, or cash, to motivate participants to attend focus groups. Additionally, future researchers should consider using a snowball sampling method to reach groups of friends who may be more motivated to attend a focus group together than to attend a group with strangers. Researchers utilizing focus groups should still provide an opportunity for participants to take part in an individual interview at a later time to ensure that they have an opportunity to share any information deemed too sensitive for open discussion with the group. Providing an opportunity for one-on-one interviews can give participants who may have felt silenced by the group setting a chance to disclose details about their experience in confidentiality (Morgan, 1988).

Another important area for future researchers to explore is the attitudes towards sexual assault prevention training held by students who are members of fraternities, sororities, and athletic teams. According to the existing literature, these students are at a higher risk for sexual assault. I did not have the opportunity to interview any students involved in these organizations,
and their opinion of campus prevention programming might reveal further strengths and weaknesses that will be important for future developers of sexual assault prevention training.

Conclusion

This study examined the memorable messages that students took from *Think About It*, an online risk reduction training program provided to all incoming Ball State students. After conducting interviews with eight participants, five major themes emerged: *partying, understanding consent, awareness, tensions between expectations and experiences,* and *impactful training design.* Using the information gathered from these interviews, I answered two research questions and shared the theoretical and practical implications of this research. This study provides insight into how students make use of risk reduction training in their daily lives and also offers some areas in which universities and other organizations might look to improve their sexual assault prevention programming.
Reference List


Bejerano, A. R. (2008). The genesis and evolution of online degree programs: Who are they for and what have we lost along the way?. Communication Education, 57, 408-414.


Dick, K., Dir. (2006). *This film is not yet rated*, n.p.: Independent Film Channel.


aggression and violence: A systematic review. *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport, 17, 2-7.*


SUBJECT: Seeking first year Ball State students for participation in study

Hello, my name is Faith Kellermeyer and I am a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies. I am currently working on a Master's thesis, that examines the memorable messages students recall from Ball State’s online “Think About It” risk reduction training. If you are interested in participating in this study, you must have engaged in the online “Think About It” training and be at least 18 years old.

To assist me with this, I ask that you please complete the following short screening questionnaire. It should take no longer than five minutes to complete. You can access the survey at: https://bsu.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_8wfaqSKz6YFSvTn.

After the survey, if you are an eligible participant, you will be invited to participate in a focus group discussion for approximately 90 minutes. Light snacks and beverages will be provided. Following the focus group, you will also have the option to participate in a one-on-one interview with me.
Your participation is optional and voluntary. Any information you provide will be kept in confidentiality. If you have any questions or concerns about participating in the study, my contact information is provided below.
Thank you.

Faith Kellermeyer
Principal Investigator
Department of Communication Studies
Ball State University
(765) 620-8272
frkellermeye@bsu.edu
Appendix B
Consent Form

Project Title: Memorable Messages in Campus Risk Reduction Training

Researcher(s) Faith Kellermeyer is a second year M.A. graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies at Ball State University. Dr. Katherine Denker is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Ball State University.

Purpose: I will be conducting a research study using focus group interviews and follow-up individual interviews to explore what memorable messages students can recall from the online “Think About It” sexual assault risk reduction training required for all new Ball State students.

Rationale: The purpose of this study is to examine socialization into college in relation to sexual assault risk reduction training, and to inspect the memorable messages that new students take away from the training.

Time: The study should take between 90 minutes and 3 hours, depending on how much participants would like to share during the focus groups and if you agree to take part in an individual interview following the focus group.

Procedures: If you choose to participate, you will complete one focus group interview with the researcher and her research assistant(s). During this time, you will discuss your experiences completing the “Think About It” sexual assault risk reduction training. After the focus group, you will be provided with an opportunity to participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. After all interviews have been completed, the researcher may contact you, and you may choose to read and respond to the results of this study.

Risk: There is minimal risk involved with the study, as you might feel uncomfortable discussing issues of sexual assault on college campuses. You may choose not to respond to any questions you are uncomfortable with, and you are free to exit the study at any time.

Benefits: The results of this study may provide researchers and practitioners with insight into useful methods of training pertaining to sexual assault risk reduction on college campuses.

Confidential: Your identity will not be revealed in transcripts, written documents, or verbal presentations of the data. All transcriptionists will sign an agreement to keep the data confidential. The following steps will be taken to protect your identity and confidentiality:

1. Consent forms will be kept separate from the data.
2. You will choose your own pseudonym during any focus group or interview.
3. Personal identifying information will be eliminated from the transcripts and any reporting of the data.
4. You can refuse to answer any questions asked.
5. Digital files will be kept on a password-protected computer and/or in a locked cabinet.

Contact: If you have questions about the study or related inquiries, feel free to contact the primary investigator, Faith Kellermeyer at (765) 620-8272. You may also email her at frkellermeye@bsu.edu. Dr. Katherine Denker is also available at (765)
Questions: If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact:
Office of Research Integrity
Ball State University
Muncie, IN 47306
(765) 285-5052
irb@bsu.edu
Voluntary: Your participation is voluntary. You may quit at any time, and you may refuse to answer any questions.

Thank you for your interest and consideration,
Faith Kellermeyer

Signing this consent indicates you understand and agree to the conditions mentioned above:

_________________________________  _________________
Signature                        Date

For more information, please contact:
  Faith Kellermeyer
  Principal Investigator
  Department of Communication Studies
  Ball State University
  (765) 620-8272
  frkellermeye@bsu.edu
Appendix C
Screening Questionnaire

1. Please identify your gender:

2. What is your age?

3. What is your sexual orientation?

4. How many years have you been a college student at Ball State University?

5. What is your class standing? (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, Graduate)

6. Did you complete 50% or more of the online “Think About It” risk reduction training? (y/n)

7. Are you interested in taking part in a focus group? (y/n)

8. What times are you typically available during a given week?

9. Name:

10. Email Address:
## Appendix D

### Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Class Level</th>
<th>Transfer Student</th>
<th>Maternal Education Level</th>
<th>Paternal Education Level</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lance</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speedo</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>Latino/Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Doctoral/Professional</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arvada</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Seminary</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flower</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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4 Participant names have been replaced with self-selected pseudonyms to protect their identities.
5 Participants self-identified their sexual orientation.
6 Participants self-identified their race/ethnicity.
Appendix E
Co-Moderator Confidentiality Agreement
This research is being conducted by Faith Kellermeyer, a masters student at Ball State University. The purpose of this research is to study university socialization in relation to sexual assault risk reduction training, and to inspect the memorable messages that new students take away from the training. Participants have been assured that the interview data will remain confidential. All names and other identifying information will be removed from the transcripts after they are completed.
I, ________________, the co-moderator, agree to:
1. Keep all information confidential by not discussing or sharing research information in any form or format (e.g. audio recordings, transcripts, names of participants) with anyone other than the researcher.
2. Keep all research information secure while in my possession, including field notes, interview protocols, audio recordings, transcripts, disks, or any other research information.
3. Return all information in any form or format when the research tasks are completed, including field notes, interview protocols, audio recordings, transcripts, disks, or any other research information.
4. After consulting with the researcher, I will erase or destroy all research information I have remaining in any form or format regarding this project that is not returnable to the researcher. This includes information stored on a computer hard drive.

Name (printed)
______________________________________________________________
Signature
__________________________________________________________
Date
Appendix F
Demographic Questionnaire

1. Please identify your gender:
2. Please identify your race:
3. Please provide your age:
4. Please identify your sexual orientation:
5. Please provide your class level (i.e. freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, graduate student)
6. Were you a new transfer student this year? (y/n)
7. What is the highest level of education completed by your mother or maternal figure? (GED, high school diploma, bachelors degree, masters degree, doctoral or professional degree, n/a)
8. What is the highest level of education completed by your father or paternal figure: (GED, high school diploma, bachelors degree, masters degree, doctoral or professional degree, n/a)
9. What pseudonym would you like to use during this interview/focus group?
Appendix G
Focus Group Short Answer Questions

Short Answer Questions:
1. Starting on August 1, 2014, all new Ball State students were required to complete “Think About It” online training. When did you complete the training?
2. Approximately how long did it take you to complete?
3. What do you remember about the training? What were your overall impressions of the training?
4. How often have you thought about the training material since finishing the training?
5. What caused you to recall this information? (Or, if you have not thought about the material, why not?)
6. If you have discussed the training with fellow students, how would you summarize their impressions of the training?
Appendix H
Interview Protocol

Greeting

Purpose

- Opportunity to provide feedback on “Think About It” training and its influence on your socialization at Ball State

(For groups): In order for this to be a productive discussion it also needs to be a safe place for you to be able to say what you feel. Here are a few ground rules that can achieve this:

- Role of moderator: We, the moderators, are here to keep this discussion focused and guide conversation by asking questions. If the group gets off track, we will gently guide the conversation back on topic, but we are primarily here to listen to what you have to say. We will ask general questions to spur your conversation.

- Recording equipment: You’ll notice two tape recorders in the room. We will use these to record this session. That way, we can really listen to what you’re saying instead of focusing on writing everything down. However, we will still take notes so don’t be surprised if you see us writing while you speak. Your ideas might bring about insights we want to get written down. The tapes will be transcribed and the recordings will be kept confidential. Any researchers or transcriptionists who listen to the tapes have signed a confidentiality agreement, so anything you say on tape will be kept confidential and safe. Does that make sense?

- Confidentiality of comments/responses: I ask you all to agree with me that what is said in this room should stay in this room. Will you commit to this? (Get verbal agreement from all)
- Individual opinions (no right or wrong answer): It’s important to let us know if you see things differently from others. The goal of this focus group is not to get consensus, but to find out about a variety of opinions. It’s important not to be critical of anyone in this room. If you don’t agree with someone, that’s fine, but be sure to address the issue—not the person.
- Speak one at a time and as clearly as possible. The tape recorders can’t pick up more than one voice at a time, so please take turns talking. If you come up with something you’d really like to share while someone else is speaking, feel free to take notes on your paper so you remember it.
- Reminder: I ask each individual focus group member to refrain from disclosing information revealed in today’s meeting to other people who are not in today’s meeting. This helps protect other participants in the group.

Brief get-acquainted period: Let’s start with introducing yourselves to each other. Tell us your preferred pseudonym, what your major is, and why you came to Ball State University.

Probes:

1. What are your thoughts on the “Think About It” training?
2. What was the point of the training? How did you come to understand that?
3. To what extent do you think the “Think About It” training was beneficial?
4. In what ways do you think the training was beneficial?
5. Can you talk about what messages you found to be most memorable from the training program?
6. Why?
   a. To others: Did you remember those messages? Why? Why not?
7. What aspects of the “Think About It” training did you find most important? Why? What was least important?

8. What would motivate future students to learn about sexual assault prevention?

9. What did you like/dislike about the training being completely online? Did it help or inhibit your learning?

10. What suggestions do you have for improving the training program?

11. Conclusion: What haven’t we talked about today that I should know?

12. Thank all you very much for your participation. If you would be willing to set up a one-on-one interview with me to talk about the training experience, please contact me. I would love to hear more from you. Whether you’re interested in an interview or not, if you are willing to provide your feedback on my findings from this study, please let me know. As a reminder, the discussion we had today will be kept confidential by the researchers, and I ask that you do not share what you heard today out of respect for your fellow students.
Appendix I
List of Resources for the Participants

Office of Victim Services
1500 W. Neely
Health Center, Room 205
Muncie, IN 47306
Hours: 8 a.m.-5 p.m.
Phone: 765-285-7844
ovs@bsu.edu

Ball State’s Office of Victim Services provides educational and supportive services for the university community related to sexual assault, relationship violence, and stalking.

A Better Way
A Better Way provides shelter and services for victims of domestic violence and advocates for victims of sexual assault.
http://www.abetterwaymuncie.org

Counseling Services
Lucina Hall, room 320
Muncie, IN 47306
Hours: 8 a.m. - 5 p.m., Monday through Friday
Phone: 765-285-1736
counselctr@bsu.edu

This center offers a variety of services for students, including individual and group counseling, self-help materials, psychological testing and psychiatric consultation.
Appendix J
Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement

This research is being conducted by Faith Kellermeyer, a masters student at Ball State University. The purpose of this research is to study university socialization in relation to sexual assault risk reduction training, and to inspect the memorable messages that new students take away from the training. Participants have been assured that the interview data will remain confidential. All names and other identifying information will be removed from the transcripts after they are completed.

I, ______________________________, the transcriber, agree to:

1. Keep all information confidential by not discussing or sharing research information in any form or format (e.g. audio recordings, transcripts, names of participants) with anyone other than the researcher.

2. Keep all research information secure while in my possession, including audio recordings, transcripts, disks, or any other research information.

3. Return all information in any form or format when the research tasks are completed, including audio recordings, transcripts, disks, or any other research information.

4. After consulting with the researcher, I will erase or destroy all research information I have remaining in any form or format regarding this project that is not returnable to the researcher. This includes information stored on a computer hard drive.

Name (printed)

_________________________________
Signature

_________________________________
Date