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## Visualizing queer spaces: LGBTQ students and the traditionally heterogendered institution

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### ABSTRACT

As colleges and universities have increased campus programs, LGBTQ students continue to experience marginalization within the very spaces intended to support them. This study explored how LGBTQ college students experienced campus climate at a Midwest Urban Public (MUP) institution through a framework of the traditionally heterogendered institution (THI). Through traditional notions of sexuality and gender, college campuses systemically, structurally, and programmatically uphold discourses which reify heterogendered ideals. Institutional spaces continue to be organized along the gender binary, which perpetuate unwelcoming environments for LGBTQ communities. Relying on a critical photovisual narrative methodology and discourse analysis, participants' findings reveal how LGBTQ students engage with campus spaces historically exclusionary of their identities. As a data collection tool, photography allowed for sensory rich interview data enhancing the study's findings. Findings illuminate how a MUP university engages in traditionally heterogendered discourses and provides valuable implications for college and university practitioners to begin challenging ideals established in the THI.

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*When I try to think of a comfortable place on campus, there wasn't really one that made me feel comfortable. Like comfortable is a place that all of my identities as a person, are like not represented, but I can feel comfortable talking about them. At first I may have done the LGBTQ Center, but not that it wasn't comfortable, but it wasn't natural, I guess. It just felt forced. It didn't feel like a place where I could be completely myself. – Jackson*

Jackson's experience exemplifies a gap in how college and university spaces may be designed to create spaces for minoritized students, but somehow perpetuate environments where belonging is not achieved. This experience provides an important question as to how university practitioners design campus spaces intended for minoritized students so they not only find comfort, but find space that allows them to just be themselves. As colleges and universities continue to be sites of exclusion for LGBTQ students (Garvey & Rankin, 2015b; Rankin, Weber,

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Blumenfield, & Frazer, 2010), student affairs have witnessed an increased growth in campus LGBTQ services dedicated to student support and programming (Marine, 2011; Self & Hudson, 2015). Despite this growth, Jackson's narrative is a reminder for student affairs professionals to consider how their campus spaces contribute welcoming environments for students, or how they might continue to exclude the very students they intend to support.

Through this project, I sought to understand how LGBTQ students at Midwest Urban Public University (MUP) experience campus climate by understanding their interaction with multiple environments on campus. Specifically, I sought to understand what spaces on campus students connected with as spaces of (dis)comfort, relying on photovisual data collection to support students in crafting their narrative of inclusion or exclusion within these campus environments. The research questions guiding this study are (a) how do campus spaces contribute to LGBTQ students sense of campus climate and (b) how do campus spaces affirm or challenge notions of the traditionally heterogendered institution (THI)?

## Literature review

In the last decade, campus climate literature has continued to demonstrate the importance of identifying the experiences of LGBTQ college students (Garvey & Rankin, 2015b; Rankin, 2005; Rankin et al., 2010; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). Findings from these studies can provide campuses with necessary information to impact campus practices and policies (Marine, 2011). Campus climate is “mediated by the extent individuals feel a sense of safety, belonging, engagement within the environment, and value as members of a community” (Renn & Patton, 2010, p. 248). Despite an increase in LGBTQ campus climate inquiries over the past 20 years, research continues to find that colleges and universities are unwelcoming environments for LGBTQ students, many of whom often perceive campus as less inviting when compared to their peers (Rankin et al., 2010; Vaccaro, 2012; Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, & Yu, 2012). Rankin et al.'s (2010) formative report provided an expansive review, assessing experiences with campus climate for the intersections of sexual identity, gender identity, and racial identities. Their report demonstrated the adversity that LGBTQ students experience, identified the need to address climate holistically, and challenged practitioners and faculty to foster welcoming spaces that contribute to both student retention and sense of belonging (Rankin et al., 2010).

Other higher education scholarship has illustrated the importance for institutions to provide a climate welcoming to all students in order to foster greater sense of belonging in their school, particularly for racial minorities (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Rankin & Reason, 2008). Although these studies focus almost exclusively on campus racial climates, it is important to recognize a potential parallel to students who are LGBTQ, independent of these students' racial identities. Previous explorations of LGBTQ campus climate have typically focused

on the perceptions and experiences of LGBTQ people, perceptions about LGBTQ people, and policies and programs designed to improve climate for LGBTQ people (Renn, 2010).

Campus support services for LGBTQ students have expanded over the last decade, with increased services, resources, and spaces for LGBTQ students to ensure college campuses are welcoming for all students (Marine, 2011). Despite spaces that harbor potential chilly climates, LGBTQ students have identified support through campus involvement and leadership opportunities, contributing to positive self-growth and development (Kezar, 2010; Renn, 2007; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005; Sanlo, Rankin, & Schoenberg, 2002). When the campus climate is thought to be friendly and welcoming to LGBTQ students, the likelihood of involvement in campus co-curricular activities is greater (Yost & Gilmore, 2011). When considering student involvement opportunities, LGBTQ involvement often encompasses participation in LGBTQ student organizations and education, and LGBTQ students' co-curricular support has positive implications (Hart & Lester, 2011; Renn, 2007). Yost and Gilmore (2011) and Renn and Bilodeau (2005) found that LGBTQ students were less likely to be involved in specific campus activities (i.e., intramural sports, Greek life, religious organizations) compared to their heterosexual cisgender peers; however, they were more likely to find outlets within specific student organizations. Thus, identifying different areas of potential support for LGBTQ students will allow higher education practitioners to be better advocates, but potentially provide opportunities for growth in areas of leadership and development.

Higher education scholarship also highlights a wide range of institutional policies and practices, focusing specifically on campus environments and resources for LGBTQ students (Beemym, 2003; Dille, 2002; Garvey & Rankin, 2015b). More specifically, research has focused on the impact of LGBTQ resource centers on LGBTQ climate and their role in creating spaces for LGBTQ students (Fine, 2012; Self & Hudson, 2015), and the impact of safe zone trainings on expanding welcoming environments for LGBTQ students (Evans, 2002; Woodford, Kolb, Durocher-Radeka, & Javier, 2014). Garvey & Rankin (2015b) explored the influence of campus experiences on LGBTQ student identity disclosure, finding that the more out students are, the less likely they are to use LGBTQ campus resources. Other scholarship has begun to illuminate LGBTQ student experiences within the classroom climate (Garvey & Rankin, 2015a; Pryor, 2015), and in residential life (Evans & Broido, 2002; Herbst & Malaney, 1999; Pryor, Ta, & Hart, 2016), contributing to our knowledge about the importance of particular campus spaces. This study will further expand upon these studies to explore how these, and other spaces, influence the experiences of campus climate for LGBTQ students.

### **Conceptual framework**

The framework for this study is guided by a thread of challenging heterogenderist ideals in higher education, illuminating how the THI (Preston & Hoffman, 2015)

upholds heterocentric and genderist ideals (Bilodeau, 2009; Dilley, 2002). As colleges and universities reify heterogendered norms, thus centering straight and cisgender identities, scholars have called on practitioners in higher education to rethink and reshape the systemic limitations levied against LGBTQ college students (Preston & Hoffman, 2015; Self & Hudson, 2015; Talburt, 2010).

### ***The traditionally heterogendered institution***

Preston and Hoffman (2015) introduced the concept of the THI as a way to understand how colleges and universities have historically been shaped by and for cisgender, straight individuals. Furthermore, Preston and Hoffman examined how institutions with seemingly supportive LGBTQ programming, uphold a limited view of success for LGBTQ students. Institutions reinforce a narrative of otherness toward LGBTQ communities by primarily focusing on students' sense of belonging and matriculation, framing LGBTQ students as needing help (Preston & Hoffman, 2015; Talburt, 2010). For example, campus ally trainings or other similar programs intended to support LGBTQ students position them as individuals who need to be saved. Thus, these resources become tools to support "at-risk" students, and "rely on narrow ideas of who LGBT youth are and what they need" (Talburt, 2010, p. 113). In these ways, institutions perpetuate a narrow focus on belonging. While well-intentioned, campuses often fail to recognize the complexity of LGBTQ student identities (Talburt, 2010).

The THI problematizes institutions engagement of LGBTQ students, highlighting how institutions "operate in a way that continues to sustain and reaffirm tradition hierarchies of gendered and sexual oppression, regardless of the various policies, regulations, and diversity programs in place to support LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff" (Preston & Hoffman, 2015, p. 65). Most notably, this is done in campus messaging that limits potentialities of success by listing only resources for suicide prevention or mental health services. While these services are important, Preston and Hoffman also argue for holistic support of LGBTQ students that centers their needs in multifaceted ways, where there are unlimited ways for being queer on campus. They urge institutions to center queer empowerment programming, supporting student centered activism that engages students in meaningful and productive ways. Otherwise, this problematic framing not only limits LGBTQ students, it upholds ideals of straight/cis normative culture by continuing to push LGBTQ students to the margins.

### ***Genderism***

Genderism in higher education is reflective of limiting gender norms found in a THI. Bilodeau (2009) found that institutional structures and policies conform to rigid binaristic views of gender, limiting the ways for gender diverse students to experience campus life. These binary practices in higher education are structured by defining gender along the rigid norms of masculine/feminine identities, which

establishes a system in which any individual not falling within this definition of gender is discriminated against (Bilodeau). Genderism most notably surfaces institutionally in how campuses maintain restroom facilities, residential life living arrangements, Greek Life organizations, and athletics/recreation sports programs. The privileging of cisgender identities then, relies on the “direct consequence of the oppression of transgender students” (Bilodeau, 2009, p. 121). Individually, genderism is reflected in the experiences of trans and non-binary students’ direct invisibility or tokenization in campus environments. In these environments, genderism limits possibilities for the breadth of trans identities by placing expectations of conforming to the gender binary, creating an environment where their identities are either erased or up for debate. Thus, genderism in higher education partially explains the hostile environments institutions perpetuate, ultimately impacting trans students’ development, health, learning, and success (Bilodeau, 2009; Nicolazzo, 2016; Rankin et al., 2010).

## Methodology

For this study, I relied on a critical visual methodology and discourse analysis (Gee, 2011) to understand how participants experienced the THI at MUP University. Critical visual narrative arose out of various traditions of photo and visual methodologies that rely on participant engagement to capture nuanced data and lived experiences not generated through typical qualitative interviews (Harper, 1998; Prosser, 1998; Prosser & Schwartz, 1998; Wang & Burris, 1997). Within the context of higher education, practitioners, faculty, or students can trouble university climate analysis through a rich collection of data consciously compiled to reflect on moments of inclusion or exclusion. Photographs served as a valuable tool that not only engaged participants in a rich exploration of campus, but were used to enhance their reflection on their historical interaction with campus space. Prosser’s (1998) use of visual narrative guided the data collection process, although elements of photo-interviewing (Collier & Collier, 1986) and photo-elicitation (Harper, 1998; Prosser & Schwartz, 1998) were utilized.

Eight LGBTQ identified students from a mid-sized urban public university participated in the study, seven undergraduate and one graduate student (Table 1). I relied on convenience sampling to recruit participants (Patton, 2002), specifically

**Table 1.** Participants demographics.

Name	Gender identity	Year in school	Sexual orientation	Ethnicity/race	Gender pronoun
Brandon	Cis man	Sophomore	Gay	African–American	He/him/his
Dandelion	Gender variant	Senior	Bisexual	White	They/them/their
Jackson	Trans man	Sophomore	Queer	Black	He/him/his
Jamal	Cis man	Sophomore	Bisexual	African–American	He/him/his
Jeremy	Cis man	Graduate student	Gay	White	He/him/his
Marissa	Cis woman	Sophomore	Bisexual	White	She/her/hers
Nicholas	Cis man	Sophomore	Gay	White	He/him/his
Tina	Cis woman	Junior	Lesbian	White	She/her/hers

relying on networks at the LGBTQ resource center and in residential life, where the graduate student participant served as a gatekeeper to identify other potential participants. Additionally, I used snowball sampling, asking participants if they knew anyone else who may qualify for the study (Patton, 2002). With the assistance of a graduate research assistant who also served as a participant, I emailed prospective students via the LGBTQ listserv and residential life contacts, hosting two informational pre-interview sessions to enroll potential participants. Students were provided instructions on informed consent, explained the purpose of the study, provided with the photograph prompts, and asked to fill out a demographic survey. Additional prospective participants were emailed individually.

### ***Data collection and analysis***

Multiple sources of data were used to contribute to a well-rounded understanding of the broader campus case (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). There were four phases to the data collection: (a) document review of campus policies, websites, or newspapers to support the case context; (b) participant review of prompts, introduction to the study, and demographic collection; (c) participant engagement with photograph collection; and (d) participant photo-interviews and meaning making.

To more fully gauge student connection to campus, participants were instructed to reflect on the MUP campus climate and were given prompts for places to photograph on campus (Wang & Burris, 1997). They were asked to focus on places of comfort/discomfort, home, distance, exclusion, and their community (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Rankin, 2005). Like Kortegast et al. (in press) contend, the use of photographs allowed for a richer spectrum of sensory systems, which can contribute “to the process of participatory meaning making” (p. 9). The prompts then served as a guide to participant data collection and I asked participants to photograph places on campus that (a) felt comfortable, (b) felt like home, (c) felt uncomfortable, (d) felt very distant, (e) represented community at MUP, (f) represented exclusion, (g) represented MUP, (h) represented their background, and (i) represented *their* community.

Once participants had taken their photos, I relied on photo-interviewing techniques to facilitate participant interpretation of their photographs (Collier & Collier, 1986). Collier and Collier view photo-interviewing as the opportunity to drive discussion between the researchers and participants, as well as an attempt to deconstruct researcher objectivity, by placing the participant in a lead role. Kortegast et al. (in press) found these tools useful as a form of “reflective consciousness,” providing participants with time for deep reflection and introspection. Interviews were conducted face-to-face with participants, in sessions ranging from 65 to 115 minutes.

Documents were used to contribute to the understanding of the case (Jones et al., 2014). This is a valuable form of data that supported the participant experiences and provide a richness to understanding the campus context. These

documents specifically focused on campus policies, websites, or campus reports that indicate any degree of the campus climate for LGBTQ students at MUP.

Discourse analysis served as a valuable lens for reviewing how institutions are framed or constituted, particularly when applying the THI framework. Gee's (2011) concept of the figured world problematizes how broader discourses establish an ideal setting. "When people 'figure' a world, that is, imagine what the world looks like from a certain perspective of what is 'normal' or 'typical', they are imagining pictures of Discourses or aspects of Discourses at work in the world (p. 43)." Within the context of the heterogendered institution, this typical figured world is one where LGBTQ spaces do not exist, and genderism (Bilodeau, 2009) is reified through institutional practices that neglect LGBTQ bodies (Nicolazzo, 2016). What is constituted as "normal" or "typical" at a university would be spaces that uphold these heterogendered ideals through spaces typically associated with campus life. Thus, discourse analysis (Gee, 2011) was informative in understanding how the THI operated at MUP.

Data analysis relied on applications of critical visual methodology, where participants were engaged in creating meaning from their photography collection. Photographs were used in the analysis process to elicit richer information during the interview process, allowing the participant to reflect on those specific spaces on campus (Collier & Collier, 1986; Kortegast et al., *in press*). Photographs were thus analyzed by participants with assistance from probing interview questions, and then interview data were used in the final analysis. Interview and document analysis happened simultaneously, mapping the THI to all data throughout the analytic process. Rogers (2011) contends critical discourse analysis requires a connection to a theory of the social world, thus applying the framework of the THI helped explore the *figured world* through discourse analysis (Gee, 2011). Photographs were thus a brief but important tool to elicit meaningful connections to the student's experience at MUP. Due to limitations of space, I provide a description of select photographs as noted by participants rather than present actual photographs. This choice to not include the photographs should not diminish the importance of photovisual methods in collecting sensory rich data in future scholarship.

### ***Author positionality***

Researchers must interrogate their role in the data collection and analysis process (Jones et al., 2014). It is important to acknowledge my identities and advocacy work and how they impact my approach to this project. I am a White, gay, cisgender man, who served as a student affairs coordinator for the campus LGBTQ programs during data collection. Researcher positionality is an important component that "[takes] into account the experiences and social identities of those being studied and of the researcher," to mitigate some biases in the interpretation of data (Jones et al., 2014, p. 41). Thus, it is important to recognize the power dynamics associated with my personal identities and my role as a staff member on campus

and how this might impact participant recruitment and involvement. I sought to disrupt this by engaging students interested in the study's purpose and process, and by leveraging the support of a graduate student to mitigate any power dynamics associated with my position on campus. This placed students in an active role, creating a sense of ownership between them and the data. Although all participants provided informed consent, as a staff member I was diligent about this process and keenly aware of the challenge associated with enrolling students.

### **Findings**

Applying concepts of the THI to MUP revealed how LGBTQ students experiences with the THI can impact practitioners' awareness of campus climate engagement. This framework was useful in addressing the research question, understanding how students experience campus climate by emphasizing spaces that uphold or challenge the THI. According to participants, campus climate varied for its LGBTQ students, depending on the campus space and their history of interactions in particular environments. Photographs elicited powerful reflection from participants as it allowed them to engage with campus spaces in a way they never considered. However, the findings also reveal how in reflection of uncomfortable spaces, campus climate may not always be as friendly as they previously understood. Findings are presented here through the framework of the THI, with critical reflection of how institutions like MUP can transform the THI to improve opportunities of engagement for LGBTQ students.

### **Campus discursive framing of LGBTQ students**

Preston and Hoffman (2015) illustrate how institutions discursively frame LGBTQ students as vulnerable and reliant on the institution to find success. How campuses frame student life and success represents the ways in which practitioners begin to measure how their institutions support LGBTQ or other minoritized students. MUP has maintained its status as an LGBTQ friendly campus for several years, so much so that campus news releases continue to promote a 2011 *Newsweek* ranking that listed them in the top five gay friendly colleges and universities. Their status among the Campus Pride Index (2017) ranks them at four out of five stars, which demonstrates some areas for growth, but also a favorable rating compared to many other institutions. These public perceptions were often matched by the participants' engagement with LGBTQ spaces on campus, but all participants reported various incidents that demonstrate even the most reputable campus can be susceptible to unwelcoming environments.

Although MUP has maintained this reputation, the way the institution promotes its student life experience is not reflective of its LGBTQ student population. In a review of the admissions page for prospective students to the university, its campus life statement reflects:

Whether you're interested in joining a fraternity or sorority, an academic or religious club, green organizations or volunteering for community service projects, we've got hundreds of ways for you to get involved.

As an institutional value, MUP lists diversity as one of its six key values, with the division of student affairs stating that it seeks to attract and develop "a diverse student population." Although many avenues for student life are included, the lack of representation for LGBTQ programs perpetuates a heterogendered discourse, and frames the campus LGBTQ programs as othered and separate from other areas of campus life. Further, to demonstrate the range of student organizations available to prospective students, the admissions statement neglects to inform students of any multicultural student engagement opportunities.

**Greek life.** This framing of student life through campus messaging is important and runs parallel to participant photographs and experiences. Notably, participants experienced conflict with spaces that were heavily represented by Greek Life and recreation sports or athletics. Greek Life and recreation spaces are environments that often represent heterogenderist ideals in colleges and universities (Bilodeau, 2009; Nicolazzo, 2016; Preston & Hoffman, 2015). These systems are historically situated along the gender binary, rooted in masculinist traditions, and perpetuated in residential life facilities, campus locker room facilities that limit choices to men/women only options, or through Greek organizations that provide narrow definitions of gender membership requirements. These spaces are historically inaccessible to trans students (Beemyn, 2003; Bilodeau, 2009; Nicolazzo, 2016; Pryor et al., 2016), which creates spaces of otherness for students who do not conform to binary genders or hypermasculinist ideals.

Photographs provided a rich description for engaging and understanding connections to student life, particularly represented in their conflict with Greek life. Areas dominated by Greek life were not compatible with participants' sexuality or gender identities. Victoria, Brandon, and Dandelion photographed the exteriors of specific Greek houses on campus, pointing out these spaces as representing traditionally heterogendered environments. Victoria said, "The fraternities are homophobic to the point where it makes me nervous. It makes me almost feel like [Greek Life] is dangerous." The lack of safety and perception carried by a number of participants represents a questionable dichotomy for student life at MUP. As students struggle to find spaces to connect with, the prominence of Greek life was not for them. Jackson also illustrated how he felt a disconnect from the Greek community and his concerns with its non-queer affirming reputation. He felt as if he had to "perform masculinity a lot more" were he had to join his preferred fraternity. Jackson photographed the Greek organization flags, prominently displayed in the student union. His photograph captured how the campus centers the Greek experience in one of the most central and popular buildings on campus. By featuring these organizations in such a visible way, the campus is communicating the importance of fraternity and sorority membership to students in the student union,

a space designed to welcome everyone. What would it mean for the campus to hang all the LGBTQ pride flags in that space? Questions likely not considered in such a heterogendered environment.

Other participants also expressed frustration with Greek dominated areas on campus. Brandon photographed a fraternity house on campus where he was told that he did not belong at fraternity circle (an area of campus where Greek houses are located), as a door to one of the fraternity houses was “shut in [his] face.” This specific area of campus was also captured by Dandelion who spoke of the exclusion of LGBTQ students in Greek organizations, noting the common perception that fraternities are historically hostile toward gay men. Perhaps promising, Nicholas added “that whole fraternity circle is why the DLP (a fraternity founded by gay men for all men) is getting started, so people feel more accepted.” Yet, this creation of a historically gay inclusive men’s fraternity also demonstrates how LGBTQ groups may participate, and ultimately assimilate, into a system that continues to reproduce traditionally heterogendered ideals. Preston and Hoffman (2015) articulate the problematic nature of the dominant organization (read Greek life here) assuming the role of savior to the minoritized group. A historically gay men’s fraternity may be able to thrive and create space for queer and trans men, and Greek life may then be free from having to consider how it reifies the traditionally heterogendered ideals, maintaining genderist binary systems and allowing homophobic institutions to continue to thrive.

**Campus recreation and athletics.** Participants’ exploration of campus climate through student life also identified recreation center space and athletic spaces as spaces of discomfort. These environments, intended to be available to all students (as all students pay fees toward these spaces), were not particularly accessible to a number of participants. Victoria photographed the exterior of the campus recreation center, noting a level of distance and exclusion from the spaces inside. She reported the rec center as uncomfortable because of the pressure to be fit in order to fit in, speaking to both gendered expectations as well as body type. Brandon said that the spaces and the people who occupy the environment perpetuate expectations of manliness, which made him feel like he did not belong. More specifically, Jeremy identified specific spaces that led to feelings of exclusion, particularly within the locker rooms. He reflected on how these spaces reproduce significant heterosexist culture in men’s locker rooms:

Locker rooms represent a space dominated by straight cisgender men, where masculinity is rewarded, heterosexuality is supported by sexist and homophobic comments, and athleticism is attributed to a specific body and masculinist nature.

Although Jeremy’s photograph was simply of the men’s locker room entry sign, it elicited a rich understanding of how the spaces beyond the walls of the photo contributed to his experience. To get out of these rigid campus environments, colleges and universities must break from the binary systems that restrict many students from participating.

Similar constructions of how student life is framed focused on the shared spaces between the campus recreation center and the athletics facility. A number of participants photographed MUP's soccer field which also represented many heterogendered ideals. Some of which were due to the teams that occupied the spaces. Brandon and Nicholas reported avoiding the soccer field and basketball courts because the players would frequently use homophobic language toward the LGBTQ community. These environments prevent students from feeling connected to this aspect of student life, and limit the ways in which LGBTQ students find community in these dominant spaces. Jamal also expressed a disconnect between his sexuality, masculinity, and sports. As a former athlete, he struggled with belonging in these prominent social spaces after he accepted his sexuality. These encounters with homophobic and transmisogynistic language created a lot of distance and discomfort for participants. Jeremy represented his distant connection by photographing the soccer field through the lens of the chain link fence surrounding the facility. His engagement with the space elicited uncomfortable feelings because it was a reminder of avoiding sports while growing up. He described sports teams as often "homonegative," and he had concerns that he would be outed if he behaved flamboyantly.

Overall, MUP framed student life as centering Greek life, recreation sports, and campus involvement, excluding LGBTQ identities and groups. The Greek life and campus recreation spaces are particularly salient due to the consistent messages provided by MUP's webpages, but also in ways students are encouraged to participate and become involved on campus. This messaging directly mirrors participants' conflicts with these spaces; they know they are supposed to find connection there, but the heterogendered histories impact their present experience. On an official campus tour, students are introduced to the prominent Greek life area of the student union, fully visible and explained to prospective students. The soccer field and recreation center is a focal point that emphasizes student health and wellness. These experiences are invaluable, but they frame student life as captured within these two domains, centering heterogendered ideals and the THI (Preston & Hoffman, 2015). The THI model troubles how campuses center non-LGBTQ identities in their practices, and illustrates the exclusion of LGBTQ students in its everyday practices.

### ***Student identity and success***

Participants' conception of welcoming spaces was directly tied to identity, and how those spaces fostered inclusion. The THI reifies hegemonic notions of racial privilege and hetero/cisnormative environments (Preston & Hoffman, 2015), pushing LGBTQ individuals, and other minoritized folks, to the margins of success. Talburt (2010) argued that colleges and universities rely on narrow ways of understanding and supporting queer identities on campus. Campuses tend to view queer students as "at risk" and reinforce programs to support these vulnerable identities through

programs such as safe zone or other diversity trainings. Preston and Hoffman reveal how the THI may situate student identities as vulnerable and separate from the dominant culture of the institution, dichotomizing identities along the binary of queer and non-queer. Participants at MUP reveal how campus spaces limit ways of being queer in their engagement with their own identities, particularly along their religious or racial identity and how that interacted with their LGBTQ identities. This was particularly manifested in LGBTQ spaces not creating room for or not centering Black LGBTQ identities, or Black spaces not creating room or not centering LGBTQ Black identities.

For the few participants who identified as queer people of color (QPOC), their multiple identities engendered different experiences on campus than they did for their White counterparts (Rankin et al., 2010). Jackson struggled to photograph campus spaces that represented true belonging for him. He reported feeling like there were spaces on campus where some of his identities were supported individually (i.e., Black, queer), but not collectively, lacking space for identity integration (Stewart, 2008, 2009). Jackson also shared that spending time in the university's LGBTQ Lounge felt "forced," adding that the rainbow flag (which is displayed prominently in the LGBTQ Lounge) seems most strongly associated with "White gay cis-men." In addition, the Multicultural Student Programs office was not a space where he felt his transidentity would be validated. His experience required him to suppress aspects of his identity even in the spaces that ideally should be inclusive and supportive of these intersectional aspects of his identities. Stewart (2009) called for student affairs practices to disrupt these singular approaches to supporting student identities, as students multiple identities can only be supported when they are reflected in the spaces they occupy. Jackson longed for a stronger QPOC presence and space, and captured this through his photograph of a QPOC informational guide. Jackson did not feel truly comfortable in any campus environment, stating that a place is comfortable if it allows him to talk about all his identities, and that he "just couldn't really find a place like that [on campus]." Self and Hudson (2015) problematize campus spaces that speak to Jackson's experience, noting how some LGBTQ centers often normalize a "homonormative whiteness," upholding power for White, Christian, able-bodied, and middle-class people.

Brandon reported different limited engagement with predominantly Black or LGBTQ spaces on campus, mostly finding connection within his academic area of the performing arts program. Yet, he discussed how important his Black and gay identities were to him, illustrated by the photographs he took of Maya Angelou and his hometown sign, Ferguson, Missouri. Brandon spoke of the important role strong Black women played in his life, particularly the love and support his mother provided in enforcing his acceptance of Black and gay identities. Ferguson was also especially important to him, as it was not only home, but it represented a community where he and his family were connected. His lack of connection to student affairs spaces was mostly a reflection of his rigorous academic schedule not permitting opportunities for involvement or those areas of support.

The distance some participants exhibited from the spaces that ideally would engender inclusion and representation of their multiple identities represents a particularly salient form of exclusion. MUP then is situated as perpetuating the tenets of the THI, by not embracing multiple dimensions of queerness, and lacking space that allows for students to explore and be in their intersecting identities (Preston & Hoffman, 2015). Further, MUP bolsters traditions historically found at Predominantly White Institutions, where racial minorities experience similar forms of marginalization by struggling to find many spaces that center their own identities (Self & Hudson, 2015; Stewart, 2009). This convergence demonstrates the importance of viewing students' identities intersectionally (Abes, 2008; Stewart, 2009; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009), particularly for student affairs practitioners seeking to holistically support minoritized students.

MUP also had some incidents that prevented exploration of religious identities, causing some conflict between students and campus guests. The engagement of religious and gay identities was prevalent among participants, often times noted as moments of conflict for many of the participants. As a graduate student staff member in residence life, Jeremy reported much conflict with reconciling support for Christian identities that may not be supportive of his own queer identities. He photographed a flyer for one of the Christian organizations on campus, acknowledging a strong level of discomfort seeing these flyers in the residence halls promoting Christian events on campus because it made him wonder about whether the group was the "good kind of Christian." Jeremy attempted to determine whether it was a Christian group that worked to adversely affect the experiences of LGBTQ people on social and political levels, or if they affirmed LGBTQ identities. Jeremy's concerns are rooted in other student experiences with hostilities from non-affirming Christian speakers and organizations on campus. Dandelion and Victoria both commented on experiencing homophobic encounters with a visiting pastor on campus, who occupied a free speech area on campus and actively harassed LGBTQ students, Muslim students, and anyone dissenting from his evangelical perspective.

Grounding this context of a Christian divide, perhaps expected for a university in the Bible belt, raises even more conflicts for LGBTQ students who struggle with their religious and sexual or gender identities. Nicholas, who claimed a Christian identity, grappled with having a roommate who framed his sexuality in moral terms one evening in the residential halls:

[My roommate] tapped my shoulder again, and he was like, "Hey, just to let you know, I just want to reiterate that God still loves you." I was like, "okay, thanks." I just kind of went to bed after that. It was just really frustrating that he needed to say that to me.

The prominence of Christian hostilities and Nicholas' roommate, contributed to some spaces that were not embracing his identity as a gay man. For Nicholas, this required him to identify others on campus who shared his beliefs about the compatibility of Christianity and homosexuality. Nicholas photographed a local church that represented his background and religious identity. This photograph not only

captured a nearby space that spoke to his identity, but it demonstrated how Nicholas had to go off campus to find this affirming Christian community. The possibility of finding an LGBTQ affirming Christian presence on campus was limited and disappointing to Nicholas.

These engagements with identities provide a troubled view of campus climate at MUP, particularly for identities that meet at the intersections of gender, sexuality, and participants' other social identities, most notably race and religion. According to participant reports and campus webpages, MUP maintained a strong reputation for LGBTQ inclusion. Despite this reputation as an LGBTQ friendly campus, participant photographs and reflections demonstrated conflicting viewpoints which requires campuses to consider support structures for these specific communities. Participant photographs provide a troubled view of a seemingly welcoming environment, which suggests important implications for college campuses, particularly those who may rest on their reputation as inclusive spaces. Further, these engagements with campus spaces and their identities reveal how the THI functions on a campus such as MUP, where its reputation cannot prevent it from upholding homonormative whiteness (Self & Hudson, 2015) and traditionally heterogendered norms (Preston & Hoffman, 2015).

### ***Theoretical and practical implications for programs and policies***

Participants' experiences engaging with campus spaces through photography and their experiences as students at MUP, provide important implications for challenging institutional structures that perpetuate the THI. A primary tenet of Preston and Hoffman's (2015) work centers on the THI positioning LGBTQ students as vulnerable and needing saved, creating a narrow view of their experiences and potentiality. Institutions with LGBTQ specific spaces (i.e., LGBTQ resource centers) may be at risk of these spaces perpetuating THI norms, othering LGBTQ students by separating them from their peers. Students' engagement with spaces at MUP illustrates how historically heterogendered spaces exclude LGBTQ identities, often situated along binaristic environments such as the recreation center or residence life. The implication for student affairs practice is important, as campuses must identify paths for LGBTQ students to participate in these spaces, without implementing some "othering" practice that grants them access.

Nicolazzo (2016) explored this limited construction of social spaces, highlighting how transgender and non-binary students experience heterogenderism in spaces that reinforce the gender binary. By situating trans students as an other, often through the creation of a third more isolating facilities option, this continues to uphold historically isolating standards in practice. Bilodeau (2009) explored these isolating practices, noting the structural limitations of colleges and universities for transgender students to find space that includes them. Jackson briefly touches on the import of trans affirming spaces, noting the lack of inclusion that he encountered within the LGBTQ lounge. Even within this LGBTQ designated space, he felt

the focus on rainbow flags represented a specific White gay ideal (Self & Hudson, 2015), one not representing trans, non-binary people, and people of color. His experience demonstrates that even within spaces of intended inclusion, campuses can miss important nuances that ultimately perpetuate heterogendered discourses. These self-reflections from participants, through the modes of photography, allowed for a rich and deep reflection of how campus spaces are welcoming or distant.

### ***Escaping the THI***

For institutions seeking to escape the perpetual othering and decentering of LGBTQ experiences on campus, this requires not only shifts in institutional policy and practice, but shifts in how institutional actors come to embrace and know LGBTQ student issues. Self and Hudson (2015) explored resistance strategies of LGBTQ student affairs practitioners, particularly how they reproduce, resist, or transform homonormative whiteness, the centering of White gay men, combating heterosexism, and cis-sexism through intersectional lenses. Historically, institutions reify normative approaches to LGBTQ student support, positioning an ideal environment in which LGBTQ students would assimilate into campus life (Preston & Hoffman, 2015; Self and Hudson). At MUP, this assimilation focused on being involved in student organizations, serving as orientation leaders, working in residence life, or participating in Greek organizations. While students may have found community within these spaces, their LGBTQ identities were required to either vanish or exist separately in their own space. Jackson's trouble finding space within the multicultural student programs office illustrated how queer identities are required to be left at the door. Jamal shared a similar expectation that "in the Black community these are things we don't need to talk about." These reflections speak to Stewart's (2009) call for greater identity integration in institutional practices. Jackson's encounter with the LGBTQ lounge reifies how the campus space centers homonormative whiteness (Self & Hudson, 2015). These examples not only trouble dominant spaces on campus, but raise questions about the role of minority designated spaces as true spaces of refuge for the most minoritized of students.

From these findings, and in support of other recommended best practices, practitioners must establish programs and environments that support the multiplicity of student identities (Self & Hudson, 2015; Stewart, 2008, 2009). Had Jackson encountered an LGBTQ space that not only displayed affirming symbols and messages for QPOC students, but engaged them and honored their identities, his story may reflect different experiences. His experience highlighted a divide between MUP's multicultural student programs and LGBTQ student programs, where both offices should be collaborating to support students of color and LGBTQ students collectively and holistically.

Participants' experiences with campus spaces, elicited through photographs, tell an important piece to the story of how the THI manifests at MUP, providing context for strategies to combat the perpetuation of the THI. Recent scholarship has helped guide this dialogue on shifting toward more queer-oriented practices in

higher education. Participant's experiences with traditionally binaristic environments (i.e., Greek life, residential Life, campus recreation) reflect the importance of troubling current practices in higher education student affairs. Establishing a separate space for LGBTQ students may also risk perpetuating genderist practices (Bilodeau, 2009). Nicolazzo's (2016) analysis critiques institutional structures that establish spaces which ultimately separate and other trans or non-binary students. This most often surfaces in the establishment of third "gender neutral" restroom options, or the implementation of a private locker room facility—all of which continue to uphold masculinist/feminine binary standards of gender. Nicholas' reflection of the establishment of the historically gay men's fraternity symbolizes an important step for gay men to be included in Greek life, but it also risks othering the men. The group was established "by gay men for all men," yet institutionally there were no steps indicated in how campus would address homophobia and transphobia in the other Greek organizations. The historically gay inclusive men's fraternity could be a positive step in creating more space within a historically homophobic/masculinist culture, but challenging the systemic issue still requires institutional action to combat upholding the THI.

Practitioners thus have the opportunity to challenge these historically othering practices by disrupting the binaristic practices historically perpetuated in Greek life and campus facilities and recreation spaces. Practically, this may entail centering the experiences of LGBTQ Greek students by actively engaging LGBTQ students in Greek events and promoting social justice education within all Greek organizations. Further, campuses should advocate for chapters to support the inclusion of trans and non-binary students to actively participate in communities they feel most connected. Ultimately, these shifts will require a constant reflection and assessment of how students are excluded from the campus but also from national organizations that campuses support and sponsor. To challenge this, practitioners will need to engage in LGBTQ advocacy at multiple levels.

These experiences illustrate how the THI cannot be dismantled by simply increasing programming support or adjusting policies. Issues from the THI are systemic (Preston & Hoffman, 2015) and require a shift in all levels of the institution. Scholarship has continuously found colleges and universities as chilly climates for LGBTQ communities (Bilodeau, 2009; Rankin et al., 2010; Garvey & Rankin, 2015b), and best practices have recommended shifts in policy, practice, and training of faculty and staff (Beemyn, 2003; Bilodeau, 2009; Garvey & Rankin, 2015a; Hart & Lester, 2011; Marine, 2011; Pryor, 2015). For higher education practitioners to move beyond research-based best practices, they must engage all areas of the institution in LGBTQ centered advocacy.

### ***Limitations and opportunities for future research***

As with any research design, this project experienced limitations. Due to the number of participants and the diversity of participants, this project was not able to

capture many nuances related to minoritized identities within the LGBTQ community. All participants who identified as people of color were Black or African-American, limiting this project's ability to assess the experience of Latinx, Asian, Native American, or other racial minorities on campus. Further, participants who discussed their struggles with religion, represented Christian backgrounds. This limited any understanding of students who were Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, or other minoritized religions. No participants disclosed currently having a disability, limiting understanding about how campus life is accessible for LGBTQ students who are disabled. Further, only two participants identified as trans or gender non-binary, not allowing for a rich exploration of how campus climate is represented for them at MUP.

Future scholarship must continue to explore the experiences of these minoritized identities within the LGBTQ community, particularly within the frame of the THI. As much of higher education, LGBTQ scholarship has centered the experiences of White, gay, cisgender men (Self & Hudson, 2015), scholars should continue to explore how institutions promote and uphold values of the THI. This study is limited by focusing on one institution, with established LGBTQ programs, leaving questions for how the THI might be upheld at institutions without established LGBTQ programs. This project illuminated how the THI can serve as a valuable framework for practitioners and scholars seeking to further progress for LGBTQ equity in higher education.

## Conclusion

The THI is an important framework for considering how campuses uphold and perpetuate practices that exclude minoritized student communities, particularly LGBTQ students. Findings from this study reveal a mixed campus climate at MUP, yet the use of photovisual methods allowed participants to critically reflect on what campus spaces engendered feelings of comfort and discomfort. These experiences provided important moments of self-reflection that demonstrated how those campus spaces continue to reify the THI and its ability to *other* LGBTQ identities. Overall, this project provides important implications for institutions to consider how they might escape these exclusionary practices and begin moving toward practices that center LGBTQ lives in all areas of campus.

Further, this study demonstrated how photovisual methods can be used as important tools for assessment of campus spaces and the college student experience. College practitioners must continually assess how students experience their institutional climate and what steps need to be taken to enhance these environments for minoritized communities. By evaluating the institutions role in perpetuating the THI, campuses can begin to view their work more critically in order to engage in more research informed best practices. The findings from this study illuminate how one campus upholds tenets of the THI, providing important implications for MUP and other similar campuses to consider how they center the lives of

LGBTQ students on campus. The THI is historically situated in a larger culture that oppresses LGBTQ individuals, yet institutions can begin to dismantle these traditions through intentional and disruptive efforts to truly center the experiences of LGBTQ communities.

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