Navigating Place and Gender: A Multicontextual Critical Narrative Inquiry of Rural Trans* Student Experiences

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Navigating Place and Gender: A Multicontextual Critical Narrative Inquiry of Rural Trans* Student Experiences

Jessie O’Quinn

Dissertation submitted to the College of Applied Human Sciences at West Virginia University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Navigating Place and Gender: A Multicontextual Critical Narrative Inquiry of Rural Trans*

Student Experiences

Jessie Lynn O’Quinn

The purpose of this critical narrative study was to understand how rural West Virginia trans* students navigate cultural norms of their rural home communities and higher education contexts. An essential part of this critical narrative was to provide rural trans* students with an avenue to share their unique experiences and give them a platform to share their voices. The resulting narratives suggested that the normative tensions rural trans* college students experience across contexts stemmed from negative regional experiences that reinforced traditional gender norms. Negative home contexts and experiences forced students to feel like they had to build walls and distance themselves emotionally when interacting in social and academic situations both leading up to and while attending college. Students shared feeling pressured to perform their gender identity to negotiate these norms and perform these identities. The institutional support that the students perceived as influencing their experiences the most was a lack of mental health supports.
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the participants who took part in the study and shared their time, experiences, traumas, and voices with me. Not only did you help me share your voices through this dissertation, you also taught me so much about myself as a mentor, researcher, ally, and faculty member. This is for you.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Place and gender are inextricably linked socially constructed identities (Massey, 2013, p. 2; McHenry-Sorber & Swisher, 2020). While the culture and assumptions of gender are ‘invisible’, social norms pressure those who feel different to yield to “normative” behavior and identities. Transgender and nonbinary students, referred to moving forward as trans* students1, are students who do not identify as cisgender, meaning their gender does not align with their sex at birth. Widely accepted social norms enforce a gender binary that oppress trans* students by refusing to acknowledge the lived experiences of the trans* population. In places where misinformation and inexperience with the trans* population is prevalent, fear of judgement, harm, and excommunication from family communities could lead to suppression of gender identity and expression. Heteronormative social expectations send the message to LGBTQIA+ community: “Do not ‘flaunt’ a gay or trans ‘lifestyle,’ do not publicly carve out a distinctively queer identity, and do not seek acceptance and celebration of difference” (Boso, 2019, p. 922).

Harmful external influences can be compounded by discriminatory policy contexts. In 2016, the Trump administration led a charge that sought to undo gender inclusive policies the Obama era had put in place. The Obama administration used interpretations of Title IX that was more inclusive of gender identities, and those interpretations were quickly shifted in 2017 (Garvey & Dolan, 2020). A Department of Education’s spokesperson, Liz Hill, declared specifically “Title IX prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, not gender identity” (Holden, 2018). The same year, the Trump administration and a rise of conservative extremism continued

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1 Trans* research has (for the most part) adapted the trans* terminology to be inclusive of all individuals on the gender spectrum, including nonbinary, gender nonconforming, agender, and others that fall outside the bounds of binary gender identity. Many trans* authors such as Stryker and Nicolazzo have adapted the terminology to be more inclusive. (See also Steinmetz (2018).) While some journals have indicated this terminology has fallen out of favor, the students chose this over other terminology, with the support of the Director of the LGBTQ Center at the school the students attended.
to push discrimination based on gender with bathroom bills in Texas and Trump announcing a ban on trans* military service members (Wright, 2017; Davis & Cooper, 2018). In response to the increase of anti-trans* rhetoric, the Trevor Project recorded nearly double the average of trans* youth calling their suicide prevention lines (Wright, 2017). Even though Trump is no longer in office, the discrimination towards the LGBTQ heralded a wave of younger voters which has increased political polarization. The political discourse across the country has prompted a concerning increase of anti-LGBTQ bills. Today, in West Virginia alone, there are 12 anti-LGBTQ bills that target healthcare, schools and education, free speech and expression, civil rights, and more (ACLU, 2023).

“Rurality, much like gender, is a contextually shifting and socially constructed category” (Boso, 2019, p. 942). Stereotypes of rural communities, particularly that of Appalachian places, have continuously marginalized rural individuals. Appalachian communities are often envisioned as being uneducated with poor dialect (Dunstan & Jaeger, 2016). Because speech is a necessity to communicate and socialize, students who have a rural accent may find it difficult to avoid the stigma tied to their accent and perceived culture (Dunstan & Jaeger, 2016). Rural communities are also characterized by “a strong adherence to traditional gender norms, conservative political views, and fundamentalist religious beliefs” (Otis et al., 2016, p. 2), all of which enforce a gender binary that can create a harmful context for both women and LGBTQIA+ individuals living in rural communities.

Traditional gender expectations found in many Appalachian communities reenforce the gender binary, harming those who happen to fall at one of the ends of the gender spectrum. Historically, women in Appalachia have been pictured in two ways: as a homemaker, with

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2 Dillon & Savage (2006)
expectations to attend to husband, children, and home (Massey, 2013), and the other as uneducated, usually pregnant, and incapable of leading (Maggard, 1999). The second image of a woman in Appalachia was a natural development of the long-standing social expectations of the first. Men in Appalachia have their own set of social expectations. Men from rural communities, such as those located in Appalachia, are pressured to be the protectors of a cis-heterosexual family and defend their masculinity by one or more of the following: physical labor (Morris, 2008), hunting (Campbell et al., 2006), and/or gun-ownership\textsuperscript{3} (Mencken & Froese, 2019).

Across place and gender, Appalachian and transgender identities are arguably among the most ridiculed, othered, and misunderstood communities. West Virginia, being at the heart and center of Appalachia, has been infamously mocked across a variety of media platforms for language (Dunstan & Jaeger, 2016; Hamilton & Hazen, 2009), culture\textsuperscript{4} (Obermiller & Maloney, 2016), and perceived lack of education (Cummings, 1999; Wallace & Diekroger, 2000). In a similar way, transgender individuals are misunderstood and are struggling to gain widespread cultural acceptance even within the LGBTQIA+ community (James et al., 2016). Within West Virginia, the anti-transgender movement is reflected within legislation that seeks to exclude and marginalize the LGBTQIA+ population (Ronan, 2021; Quinn, 2021). Hate groups across West Virginia have doubled since 2000, making it a state that has one of the highest numbers of hate groups per capita (Southern Poverty Law Center[SPLC], 2021). One of these hate groups, Mass Resistance, specifically targets the LGBTQIA+ community (SPLC, 2021).

\textsuperscript{3} This study also found region was not the sole indicator of gun ownership, but also that when men were in need of security in an element of their life, they were more likely to turn to gun ownership to re-obtain power and security.

\textsuperscript{4} “Many popular perceptions of Appalachians were based on supposed cultural traits such as ‘personalism, familism, and fatalism’ (Weller 1965), having ‘school phobia’ (Looff 1971), and belonging to an ‘analgesic subculture’ (Ball 1968)” (Obermiller & Maloney, 2016, p. 104).
In rural areas like West Virginia, trans* marginalization can be magnified by lack of diverse communities or by more conservative views. West Virginia is least socially accepting of its LGBTQIA+ communities than any other state (Mallory et al., 2021, p.2), yet in 2017, a study was released that found that West Virginia has the highest percentage of 13- to 17-year-olds across the country who identify as trans* (Herman et al., 2017). Despite being a state that has a LGBTQIA+ community of more than 68,000 individuals (Conron & Goldberg, 2020), West Virginia is becoming one of the most discriminatory states across the country in terms of policy. West Virginia currently has no non-discrimination statutes regarding employment, education, public accommodations, housing, or credit (Conron & Goldberg, 2020, p. 2).\(^5\)

The state of West Virginia is not only passively refusing to offer protections of the LGBTQIA+ community, but also has anti-equality laws in place that continue to push a non-inclusive social narrative across the state. A bill was proposed in the WV State Legislature in February 2021 that could prevent schools from, “teaching sexuality” while also attempting to silence support that educators could give their LGBTQIA+ students (HB 2157). Trans* individuals in West Virginia can be discriminated against while attempting to adopt, are excluded in State Medicaid Coverage, and can now be excluded from sports participation (Human Rights Campaign, 2022). In March 2021, the WV House banned trans* students from playing on sports teams that aligned with their gender identity (Quinn, 2021). Without proper policies in place to protect trans* individuals, West Virginia will continue to be unsafe for LGBTQIA+ students.

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\(^5\) These estimates do not consider administrative and judicial decisions that have interpreted sex discrimination laws to cover sexual orientation or gender identity discrimination. The cited study only included statutes that included the words “sexual orientation” or “gender identity.”
Colleges and universities provide an outlet to explore and understand normative cultural expectations. For West Virginia students, the college they go to could be the first time they are able to step into an inclusive and supportive environment. Trans* individuals often report knowing at a very young age that they were not in alignment with social expectations of their gender identity, and by the time they enter college, the students have already come out to themselves (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012).

As students move away from the expectations and gendered cultural norms of their Appalachian communities, they can begin to interrogate internal conflict that has arisen from their gender and place identities. This internal investigation that occurs in college is particularly important for those within the LGBTQIA+ community because it is often within an institutional context that the students can come out to others as a member of the community (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Evans & Broido, 1999, 2002). Campus climate and support have been increasingly discussed in research for trans* students, and in 2018, Greathouse et al. called for institutions to provide better supports for the LGBTQIA+ community, detailing the normative stressors, mental health, and invisibility that these students face.

The gendered experiences of rural individuals in higher education have been largely limited to a binary concept of gender. Existing rural literature has investigated Appalachian women’s experiences (McHenry-Sorber & Swisher, 2020), academic aspirations (Meece et al., 2013, 2014), and educational attainment (Koricich et al., 2018). Both gender and rural identities are difficult to quantify, requiring nuanced definitions and inclusions. Reducing rurality to a quantifiable distance or context restricts the lived experience of those who may otherwise identify as rural⁶; in a similar way, restricting gender to a binary excludes the increasing number

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⁶ An example of this is a “urban” area in a largely Appalachian region.
of individuals who are identifying as nonbinary. Individuals at the intersection are then marginalized for both their rural and gender identities and face additional oppression as LGBTQIA+ in a rural context.

In the macro-context of the state of West Virginia, genderism can be seen in both legislation and discriminatory cultural norms that isolate and shame trans* students. Policies of states like West Virginia often reflect the traditional gender expectations of rural communities. Appalachian gender expectations enforce a strong gender binary where men are required to provide for his family, often with physical labor, and women are expected to be homemakers. In addition to the genderism experienced by rural trans* students, rural communities have been historically viewed as uneducated, uncultured, and poor. The combination of the genderism within rural contexts and the overall negative association of rural students impacts rural trans* students from dual perspectives. In particular, West Virginia trans* students must navigate marginalization across multiple identities, influencing their experiences across higher education and community contexts.

Most of the research done on trans* students in college revolves around the general campus climate (Humiston, 2017), student experiences (Cochran, 2019; Greathouse et al., 2018; Rankin et al., 2010) and student safety (Rankin et al., 2010). In the literature that does exist for trans* students, most of it is comprised of survey data, investigating how the community is experiencing different contexts, and often excludes nonbinary and gender non-conforming students. In comparison to this set of research, the majority of postsecondary rural student research focuses on college choice (Koricich et al., 2018), access (Perna, 2006), and family communities (Morton et al., 2018; Perna, 2006; Perna & Jones; 2013; Petrin et al., 2014). Because of the quantitative and macro-level approaches to research on both communities, the
current body of scholarship has unintentionally excluded rural trans* students. As a state that is currently housing high numbers of trans* youth, it is more important than ever that higher education is proactive and provides supports for the communities that are not currently supported or welcomed in West Virginia.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this critical narrative study is to understand how rural West Virginia trans* students navigate cultural norms of their rural home communities and higher education contexts. Narratives enable research to investigate the wide range of unique experiences while also creating an opportunity for the researcher to explore nuanced conflicting and dynamic contexts. An intersectionality approach allows for investigation of how place and gender identities interact or create conflict within the lives of rural trans* students. To explore higher education contexts, it is important to first identify institutional norms, micro-contexts, stakeholders, and supports that are important to rural trans* students. After identifying different institutional contexts, it is then possible to highlight and analyze moments of internal and external conflict within the narratives. By using a critical narrative approach, the students are provided an outlet to legitimize their lived experiences and claim their own truth as an expert and authority. While sharing their experiences, students are given an opportunity to critically analyze moments of dissonance and other power differentials they have witnessed across contexts. The following questions guide the study:

RQ1: What are the normative tensions rural trans* college students experience across home community and postsecondary institutional contexts?

RQ2: How do rural trans* students negotiate these norms and perform these identities across home and university contexts?
RQ3: What institutional supports do rural trans* students perceive as influencing their experiences?

Genderism perpetuates a gender binary that excludes and “others” trans* students and influences students for their entire life (Bilodeau, 2007; Kean, 2021; Nicolazzo, 2016). Rural students face additional barriers including lack of resources, academic preparation, financial hardships, family support, and an increased pressure to maintain community ties (Morton et al., 2018; Perna, 2006; Perna & Jones; 2013). The intersection of gender and place can then create additional internal conflicts that negatively influence their experiences and interaction with their environment. Genderism in a rural area is unique due to rural communities’ binary, and often conservative, gender expectations, which further “others” LGBTQIA+ individuals and can therefore hinder students’ self-efficacy, ability to feel comfortable coming out, or even alter their overall career and academic path or choices (Morton et al., 2018). By focusing on moments of internal dissonance and conflict, the study can highlight the moments of internalization for the students and investigate how the students experience and interact with these moments.

The study is framed using a combination of intersectionality, critical trans* theory, critical race theory, and symbolic interactionalist perspectives that help support the unique perspectives of rural trans* students. Intersectionality plays an important role as the study attempts to consider the intersections of the rural and trans* communities. By using critical trans* theory, the study emphasizes the importance of embracing gender diversity while also staying grounded in the desire to promote positive change in societal expectations and institutional policies by highlighting multicontextual experiences. Critical race theory applied to rural students then supports the theoretical framework by challenge existing social structures while analyzing how the students’ interaction with their college environment can be informed by
their previous experiences, identity, power differentials, and background. Finally, the symbolic interactionalist perspective informs the study on how the students navigate sense making. Sense making is an important theme when constructing the student narratives as the students make sense of cultural contexts and how they perceive institutional supports and policies.

**Significance**

Approximately 29% of students aged 18 to 24 are from rural areas (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015), and 3.2% of the college population identifies as transgender (American College Health Association, 2019). Of those who identify as transgender, around 1.1% of those students identify as nonbinary. These latter figures likely underrepresent actual transgender and nonbinary student populations. Future data may expect to see an increase in these numbers as national survey data suggest that there is currently a higher percentage of transgender identifying individuals between the ages 13-17 (.73% total population) than there are 18-24 (.66% total population) (Conron, 2020; Herman et al., 2017). While these numbers suggest the intersection of the two groups may be small, it is imperative that colleges and universities acknowledge the difficulties that their dual identities may pose. The number of students who identify as transgender has steadily increased (ACHA, 2019), and with growing pressures on rural students to attend college (Johnson, 2019), postsecondary institutions need to be more prepared to support their increasingly diverse populations.

There is little, or no, research that has been done on how rural trans* students perform their gender identity, particularly when considering the intersection of gender and place. The word perform is used because it describes gender reflection from two conflicting perspectives: gender as an outward reflection of what is felt inside, or a forced performance based on societal expectations (Butler, 2004, 2007; Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017). As students experience both
academic and personal microcontexts, they actively construct and perform different socially constructed gender behaviors and symbols based on previous societal experience. Using Butler’s (2004, 2007) exploitation of expected gender performance, the study considers gender symbolically, to consider how rural trans* students perform their gender in different contexts and how moments of conflict alter or interact with these performances and expectations. In particular, the study emphasizes and explores moments where social pressures are creating gender identity conflict for the students.

Narrative research on rural trans* students provides a voice for students who are often left out in the literature. By using narratives, the study can explore how social norms influence rural trans* students while also investigating how those social norms influence their gender performance in different contexts. By looking at the intersection of these under-researched perspectives and populations, the study advances knowledge on a growing population, offer insights on how social contexts could influence other marginalized populations, and explore how external factors influence gender performance.

**Limitations**

Rural transgender students are a small portion of the population, and because of this, there are expansive gaps in the existing literature, making connections within existing literature difficult. Because the intersection of rural students and transgender students is such a small population, this study is limited by the number of participants that are both willing and available to participate in the research. A common problem of existing literature is that it often groups lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in one large group, and it should be expected that transgender students are facing much different experiences as sexuality and gender can be victimized in different ways. “Trans and non-binary identities are routinely erased or suppressed
in educational research that conflates gender identity with sexual orientation” (Kean, 2021, p. 15).

Existing quantitative research on gendered experience in college is restricted by a difficulty in language surrounding gender identity, and the lack of quantitative studies on transgender populations can have damning affects to the students. “The omission of queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum demographics in quantitative survey research render these populations invisible to university leaders driving institutional advocacy, policy reform, and resource allocation on college campuses” (Greathouse et al., 2018). Research on rural trans* students would create even more difficulties for quantitative research as it combines difficulty quantifying the demographics while also defining rural geographically which may or may not exclude individuals experiencing similar internal dissonances. The benefit of a critical qualitative approach to the study is that it is not held within similar bounds and is more inclusive to unique rural trans* narratives.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Liberation of trans* and queer communities has occurred slowly over the last 60 years, and this freedom has led to an increase in trans* research over the last decade. Homosexuality prior to 1974 was considered a disease, defiant behavior, and was eventually considered to be “treatable.” The 1969 Stonewall Riots sparked a queer revolution that transformed society and higher education. Immediately following the riots, the first gay student organization was founded, and within five years, the American Psychiatric Association reversed its stance on homosexuality, and universities across the country had more than 200 gay and lesbian student organizations (Renn, 2010).

Research involving trans* students began by being lumped into LGB communities, and it has since developed to become more inclusive and specialized with time. With the increase of literature, it is becoming more possible, and important, that critical research considers the unique positionality of those within the intersections of gender identity and other minoritized groups. The chapter begins with a brief exploration of environmental contexts and language used to help research nuance the multiple layers of experiences of individuals. To understand and analyze the experiences of rural trans* students, the chapter considers existing research on trans* students and rural students separately so that the study can then synthesize across the research. For this chapter, institutional contexts follows the research on trans* and rural communities and investigates institutional policies and stakeholders and then funnels directly into West Virginia specific policies.

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7 Trans* research and acceptance is inextricably connected to the queer movement, but it is important to note that literature, particularly prior to the last decade or two, lumped sexuality research and gender identity research into one holistic community.
Student Contexts and Language

Bronfenbrenner developed a “nested series of contexts” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 162) including microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems. These contexts and systems help discuss and analyze experiences that influence students by understanding how students adapt to their environment. The combination and interaction of these systems are partly responsible for student self-efficacy, mental health, and social and academic experiences. Students from rural WV who identify as trans* are influenced by the culture, peers, family, health care, and government agencies, the school systems they have attended, and policies that are implemented within schools and in the state. Bronfenbrenner’s model of contexts, then, can be used to help compartmentalize these contexts while also providing important language to use when discussing students’ experiences and perceptions.

Bronfenbrenner (1993, p. 15) defined a microsystem as, “a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing persons in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features and invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment” (As cited by Evans et al., 2010, p. 163). A college student’s microsystem would then include interactions with friends, family, faculty, staff, and any other direct interaction on or off campus. The mesosystem develops naturally as a system of an individual’s microsystems, meaning that the student’s mesosystem is then the interaction of the student’s microsystems. Unlike microsystems and mesosystems, the exosystem and macrosystem of Bronfenbrenner’s model relate to contexts in the students’ life that indirectly influence them. Exosystems include an individual’s SES, media, state and federal governments, and institutional policies, whereas macrosystems encompass the cultural systems and ideologies.
Bronfenbrenner’s Ecology model provides important language when discussing student experiences across multiple contexts. The rural trans* community, like any other oppressed and misunderstood community, perceives and internalizes social pressures and stigmas across each environmental context and learns to adapt as a way of survival. If higher education institutions can begin to understand how these stigmas and pressures can influence rural trans* students social and academic success when in college, they can begin to offer better policies and utilize institutional stakeholders to create a welcoming and inclusive environment.

**Gender Identity**

To fully understand and interact with trans* research, it is important to understand current and accepted definitions of sex, gender, gender expression, and gender presentation. The Trevor Project provides a helpful guide to explain gender terminology, how it is applied, and examples of individuals who would fall within each category.

![Gender Identity Diagram](TheTrevorProject.org (The Trevor Project, 2017))

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8 “The Trevor Project is the leading national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer & questioning (LGBTQ) young people under 25.”

9 Sexual orientation is separate from gender identity, and for the purposes of this paper, I will only be discussing gender identity and how that affects undergraduate experiences.
Gender identity and expression falls on a scale. Gender expression, such as masculinity or femininity, does not have to strictly connect to gender identity. For example, an individual can identify as man but also identify as having more feminine traits. Gender presentation is how the world identifies your gender, and this definition is important when discussing transgender issues, especially in young adults learning how to express their gender identity. For example, an individual may be transgender and identify as a man but presents as a woman because that was their biological sex.

Society pressures a binary scale that is measured by masculinity and femininity, where a man is expected to have masculine traits, a woman is expected to have feminine traits, and those who lie in the middle are often forgotten. Genderism is the enforcement and social pressure to conform to a strict gender binary (Hill, 2003; Nicolazzo, 2016). The existence and cultural appropriation of the gender binary has negative impacts on health and safety (Mulé et al., 2009; Rankin et al., 2010), campus environment (Bilodeau, 2009), and overall academic and social success in higher education (Rankin et al., 2010).

**Higher Education as a Gendered Institution**

The negative influence of genderism begins before students arrive on campus and continues to influence them throughout their lives. Where cisgender students can focus on career, location, and extra curriculars when applying for school, trans* students are faced with finding a community where they feel safe and accepted while also facing potential extra pressures from family. Many individuals find college to be their first opportunity to explore gender identity, gender expression, and gender presentation (Evans et al., 2010, p. 333), yet upon applying to college, they are immediately required to make selections on the application based on a gender binary. In addition to this pressure and discomfort, many students fill these same applications
alongside family who may not support them. While not every trans* student decides to undergo surgery, or are even considering it while in school, trans* students may eventually consider having reconstructive surgery while undergraduates, which can influence their concerns about medical expenses and financial (and possibly then familial) support (Goldberg, 2018; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017).

Admissions and Academic Performance

Pre-College Experiences. Many of the decisions made before even arriving on campus influences a student’s experience once enrolled. The decision of what college to attend is affected by what academic program they desire (and accreditation), what social groups are available, support opportunities, distance from home, school size, financial aid opportunities, and more (Perna, 2006). Gender plays an important role in making these decisions and influences the experiences they have after arriving on campus. Where cisgender men and women can explore colleges by considering career, location, financial aid, etc., trans* students have an added pressure on them to find a school that would provide necessary support and inclusion. Many students find college to be their first opportunity to explore gender and how it fits within their own identity (Evans et al., 2010, p. 333), yet upon applying to any college or university, they are required to identify within the bounds of a gender binary.

Kosciw (2015) found that rural LGBT youth see a larger amount of victimization if they are out. “Rural students may see more of the negative effects of being out, and this heightened negative contribution may not necessarily be offset by the positive effects of being out, in that the paths between outness and the two well-being indicators did not vary in strength by community context” (Kosciw et al., 2015, p. 175). These negative experiences as adolescents could have long term effects on students’ social decisions and may lead to an inability to feel
comfortable creating a safe community around them. This could be worsened for LGBT rural students as they face lack of family support and higher levels of depression (Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017).

Past academic experiences influence both college choice and college academic performance. Kosciw et al. (2013) explore the effects of victimization on LGBT youths, indicating that victimization can negatively affect students’ academic performance. “Experiences of victimization can negatively affect LGBT youths' access to education, as they are linked to increased absenteeism due to feeling uncomfortable or unsafe in school, increased discipline problems, and lower levels of school engagement and academic achievement” (Kosciw et al., 2010; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; As cited by Kosciw et al., 2013, p. 46). These experiences from secondary institutions can have long-term effects on trans* students as they carry past academic experiences and records.

Previous research has also posed that those in the LGB community may not be able to adequately develop both their identity and academic career at the same time. Schmidt and Nilsson's (2006) study details the bottleneck hypothesis for LGB young adults (as cited by Datti, 2009). The bottleneck hypothesis proposes that LGB youth may not have the capacity to focus on a normal career trajectory because the development of sexual orientation and identity is more prevalent for self-authorship during that age (Datti, 2009). Though this study was particularly focused on LGB individuals, the findings could have implications for transgender and nonbinary students as they struggle with their gender identity throughout their time at an undergraduate institution.

This set of literature suggests that some students within the LGBTQIA+ community find it difficult to balance academic expectations with their identity exploration and/or trauma. To
maintain support and academic success, students need the help of peers (Goodrich, 2012; Pusch, 2005). Nicolazzo (2016) found that having peers and kinship within the college can provide important support to help balance these struggles. Even within contexts where genderism is prevalent, Nicolazzo (2016) found that students who develop strong kinship with others on campus or in the community are more able to practice academic and personal resilience. In particular, the study found that students, faculty, and staff that promoted safe spaces and developed kinship with trans* students benefited the students by helping them maintain student resilience, which would then have positive impact on their academic success (Nicolazzo, 2016). Linley and Nguyen (2015) further highlights that relationships with faculty are particularly important for LGBTQ students.

**Campus Experiences**

Higher education institutions can positively influence students beyond their micro-contexts by creating policy and offering support where the state has not. As the students’ first home away from home, colleges and universities contain both academic and social climates. Campus climate has been abundantly researched due to the noticeably significant role it holds for students, and this is particularly true for marginalized communities. For these groups, campus climate is uniquely important because it is directly responsible for the students’ sense of belonging and safety, and perception of campus climate can be equally as influential to the students. Rankin, et al. (2010) investigated the impact of campus climate and perception of campus climate within LGBQ and Trans* communities, and their findings suggested that the students within the LGBTQIA+ communities who experience positive campus climates are more likely to have positive educational experiences, are more likely to engage in positive social interactions, and are more likely to experience healthy identity development (Rankin et al., 2010,
Furthermore, the authors found that the intersection of multiple cultural and social identities increased the risk for negative perceptions of campus climate.

Many students are going to postsecondary institutions with the financial aid of their parents and outing themselves may strip them of the financial support or abandon them completely. When students come out to their parents, they risk losing both emotional and financial support. In 2015, the National Transgender Survey found that 26% of respondents were either temporarily or permanently denounced from immediate family when coming out to them as transgender. “Within an hour of coming out to my parents, I was kicked out into the cold with very few items and my car taken away. I was soon informed by my college that my parents had withdrawn my tuition for the upcoming spring semester.” (James et al., 2016, p. 68).

Another challenge facing higher education institutions is the increasing numbers of students who identify as nonbinary. Even college programing that aims to support transgender students often excludes an inclusive policy for those who do not fall at one of the ends of the gender binary. In a 2015 survey of trans* individuals done by the National Center for Transgender Equality, 35% of participants identified as nonbinary (James et al., 2016). Beemyn (2015) posited that not only are the numbers of nonbinary students increasing, but that these students are now making up the majority of the transgender student population (para. 4). While 35% is not the majority, it is possible that the overall national increase in nonbinary individuals will eventually reflect an increase in these numbers.

Stolzenberg and Hughes (2017) conducted a study on first-year students across 209 colleges. The researchers analyzed survey data on trans* students in the sample by considering their needs and experiences as undergraduate students and then compared those results to cisgendered students’ national norms. The comparison across the groups allowed the researchers to
have a holistic view on transgender students’ needs while also allowing the researchers to analyze how those needs differed from their cis-gendered counterparts.

Transgender students must face a variety of unique issues such as parental support (which can affect financial support), health care concerns, and participation in student activism that can greatly impact their experiences and choices (Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). Transgender students who decide they would like to physically transition could face significant health care costs to pay for hormone treatments or other gender confirmation surgeries. Compounding these extra health care costs with lack of parental support, transgender students’ financial distress is significantly higher than average. Stolzenberg and Hughes (2017) found that “the proportion of transgender students facing major financial concerns was more than 50 percent higher than the nationally normed sample” (Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017, p. 38).

Stolzenberg and Hughes (2017) also found a significant difference in mental health concerns. The rate of depression reported for transgender students (47%) is significantly higher than the national norm (9.5%), and this is reflected in higher levels of mental health concerns for transgender students as they navigate their various hardships. First-year transgender students also reported feeling significantly more overwhelmed than the national norm in the year leading up to college (Stolzenberg and Hughes, 2017).

Another problem facing trans* students is how they develop and navigate relationships while on campus. Duran and Nicolazzo (2017) investigated how gender identity influenced students’ experiences within institutional microsystems by exploring how trans* students develop academic, romantic, and social partnerships while at college. The participants and researchers considered dual perspectives that trans* students experience: the experience of being looked at and how systemic changes should seek to change this to looking with. Their study
found that across academic, romantic, and social partnerships, trans* students are forced to conform to social standards or remain invisible. Within academic contexts, students admitted that they felt forced to enact the “authority of experience\(^{10}\)” or stay invisible. In romantic relationships, the students reported feeling like they needed to disclose their identity while also conforming to traditional gender roles. In building social partnerships, the students felt as though their gender identity was often conflated with sexual orientation or was disregarded completely.

**Residence Halls.** When students arrive on campus their first year, their residence halls become a new place to rest their head, a place to build a community, a place to study, and a safe place to learn about themselves while being away from family for the first time. Where cisgender students are placed in typical binary split housing, trans* students find themselves forced into housing that aligns with their sex instead of their gender identity. While some progress has been made, there is still an uphill battle to make more widespread changes. Trans* students face a high level of bullying and abuse both inside and outside the college, so residence halls need to work harder than ever to provide a safe housing option for these students (Garvey et al., 2018).

It is not so simple that colleges and universities simply allow students to live in housing that aligns with their gender identity. Nonbinary individuals, for example, fall under the umbrella term transgender, but since they do not identify solely with one of the two binary genders, housing can be a unique challenge. This means that while many students may prefer identifying and living with a binary gender, a large portion of these students may not be comfortable in either situation. Furthermore, because of the inherent danger and discomfort that could occur from the individuals living in either binary housing option, schools need to look for alternative housing options.

\(^{10}\) Hooks (1994) refers to “authority of experience” as moments that participants in a social setting are forced to self-advocate and educate others, usually at their own risk.
Garvey et al. (2018) explored a variety of issues and suggestions involving inclusive housing in *Trans* Policies & Experiences in Housing & Residence Life. By looking at examples from Roosevelt University, George Washington University, University of Maryland, University of Oregon, University of Arizona, and others, the book explores how colleges across the country are taking steps towards gender inclusive housing. All of the colleges have successfully added some variety of gender inclusive housing as an option for its students, in most cases regardless of sex, gender, or sexual orientation. Because of the inclusiveness involved with gender inclusive housing, there is never a concern that a student would be identified as trans*, or any other member of the LGBTQIA+ community. Students who participated in GWU’s gender inclusive housing have stated that they felt like they had a comfortable space to be themselves, even if they were not out to the college. This is important because colleges that offer trans* specific housing often must out themselves to receive different housing situations (Garvey et al., 2018).

To accommodate trans* students, some colleges who do not have overall gender inclusive housing are attempting to offer single rooms where available. While offering students a single and private room is a step in the right direction, this could also pose a problem. Students who are financially dependent on parents may find that their parents would either not be able to pay for a private room or question why they would need it in the first place. Secondly, many private rooms in dorms do not have a private bathroom, which would still have the student sharing very private spaces which they may not feel comfortable doing. In either case, however, if the student has a private room with a private shower, and can also manage to pay for it somehow, the student is still unprotected from the “otherness” that being so secluded would place on them and make the experience potentially uncomfortable and less enjoyable.

Designating specific halls, spaces, or rooms to be specific to trans*, or even LGB individuals,
without having overall gender inclusive housing creates an environment of separateness and should be avoided when possible (Garvey et al., 2018). In conclusion, these colleges suggested keeping in mind that there is no such thing as a “one size fits all” approach to housing, and that student needs are often unique and as such, each student’s needs should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis to properly serve and protect each student (Garvey et al., 2018).

Colleges who have created gender inclusive housing suggested that adding LGBTQIA+ members to committees when deciding accommodations and making inclusive housing policies was imperative for initiatives to be successful. Much of the concern regarding policy development of gender inclusive housing is the ability to keep trans* students’ identity private from family and peers and to keep the number of people involved to a minimum to allow trans* students to own their own story and to allow them to out themselves on their own terms.

**Fraternities and Sororities.** Fraternities and sororities, by their very definition, reinforce the gender binary. Title IX does not directly provide guidance for transgender students in fraternities and sororities.\(^{11}\) For the most part, it is up to each organization to make its own rules and regulations. While Title IX does not prevent Greek life organizations from accepting transgender students, neither does it protect them and give them the opportunity to participate (Demos & Segal, 2017). The confusion and lack of protection often comes from the debate between definitions of sex and gender identity in laws and protections.

Transgender men and women may feel unwelcome and judged by sororities and fraternities, and depending on the Greek organization, may not be able to join one. The role of physical appearance plays a significant role in acceptance across organizations on campus.

\(^{11}\) The “Dear Colleague Letter” of May 2016 provided opportunities for transgender students to have more opportunities, but since the Trump administration, this letter was removed, and therefore regulations have changed. The Biden administration then brought back many of the protections that the Obama administration had in place. For the purposes of this paper, these changes are not discussed, because it does not alter the intention of the paper.
Transmen are pressured to appear hypermasculine, while transwomen are pressured to appear hyperfeminine (White & Jenkins, 2017). If these societal pressures are met, transgender students are more likely to be welcomed into the fraternity or sorority of their choice, not only pressuring binary trans* performance, but also excluding nonbinary students.

**Athletics, Locker Rooms, and Bathrooms.**

Segal and Demos (2017) highlight colleges’ and universities’ ability to allow transgender students to participate in sports, but trans* students may still feel uncomfortable at the idea of participating because of fears and concerns about locker rooms and bathroom use. To avoid others finding out that they are trans* while changing in public spaces, trans* students often avoid participating in sports activities all together. While in gender specific locker rooms, trans* students are faced with verbal abuse and physical abuse (Beemyn et al., 2005). These fears extend to bathrooms and can occur to trans* students regardless of which restroom they use and can be influenced by how they are presenting at the time.

Recent news coverage has revived controversy surrounding trans* students, particularly trans* women, participating in collegiate sports. People who are opposed to trans* athletes participating in their respective sports often cite an unfair advantage and claim that those who had transitioned from male-to-female had athletic benefits stemming from male sex physical attributes. In 2022, Lia Thomas, a trans* woman swimmer from University of Pennsylvania, won the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) first division swimming championship, which renewed debates over the fairness of including trans* students participating in high-reward sports (Moody, 2022). Harper (2015) found that runners who had undergone HRT had a significant decrease in running speed, and scientists claim that the testosterone is the biggest factor on the performance difference that can be seen over the time of transition. Because of the
impact of testosterone levels on performance, both the NCAA and the Olympics restrict trans* athletes from participating for a certain amount of time after beginning hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and then continue to monitor the hormone levels of the athletes. After Lia won this year, U.S.A. Swimming updated its policy and extended the amount of time participants needed to be on testosterone to three years (U.S.A. Swimming News, 2022).

Despite recent news coverage highlighting Lia Thomas, trans* students have been participating in competitive college sports for over a decade (Ziegler & Webb, 2022). Trans* student athletes have a right to participate in a competitive sport, but it is clear across NCAA and other regulatory athletic organizations that defining what is and is not acceptable is difficult and uncomfortable. The separation of the sexes in athletes was originally intended to be more inclusive of women, since research and society had typically agreed that women were slower or less physically fit than their male counterparts (Archibald, 2019). Even transgender athletes who align with one of the binary genders do not have the same experiences or physical attributes as their cisgender counterparts, and nonbinary athletes will never be supported within the confines of sports defined within the gender binary. Any solution that reinforces traditional cisgender norms then inevitably causes discomfort for these trans* athletes. Conversely, removing the gender binary reverses the original intent of creating an inclusive space for cisgender women in their own competitive sports. It is important to note that there is no research showing that trans* athletes are dominating their perspective sports (Harper, 2015), and little research analyzing trans* athletes’ performance, so decisions regarding trans* participation, transition details, and hormone levels should be grounded in science and supported with what research that does currently exist. 12

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12 Archibald (2019) suggests sports begin to remove the gender binary, when possible, but acknowledges that this would be a nearly impossible task.
**Institutional Supports**

**Student Organizations.** One of the most direct and impactful ways to welcome and support these students is by having strong Gender and Sexuality Alliances/Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) on campus. These alliances offer an immediate and welcoming community for LGBTQIA+ students and the leadership within these programs can make a strong impact on the success or failure of these programs. Nicolazzo, Pitcher, Renn, and Woodford (2017) found that having LGBTQIA+ centers available is important for trans* students to begin to build communities, but these centers are often absent from campus (Fine, 2012). Even within LGBTQIA+ centers, trans* students struggle to balance their place within the LGBTQIA+ community with their need for a trans* specific space and supports (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017). While these centers are open and available to trans* students, cisgender members within lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities are not openly advocating for them in these communities (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Across different LGBTQIA+ centers, programing is often targeted at cisgender students, and often these spaces do not properly acknowledge the needs of the gender minorities, focusing mainly on the sexual minorities in the community (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014). Programing that targets the trans* community often focuses on training for cisgender students as opposed to programing created for the trans* community.

**Summary, Tensions, and Gaps**

Once on campus, trans* students face difficulties that their cis counterparts would not. Trans* students face concerns about housing, bathrooms and locker rooms, health care, documentation, and outing themselves to their family and/or college peers (Beemyn et al., 2005; Beemyn, 2005; White & Jenkins, 2017). While many cis students find a welcoming community in fraternities or sororities, trans* students may feel unwelcome and judged and, depending on
the Greek organization, may not be able to join one. The role of physical appearance plays a significant role in the acceptance of trans* students across all organizations on campus, creating an environment that further preserves genderism on campus. Transmen are pressured to appear hypermasculine, while transwomen are pressured to appear hyperfeminine; if these societal pressures are met, transgender students are more likely to be welcomed into the fraternity or sorority of their choice (White & Jenkins, 2017). Beemyn (2005) suggested that students who physically transgress a gender norm are at a higher risk for harassment, and Seelman (2014) proposed those students are more likely to be opposed and denied within social communities. As an “outsider,” transgender individuals are expected to go above and beyond to participate, and this can be particularly difficult for trans* students who identify as nonbinary.

Over the course of the last few decades, more literature has been published for sexual minoritized students in the LGBTQIA+ community, but more research is needed still for the trans* community and other gender minorities such as nonbinary and gender non-conforming students. Quantitative research has been restricted by the gender binary and quantifiable definitions, so more qualitative research is needed to highlight these voices. In general, research agrees that the gender binary naturally excludes and can harm those who fall both inside and outside of the binary social norms, which means trans* inclusive policies can be hard to implement because no program can be a one-size-fits all approach. Existing literature suggests that simply allowing trans* students to participate within gender binary restrictions can cause discomfort, so more research is needed on best practices for trans* inclusive policies and institutional supports. No research currently investigates rural trans* students’ experiences across home and institutional contexts.
 Place Identity

Place identity was first conceptualized by Proshansky (1978), who defined it as, “those dimensions of self that define the individual’s personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, values, goals, preferences, skills, and behavioral tendencies relevant to a specific environment” (Proshansky, 1978, p. 155, as cited by Peng et al., 2020). Paasi, another notable place scholar, was one of the first of many to distinguish the two nuanced elements of place identity: “identity of a region” and “regional identity (or regional consciousness)” (Paasi, 2009, p. 141). Across these two elements of place identity, existing literature often examines experiences and identity development using one or the other definition, but rarely both (Peng et al., 2020). For critical place research, both definitions and identities are important to capture a more holistic and thorough narrative perspective.

The first element of rural place identity is the element of the identity as a region (Paasi, 2009). The identity of a region attempts to quantify a region by defining it analytically with classifications such as politics, tourism, or religion. “The aim of such classifications is often simply to distinguish one region from others, and respectively such classifications are acts of power performed to delimit, name and symbolize space and groups of people” (Paasi, 2009, p. 141). Examples of identity as a region are regions within a state, for example the Kanawha Valley in West Virginia, or the Bible and Rust Belt regions.

To quantify rural areas, the NCES defines three separate rural areas: rural fringe, rural distant, and rural remote, each characterized by its distance to an urban cluster, which is an area with populations between 2,500 and 50,000. The U.S. Census Bureau similarly defines

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13 Often along the divides of quantitative/qualitative research.
14 See Appendix A for definitions.
urban areas as having a population of 50,000 or more people, urban clusters as having between 2,500 and 50,000 people, and rural areas as all places outside of an urban cluster. Using these definitions, 34 out of 55 of West Virginia’s counties are rural (O’Leary et al., 2018). These rural definitions are problematic and exclusive, especially in West Virginia where so much of the state is rural, because it is easy to be in a rural area while also being within driving distance of an urban core (O’Leary et al., 2018).

The second element of rural place identity is regional identity or consciousness (Paasi, 2009). Within the regional consciousness are three elements that can be used to describe the internalization of place identity: cognitive place identity, affective place identity, and evaluative place identity (Belanche et al., 2021). Cognitive place identity stems from self-identifying as a member of the region using characteristics of members or nonmembers (Belanche et al., 2014). Affective place identity refers to the emotional bond to the community and its members. The final identity component, and most complex, is evaluative place identity. Evaluative place identity refers to “the significance of membership in terms of self-worth and related positive or negative connotations” (Belanche et al., 2021, p. 244). In other words, evaluative place identity is the pride (or shame) felt towards the community and how appealing the community is to the individual.

For rural place identity, cognitive place identity could be influenced by population density, local access to amenities or recourses, or perceived separation from urban communities. Affective place identity is important for rural/urban place identities because it is common for family ties or community bonds to be stronger for rural individuals than their urban counterparts. “Rural communities are generally associated with higher levels of social capital and stronger community ties” (Morton et al., 2018, p. 157). Evaluative place identity is helpful in situating the
individual in their rural identity by assessing their emotional connection and personal ties to the
culture and community. Individuals could feel shame about being considered rural because of the
negative connotations associated with it or feel cultural pride at being a part of the strong
community ties with which they were raised.  

Defining rural areas is difficult because there are several different ways you can quantify
rurality: population, distance to a city, access to local resources, and more. Difficulty defining
rurality has led to inconsistent definitions across literature, but a common thread is in
researchers’ urban-centric approach to the definition. In other words, rural areas are often
defined as what they are not – urban. Even though the term rural is inconsistently defined in the
literature, it is easy for researchers to “quantify” their definition of rural by placing a mileage
perimeter from a local city or simply discussing population (National Center for Education
Statistics, 2020; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). What is not easy, however, is how a rural
environment or feelings of rurality can vary widely across the country and may, or may not, fall
within the quantified data. This research, then, attempts to utilize both student definition and the
National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) defined geographic locale data. While rural
communities may have common quantifiable and researched qualities (etic perspective),
everyone has experiences that are unique to them (emic perspective) and including both
perspectives allow research to be more inclusive of student experience.

**Rural History and Communities**

In its original Latin meaning, rural is the antithesis of urban and has the same etymological
roots as the word rustic, that is, simple, unadorned, unspoiled, or primitive. These

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15 Note to self – this would be a good discussion on rural trans* students, since they may feel disconnected to the
typical “West Virginia Pride.” They may think “I do not want to associate with the rural community because of the
anti-trans* movement.” etc., so this will help me build an argument to help situate rural trans* individuals.
descriptors have been used to evoke negative as well as positive feelings... Country, another term used to refer to rural areas, has its roots in the Latin “contra” and like rural, implies something that is opposite to or the opposite of something else” (Schaeffer et al., 2013)

As recently as 1900, most Americans were still living in small towns or farms (Library of Congress, 2022), but the second industrial revolution and the increase in railroads across the country began to further divide the country’s rural and urban communities. As industrial plants and mass production began, people migrated away from rural areas and towards areas of increasing economic possibilities. While the industrial growth saw an increase in machine farming, rural areas were still restricted by local terrain. Farms that were unable to begin mass production for the increased needs of a more industrialized country often migrated to different regions or continued to run smaller farms that were self-sufficient and not meant solely as an economic venture.

Castle (1993) described the economic and political environment of rural America in three characteristics: diversity of the countryside, interdependence between rural places and people, and an “enduring myth that rural can be considered synonymous with agriculture and farming” (Castle, 1993, p. 13). The first characteristic, diversity of the countryside, influences economic development and policies: the diverse landscape of rural America causes variation in natural resources, human resources, and social experiences and expectations. Agrarian communities rely on the natural resources and terrain available; for example, productive farmland requires rich soil and large amounts of flat land, and forestry requires mass forests that are maintained differently depending on the terrain they are located, such as mountainous or flat. The diversity in agrarian communities directly impacts the economic development of these rural areas, and the region’s
ability to rise with industrial growth. Regional natural resources then place different levels of importance on economic attributes such as education, income, and racial diversity.

The second characteristic of rural America Castle (1993) describes is the interdependence between rural places and people. Rural areas and their circumstances cannot be evaluated without understanding how these communities interact with other communities and the larger economic or social context they engage with. “In the 1980s, the decline of rural manufacturing in many areas was linked directly to the growth of international competition” (Castle, 1993, p. 14), and this context highlights that rural areas and their economic stability do not exist in a vacuum.

The third characteristic highlights the importance of separating rural individuals from the practice of farming: “to be rural is not necessarily to farm” (Castle, 1993, p. 14). This separation has grown in importance over the last few decades as most current rural individuals do not live on farms. While the history of agriculture, forestry, and mineral extraction helped shape institutional and cultural norms of rural communities, this history does not wholly define the individuals from these rural regions. Without the agrarian or industrial history of rural communities, however, it is impossible to understand contemporary rural cultures and communities.

“Rural places are often characterized by a reliance on a single industry, placing them in precarious economic situations unless they are able to reinvent themselves in the wake of economic change” (McHenry-Sorber, 2021, p. 110). Rural communities are often dependent on a single industry such as mineral extraction, agrarian industries, and tourism, which makes them particularly vulnerable to economic variability. When an industry falls in rural communities, it could lead to an increase in unemployment and poverty, but it could also lead to a successful transition to newer economic possibilities (McHenry-Sorber, 2021). These rises and falls of
single industries create shifting economies and populations that alter the context of each of the surrounding regions.

Social, economic, and political climates of rural communities are often discussed using the rural-urban interface. Historically, the rural-urban interface has been used to understand the transfer of goods, services, labor, ideas, and people between rural and urban America. Recent rural literature suggests that the rural-urban interface is evolving because of the increased interdependence of rural and urban communities (Lichter & Brown, 2011, 2014; Lichter & Ziliak, 2017; Woods, 2009).

Lichter & Brown (2011, 2014) and Lichter & Ziliak (2017) describe a new rural-urban interface that highlights this increased interdependence. Lichter & Brown (2011) describe two important aspects of the new rural-urban interface: (a) the dramatic increase of cross community interdependence that has led to boundary variance and (b) the increased symmetry between the two communities, described as the “bidirectional relational aspects of spatial categories” (p. 1). The increased flow between the two communities has contributed to the difficulty in discretely defining rural and urban as spatial and social boundaries have become more blurred (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017). In the past, the rural-urban interface was synonymous with urban dominance that influenced corporate farming, manufacturing, and mineral extractions, but as the interdependence of communities increases, their relationship has gotten increasingly less asymmetrical (Lichter & Brown, 2014, p. 3).

“Rural and urban are flip sides of the same coin; the things that divide rural and urban areas are real but arguably minor when compared to the things that unite most Americans” (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017). Despite the increasingly blurred lines between rural and urban communities, rural America continues to be ignored in the research, particularly in the social
The increased interdependence within the rural-urban interface has been caused by an expansion of urban culture, changing economics and “uneven” economic growth, inequal institutional shifts, and patterns of health and wellness (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017, p. 9).

Continually shifting definitions and blurred social spaces have continued to push our understanding of rurality. As technology becomes more accessible and information freely flows through and across multiple communities, rural and urban communities increasingly impact each other. “The implication is clear: the symbolic and social boundaries that separate rural from urban are not a clear physical or cultural border or line at all but, rather, a zone of intense human interaction” (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017, p. 14). The zone of interaction can inform future research by acknowledging the blurry space that lies between rural and urban spaces, and including this grey area creates a richer knowledge of our understanding of individual experiences. Acknowledging the complex spatial and social boundaries, investigating community interdependence, and accepting both emic and etic perspectives can then inform the lived experiences of rural individuals.

**Appalachian History and Context**

In 1963, the Appalachian Regional Commission was formed to analyze Appalachia’s needs. The commission then used those findings to create regional development programs to help support Appalachian communities and close the gap between Appalachia and the rest of the country. “The ARC, one of the most extensive place-based regional development programs, has since invested over $4.5 billion into Appalachian communities with the principal goal of achieving socioeconomic parity with the rest of the nation. Federal, state, and local funding has matched this funding by more than $10 billion” (Bergantino, 2021, p.3).
To better understand the economic and population differences between rural Appalachia and the rest of rural America, the Appalachian Regional Commission compared population demographics, education, employment, income/poverty, and computer/broadband access in their report *Rural Appalachia Compared to the Rest of Rural America* (ARC, 2021b). 16 Demographically, the population of rural Appalachian is less diverse (12.1% minority) than non-Appalachian rural communities (25.3% minority), and the population of rural Appalachia is decreasing faster (2.7% decrease since 2010) than that of the rest of the country (0.5% decrease). Rural Appalachia’s population obtains fewer degrees across all education attainment levels (high school diploma, associate’s degree, and bachelor’s degree), and the unemployment rate is slightly higher for rural Appalachia. These differences in education and employment are reflected in lower income and higher poverty levels (*Rural Appalachia, 2021*, para. 10). “Median household income in rural Appalachian counties is more than $9,000 below that of households in rural counties in the rest of the country” (*Rural Appalachia, 2021*, para 8). Rural Appalachians are also less likely to have computers at home and are more likely to have no access to internet (*Rural Appalachia, 2021*).

Even with the Appalachian Regional Commission’s development programs, Appalachia, particularly central Appalachia, continues to be economically deficient compared to the rest of the country. In the past, central Appalachia relied on mineral extraction and logging, but between 1990 and 2020 the number of people in West Virginia employed in those industries were halved (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Over the last half-century, central Appalachia has experienced a dramatic decrease in mineral production and employment which has drained the economic stability of the region (West Virginia Office of Mine Health and Safety, 2020). The economic instability has decreased median income and increased poverty levels. “Rural Central

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16 The ARC defines the Appalachian population by classifying rural counties as those that are “neither part of nor adjacent to a metropolitan area”
Appalachia’s per capita household median income is now just three-quarters of the greater region’s income and just over half of the nation’s” (Bergantino, 2021, p.4; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

**Appalachian Identity**

Using Paasi’s two elements of place identity, identity of a region and regional identity, it becomes easier to understand Appalachian identity (Paasi, 2009, p. 141). Geographically, the Appalachian region is physically situated around the Appalachian Mountains. More specifically, the Appalachian region is divided into five subregions that cover parts of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, and all of West Virginia (Appalachian Regional Commission[ARC], 2021a). Across these states, the Appalachian region contains 420 counties, and the Appalachian Regional Commission classifies a quarter of these counties as rural, counting for roughly 10% of Appalachia’s residents (Rural Appalachia, 2021).

Defining regional identity, and therefore Appalachian identity, can be much more difficult. Phillip J. Obermiller highlights the difficulty in pinpointing Appalachian identity:

> We cannot agree on a definition of Appalachia, nor can we definitively say who is Appalachian. Yet we can agree that Appalachia is an important concept because it often makes a difference in people’s lives, either personally or as a group. This is a key distinction – to say something is important is not to say that it is determinative, much less to reify it (Smith et al., 2010, p. 62)

In Smith et al. (2010), each author notes that an Appalachian identity is so diverse that it would be impossible to narrow it down to one cohesive definition. Steve Fisher details two...

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17 A map of the subregions in Appalachia can be found in Appendix B.
important factors when considering someone’s Appalachian identity: their positionality and where they are in the Appalachian region (Smith et al., 2010, p. 59). Each region within Appalachia is influenced by political, economic, and social factors that are all unique to each subregion. Interestingly, Obermiller emphasizes that not only do researchers find it difficult to find quantifiable identifiers of Appalachian individuals, but people in the Appalachian region may not identify themselves as Appalachian (Smith et al., 2010, p. 64). Obermiller stresses, however, that it is important for researchers and future literature to continue to try and find common Appalachian identifiers to be able to adequately understand equity, quality of life, and health concerns of those in the region (Smith et al., 2010, p. 64).

Higher Education as Urban-Centric Institutions

It is evident from the previous century of literature that education research has been urban-centric. Even now, rural research struggles with defining who classifies as rural students because most literature defines rural communities based on distances from urban spaces. Until the recent increase in rural literature, higher education institutions had been largely unaware and unprepared for the unique challenges rural students face. Students from rural areas graduate from undergraduate institutions at a lower rate than their urban counterparts (Cain & Smith, 2020), and this is amplified for low income or racially diverse rural students (Cain & Smith, 2020, p. 4). Academic preparedness is not the only factor contributing to success, however, as rural students having stronger family ties and more financial stress could be just as important indicators of student success.

Admissions and Academic Performance

Pre-College Experiences. Previous literature on rural students suggest that rural students face barriers in college attainment or access because of their lack of academic resources and
preparation (Koricich et al., 2018), financial hardships, or family support (Morton et al., 2018; Perna, 2006; Perna & Jones, 2013). Rural students are also more likely to have a low socioeconomic status, which means they are often in areas that have fewer resources such as Advanced Placement Courses and guidance counselors and these students are often first-generation (Provasnik et al., 2007). These difficulties create a unique and difficult experience as the students attempt to succeed in their undergraduate institutions. Students from rural communities experience higher levels of poverty than their urban counterparts and this is worsened when considering the intersection of race (Koricich et al., 2018). This financial burden is expanded when considering that rural students may need to travel a great distance to attend a four-year university. Rural populations are often associated with their strong community ties (Meece et al., 2013; Meece et al., 2014), and are therefore more influenced by familial and parental support or expectations (Meece et al., 2014). Meece et al. (2014) found that geography, family, and economy had different influences across genders, resulting in an important correlation between gender and aspiration in respect to rural youth.

If rural students are entering college underprepared, it may influence their college choice or even reduce the possibilities for what colleges are available. Perna’s (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice has been used as a guide to understand students’ college choice who are from low SES backgrounds, first generation, and non-white by exploring multiple elements that alter decision-making. The conceptual model explores how college choice is affected by multiple influencers including student traits, community factors, higher education context, and economic characteristics (Perna, 2006). Koricich et al. (2018) extended Perna’s conceptual model by further exploring how being from a rural area influences college attendance and choice. Their study found that rural students were less likely than their non-rural counterparts to
attend college at all, and if they do attend, they were more likely to choose a two-year institution (Koricich et al., 2018, p. 294).

Hlinka (2017) investigated various supports and barriers impacting student retention that rural Appalachian students face. Hlinka interviewed several students, faculty, and administrators in a central Appalachian institution to identify factors affecting rural Appalachian students’ persistence and engagement. The study had three main findings: home community is necessary to urge students to attend college; students are unable to overcome home community obligations; and, students struggle to master course materials while in college. Both faculty and administrators acknowledged difficulties when developing programing and supports for rural students because of their strong community ties; students had difficulty balancing academic responsibilities with both family and place obligations.

**Campus Experiences**

While the literature on rural student experiences remains very slim, Ganss (2016) provides a good foundation for what rural students may be experiencing as the students enter college. The researcher explored narratives of 10 rural students from Oregon and found four major underlying themes in their narratives. The researcher found “(a) unexpected emotional and social transition, (b) motivations for enrolling, (c) lack of social and co-curricular involvement, and (d) exposure to diversity leading to consciousness of a rural identity” (Ganss, 2016, p. 1). While the study was conducted on a small group of students, the researcher’s findings on underlying themes and important identity information is consistent across other works that study rural students.

Dialect plays an important role in rural student interactions once on campus. Dustan & Jaeger (2016) found that their participants were influenced by both their own and others’ dialect.
Across all participants, there were two main themes: dialect was a strong indicator of rural communities and dialect was a source of stigma and stereotyping. They found that many students were drawn to others who had speech that was similar to theirs, in particular, that those with more Appalachian qualities in their dialect were more likely to seek out those whose accent indicated they were from a similar background. Conversely, some students specifically avoided individuals who had more Appalachian speech in order to distance themselves from the rural association.

In addition to association with rural communities, rural dialect is highly stigmatized by other students and faculty/staff on campus. Stigma against communities can directly influence students’ desire to be associated with a community (Major & O’Brien, 2005), and that is reflected in some of the students’ desire to separate themselves from a rural association (Dustan & Jaeger, 2016). Rural stereotypes enforce an image of Appalachians as “uneducated, unintelligent, and slow,” (Dunstan & Jaeger, 2016, p. 56), and some rural students feel like they need to prove themselves to counteract judgements from faculty (Dunstan & Jaeger, 2016).

Dialect is one of many factors that influence students on campus experiences. Even though rural students often have very close family ties and tight-knit communities, rural students often struggle to make friends once on campus (Ganss, 2016), and are generally less involved with campus life than their urban counterparts (Ganss, 2016). Rural students who are first generation, low-income, and less familiar with diverse communities may experience anxiety and find themselves struggling to engage with campus life. Low-income students are more likely to feel isolated on campus (Soria & Bultman, 2014), and since rural students are more likely to be low-income, it would be expected that rural students also experience feelings of isolation.
Institutional Supports

Academic success and GPA is only one of many factors that influence a students’ overall college success, and this is particularly true for minoritized students. Pierson and Hanson (2015) found that rural community college students who successfully completed entry level courses were more likely to stay in college than those who did not, which indicates that academic success is not the most important indicator of overall success. Other factors such as career indecision (Schonert et al., 1991) and financial concerns (Pierson & Hanson, 2015) influence rural students’ decision to withdraw from college. Tinto (1993) found that academic problems attribute to only 15-25% of students dropping out of college. A common thread across studies on different student communities is the importance of institutional supports for students (Gansmer-Topf & Schuh, 2006; Gibbs, 1998; Hausmann et al., 2007; Howley et al., 2014; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Milem & Berger, 1997; Swecker et al., 2013), and because rural students are faced with more financial struggles and less academic preparation than their urban counterparts, they need both academic and social institutional supports to succeed.

Most of the institutional supports that exist for rural students focus on financial support for high achieving students. Upward Bound, for example, targets low-income rural high school students with high GPAs and supports them by providing college readiness programming and college tours.18 19(U.S. Department of Education[ED], 2022). After Upward Bound, programs such as the Promise Scholarship in West Virginia provide students with merit-based aid to incentivize maintaining high GPAs while maintaining 15 credits every semester (Promise Scholarship, 2022). While these programs are necessary to support rural students who need

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18 Some undergrads also have Upward Bound programs to continue supporting these students.
19 “TRIO includes eight programs targeted to serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to postbaccalaureate programs” (ED, 2022).
financial support, they target already high achieving students. Despite place-based programs like Upward Bound and Promise, schools are lacking in other rural institutional support or programming. Because of the importance of community ties to rural students, colleges should be more proactive in creating institution wide programs that targets supporting these students and helping them feel supported in a campus community that understands the unique needs of these students. Specifically, more programming is needed that targets rural students’ academic preparation, family/community support, and cultural discontinuities (Byun, Meece, & Agger, 2017).

**Summary, Tensions, and Gaps**

While the NCES definitions of rurality is typically used for rural education research, the definitions are increasingly acknowledged as problematic. Characteristics of rural communities are not properly highlighted when using urban-centric definitions to characterize the community. For rural students in higher education, it would be more inclusive to acknowledge and accept students’ experiences which may have otherwise been excluded using NCES definitions.

Even with the recent increase of rural literature, a century of existing urban-centric research makes it clear that rural research has been marginalized. As rural areas are seeing an increase in diversity (Johnson et al., 2014), rural education research is needed for higher education institutions to be adequately prepared to accommodate students that have often been overlooked. Rural student characteristics show that rural students are going into college with more challenges than their urban counterparts: “47% of these students are living in poverty, 27% are minority, and nearly 13% require special education services” (Nugent et al., 2016, p. 3). Though these numbers show an obvious need for institutional support, colleges are not programing to support rural students in the way that they are programing for other minoritized
groups. Another gap in the literature is rural students’ perspectives on social capital and community ties that may influence their transition from home to a postsecondary institution (Morton et al., 2018). Research that does exist for rural education often focuses on K-12 education, college and career aspirations/choice, academic performance, and retention (Arnold et al., 2005; Nugent et al., 2016), so there is an obvious gap in research focusing on diverse rural communities and their intersectional identities and how these individuals are navigating higher education institutions.

**Place and Gender as an Intersectional Identity**

The increased importance on community and family ties in rural communities can create a unique environment that could alter internalization of gender identity, increase feelings of isolation, and negatively influence academic aspirations (Morton et al, 2018). Rural trans* students can experience conflict rising from gender normative expectations that exist in rural communities. Rural areas can create harmful social situations for trans* students and may trigger feelings of dissonance and discomfort as these students face a unique form of genderism within their own community (Horvath et al., 2014). Rural students may not be experienced or comfortable with diverse populations (Heinisch, 2018) and having little experience in diverse environments before college means that many trans* students may use their time in undergraduate school, away from their home life and rural pressures, to be out within their college community. An open and supportive environment has shown to be imperative for the mental health of trans* students and is an important influence on the student’s comfort coming out (Garvey & Rankin, 2015). Having a supportive and inclusive environment to explore gender identity and expression is even more imperative for students whose home community has reinforced an anti-trans* culture.
Rural trans* students may alter their social decisions while in college based on a stigma, real or imagined, that they feel from family, peers, and mentors. “People who are stigmatized have (or are believed to have) an attribute that marks them as different and leads them to be devalued in the eyes of others. Stigmatizing marks may be visible or invisible, controllable or uncontrollable, and linked to appearance (e.g., a physical deformity), behavior (e.g., child abuser), or group membership (e.g., African American)” (Major & O’Brien, 2005). Building on this theory, and molding it to experiences of transwomen, Sevelius (2012) suggested that this stigma negatively influences transgender individuals’ gender affirmation. Due to the fear and lack of gender affirmation, it would be expected that rural transgender and nonbinary students make less desirable and less aspirational personal choices.

The interdependence of the rural-urban interface may hold particular significance for rural trans* students. Ambiguity in parental support creates stress and instability for trans* students. Trans* youth are often told to leave their homes if they do not conform to traditional gender norms, and students needing to escape their family communities may often choose to travel out of regional bounds or become homeless (Catalpa & McGuire, 2018). Youth feeling gender dysphoria may also seek leaving their home region to distance themselves from their family for privacy or safety. While fleeing home communities may help trans* students feel safer, rural trans* students are more likely to feel a community pull to stay in their home region because of their rural identity and strong community ties. Because of the close-knit nature of rural communities, rural trans* students could feel two conflicting pulls: the desire to leave and explore their gender identity and the desire to stay close to their home community. This tension further complexifies our understanding of the rural-interface and highlights blurred special boundaries.
Smith et al. (2018) studied the overall mental health of rural trans* individuals living in the state of Montana and found that environment, politics, work, healthcare access, local religious beliefs, conservative political climates, and family and social relationships all impacted the participants’ overall mental health. An alarming number of the participants described suicide ideation or attempts prior to coming-out or transitioning (Smith et al., 2018, p. 15), which is echoed in the national sample done by James et al. (2016) for the National Center for Transgender Equality. The report found that 40% of respondents had attempted suicide in their lifetime, which is nine times that of the general U.S. population (James et al., 2016). In addition to these staggering numbers, James et al. (2016) found that 54% of respondents who had unsupportive families had attempted suicide, in comparison to 37% of respondents who had supportive families (James et al., 2016, p. 6).20 Local stigma, conservative political climates, losing relationships, and access to inclusive healthcare were of particular concern to the participants (Smith et al., 2018). The study highlighted a need for more research on how the political environments and the macro-context of the state and/or region influenced individuals’ mental health. Moreover, the mental health of the rural trans* students can influence the way the students interact with and navigate higher education institutions and highlights the need for programming and institutional supports to counteract the existing fears and traumas these students face.

**Theoretical Framework**

When considering research on oppressed groups and dealing with social justice concerns, a critical lens supplies the participants an opportunity to share their voices and experiences, while also searching for liberation from social bounds. Crotty (1998) explains that researchers

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20 This sample was not specific to rural areas.
can utilize a critical lens to interrogate and challenge social structures, engage in social action, investigate power structures, and expose power discrepancies in existing social norms (Crotty, 1998, p. 157). Karl Marx is often considered as providing a foundation for critical inquiry, as his philosophy called for change in social structures. “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways… the point is to change it (as cited by Crotty, 1998; Marx, 1961, p. 84).” Furthering Marx’s foundation, Paulo Freire continued and furthered critical inquiry. His combination of critical inquiry and phenomenological influences provides a unique perspective to consider social action research on oppressed groups. “Since people do not exist apart from the world, apart from reality, the movement must begin with the human-world relationship (Freire, 2018, p. 84).” Freire’s motivation to liberate oppressed individuals by exploring their “human-world” relationship provides a foundation for the research’s critical lens. The study also acknowledges the importance of intersectionality and uses Kean’s critical trans* theory to understand trans* student experiences, critical race theory to understand rural college student experiences, and then symbolic interactionalperspectives as a tool to create metaphors and symbols to discuss moments of conflict, experiences, and identity development.

**Acknowledging Intersectionality**

To understand how multiple identities interact and influence an individual’s experiences and internalization of external influencers, it is important that the study acknowledges intersectionality and how it directly influences the experiences of rural trans* participants. Intersectionality originated from the works of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1995) who wrote on themes of intersectionality using a critical race theory perspective. Intersectionality is useful in its ability to conceptualize experiences of marginality. Research that utilizes intersectionality can explore the “liminality of lived experiences for those whose various social identities place them
in the borderlands between and among groups” (Nicolazzo, 2016). By including intersectionality within the theoretical framework, the study acknowledges the various, “historical, social, and political contexts in which participants exist” (Nicolazzo, 2016, p. 5). The importance of intersectionality is essential for qualitative research as it enables research to be inclusive of all elements of personal identity, while also helping to acknowledge the important and unique effects of marginalization.

Though intersectionality is an important tool and lens to understand intersections of marginalized communities, it can be convoluted and difficult to use as a frame for a study. Future research in intersectionality is “dependent on the rigor with which scholars harness the most effective tools of their trade to illuminate how intersecting axes of power and inequality operate to our collective and individual disadvantage” (Cho et al., 2013, p. 795). Cho et al. (2013) further assert that, “what makes an analysis intersectional—whatever terms it deploys, whatever its iteration, whatever its field or discipline—is its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power” (p. 795). Following these cautions and building on the need for strong epistemic construction, Collins (2019) developed six constructs to support epistemological analysis using intersectionality with a critical lens. These constructs include relationality, power, social inequality, social context, managing complexity, and using social justice as a grounding praxis. Since intersectionality has never been done to analyze the intersection of gender and place, the study uses these six underlying constructs as a guide when exploring rural trans* narratives, making sure to highlight moments of power and conflict across different contexts.
Critical Trans* Theory

As with most research that uses a critical lens, the motivation of this study is rooted in its desire to spark positive change. Most current qualitative research done involving trans* students use feminist theory, critical race theory, heteronormativity, queer theory, or a combination of these to create a separate transgender theory (Gedro & Mizzi, 2014; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Nagoshi, Nagoshi, & Brzuzy, 2014). Each perspective has increased support for the trans* community, by slowly stripping away pre-conceived notions of a gender binary. Feminist perspectives originated in a goal to fight for binary equality; queer theory stripped assumptions of heteronormativity; and transgender theory has attempted to create a spectrum across gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010).

Monro (2005) further explores the bounds of gender and sex by discussing important implications of poststructuralist transgender theory. Monro examines how poststructuralist gender theorists such as Butler (2007) view gender, sex, and the body as, “fictitious,” and, “constructed through social processes occurring at macro socio, micro social, and intra-psychic levels” (Monro, 2005, p. 6). The underlying assumption of poststructuralist gender theory is that the concept of gender is a social construction which opens the concept of gender fluidity and the gender spectrum (Monro, 2005).

Each gender theory above has been an important building block and advancement for gender research and trans* studies, but with each theory there are pros and cons, with none alone able to satisfy the unique views and experiences of trans* students. Nicolazzo (2016) also points out that each theory is “ruptured” across researchers, highlighting that the theories and definitions have become inconsistent. It is important that future trans* research is inclusive of the gender spectrum across all its subcategories. Gender nonconforming individuals are more likely
to experience discrimination and hate crimes than the rest of the transgender community (Miller & Grollman, 2015), making it even more important to be inclusive and concise in the theory that frames this research.

Eli Kean (2021) developed a critical trans* theory that attempts to frame trans* research in such a way that makes trans* students central while also embracing gender diversity. The three principles are:

- **Principle 1**: Gender operates on individual, institutional, and cultural levels.
- **Principle 2**: Genderism is a system of oppression that interacts with all other systems of oppression.
- **Principle 3**: Epistemic injustice and the critical importance of trans* experiential knowledge. (Kean, 2021, pp. 2-12)

At an individual level, gender is personal, relating to an individual’s sex, gender, gender identity, and expression. While considering the individual level, it is important to acknowledge that any variation and/or multiplicity of gender is valid and there is no “archetypical means” that all trans* people can relate (Kean, 2021, p. 4). Moreover, there is also no “measure” of what it means to be trans*, and no “correct” way to be trans*. Within the individual, trans* experiences are varied, unique, and all valid. At an institutional level, gender presents itself as representing the context and social environment that surrounds everyone. “Biological sex and gender are intricately connected in social institutions such as family, media, religion, government, prisons, and schools, which are key sites of socialization of behavior and regulation of identity” (Kean, 2021, p. 4). Gender also operates at a socio-cultural level that consists of social norms and cultural assumptions and ideologies. These ideologies are often binary and cis-heteropatriarchal and thus restrictive and harmful to those who are “othered.”
Genderism encompasses gender-related oppression, and is experienced by every individual based on their intricate layers of identity and background. Unlike other systems of oppression, genderism influences everyone and is not restricted to those who fall outside of the socially accepted norms. By continually reinforcing binary gender norms, genderism perpetuates hostile environments for trans* individuals across individual, institution, and socio-cultural levels.

Epistemic injustice is particularly important in a higher education environment. “Epistemic injustice can offer a lens to understand how genderism operates within various educational contexts, with the result of rendering transgender identities invisible, our experiences immaterial, and our knowledge illegible” (Kean, 2021, p.12). Trans* invisibility can be seen from various angles and contexts that all seek to harm and devalue trans* students experiences and views. A fear of oppression, being misgendered, judgement, and self-preservation can lead trans* students avoiding social or academic events. In these situations, trans* students are socially manipulated to yield under social stigmas and create an invisible identity within themselves. Within literature, the most common cause of trans* invisibility is a tendency to group the LGBTQIA+ community together and assume that each identity within shares the same or similar experiences.

The final basic assumption that is important to acknowledge within trans* research is the power of experiential trans* knowledge. “Experiential trans knowledge, or the knowledge that trans people create through the experience of being trans, directly challenges dominant ideological narratives about gender” (Kean, 2021, p. 14). Without acknowledging and legitimizing the unique experiences and gender identities of trans* individuals, social norms and socially constructed behaviors could be improperly used to devalue the experiences and identities
of trans* individuals. Furthermore, it is important for me, as a cisgender researcher, to acknowledge that the truths of the participants are real, experienced, and should not be contested, devalued, or questioned for their validity.

**Critical Race Theory for Rural College Students**

Cain and Smith (2020) use critical race theory as a lens to ground their research and analyze rural college student experiences. The authors use six central tenets of critical race theory to build comparable tenants applicable for rural college students.²¹ To better understand rural student experiences, the authors dissected and analyzed the inequities rural communities face by shifting their focus, “away from a deficiency model” (Hernández, 2016, p. 170, as cited by Cain & Smith, 2020). Their strategy included five elements that enables researchers to understand different elements of identity development of rural individuals, while also investigating how educational systems continue to perpetuate the “achievement gap” (Cain & Smith, 2020). Each element of the strategy explores how the students’ interaction with their college environment can be informed by their previous experiences, identity, power differentials, and background. The five themes that Cain and Smith explore are: understanding of individual experiences, challenging dominant ideology, commitment to social justice, experiential knowledge and voice, and interdisciplinary perspectives.

The first theme situates the participants within their context by exploring their demographic, background, and micro-context. By focusing on the participants’ demographic in the first theme, the researchers can discuss intersectionality and oppression that may exist for each participant. Rural experiences vary widely across race (Marré, 2017), socio-economic status (High School Benchmarks, 2016), and family influence (Hlinka, 2017; Meece et al., 2014; ²¹ The six tenants of CRT used in Cain and Smith can be found in Appendix C.
Due to the lower educational attainment of individuals in rural areas, rural students may arrive on campus with less preparation for the college experience and community (Ganss, 2016), which could lead to both discomfort, anxiety, and may negatively influence the students’ educational success (Ardoin, 2018; Cain & Smith, 2020).

The second theme analyses the relationship that the participant has had with education as an institution while also attempting to challenge the dominant ideology of education. By acknowledging that education is not objective, neutral, or equal (Cain & Smith, 2020, p. 8), rural research can critically analyze how educational opportunities differ across different minoritized groups. Literature on the importance of high school preparation indicates that rural areas are generally less supportive of academic advancement. Schools with lower poverty and minority rates (High School Benchmarks, 2016) and schools that encourage advanced courses, harder curriculums, and college prep courses (Byun et al., 2012) are more supportive of higher education attainment. Furthermore, rural students may be more limited to the types of postsecondary institutions they have access to due to geographic and socio-economic barriers.

The third theme highlights the importance of a “commitment to social justice by working to eliminate multiple oppressions and empowering marginalized groups in educational contexts” (Cain & Smith, 2020, p. 10). Social justice is an important tenant across all critical research, and within rural research means challenging urbannormativity. Urbannormativity is the social norm that views urban environments and people to be superior to their rural counterparts (Thomas et al., 2011). Along with urbannormativity and power differentials, rural students may also face internal struggles over their rural culture and the typically strong ties to their home communities. Whether rural students desire to stay close to their home community (Hlinka et al., 2015) or desire to expand their career and social opportunities by leaving their home community (Bryan &
Simmons, 2009), rural youth must navigate difficult decisions while they negotiate both educational and personal goals.

The fourth theme Cain and Smith relate to critical race theory is centralizing the importance of acknowledging the experiential knowledge of marginalized students. Like feminist theory, this theme centers the participants as the experts and the researcher as the learner (Oberhauser, 1997). The rural experience differs across students as they balance both elements of place identity: identity of a region and regional identity (Paasi, 2009, p.141). As rural students enter postsecondary institutions, they face a cultural shift where they must learn how to navigate a college campus. Rural communities have typically smaller elementary schools and college campuses can be difficult for students to make friends (Gans, 2016), especially as they need to overcome anxiety over class and campus size (Schultz, 2004) while also being newly exposed to more diverse communities (Schultz, 2004; Walker & Raval, 2017). Rural students entering college internalize the cultural shift and experience identity exploration, meaning making, and re-evaluate personal and academic goals.

The fifth and final theme Cain and Smith discuss is utilizing interdisciplinary perspectives. Using interdisciplinary perspectives is important for both rural and rural trans* research surrounding identity and experiences because “understandings of ‘identity’ differ depending on the discipline, epistemological worldview, and historical context that the perspectives were developed” (Cain & Smith, 2020, p. 12). Multiple perspectives help develop a more thorough and multi-contextual analysis of the experiences and identity development of rural students. Rural college students’ identities can be understood, “as individual, as influenced by social groups, as the interaction between individuals as social groups, as impacted by environmental factors, and as changing based upon contexts” (Cain & Smith, 2020, pp. 12-13).
By analyzing across these contexts, the research is able to critically analyze the social structures that have influenced these students.

*Symbolic Interactionist Perspective*

To properly analyze and critique the social structures that can create potentially harmful microcontexts for rural trans* students, it is helpful to consider a *symbolic interactionist perspective*. While a large portion of trans* student research connects moments of resilience (Nicolazzo, 2016; Kosciw et al., 2014), this study highlights moments of internal dissonance as a theme throughout the critical narratives. To focus on these moments of dissonance, the study utilizes symbols to enhance narratives. The symbolic interactionist perspective is rooted in sociology and examines how individuals “present and construct the self” (Boundless Sociology, 2016, p. 1981). The symbolic interactionist perspective is helpful for this study because of its ability to consider how gender is viewed through social interaction and how individuals use symbols to make sense of themselves and the world around them. “The importance of symbolic interactionalism to qualitative inquiry is its distinct emphasis on the importance of symbols and the interpretive processes that undergird interactions as fundamental to understanding human behavior” (Patton, 2015, p. 134, as cited by Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 9-10).

Symbolic interactionism is particularly important for rural trans* students as they navigate sense making at the intersection of gender and place. Moments of internal dissonance occur more frequently among marginalized groups, and the symbolic interactionalist perspective helps create symbols out of the social worlds around them. The symbolic interactionalist perspective enables researchers to consider social norms and helps the research compare and analyze the internal conflict across individuals. Symbols are particularly important to the critical narrative because it enables the study to highlight internal dissonance, external dissonance in
both micro and macro contexts, and help create moments of sense making and gender identity growth. As the participants explore these moments of dissonance, both researcher and participants can use symbols as a tool to discuss how their biological sex, gender identity, gender presentation, and gender expression coexist in the social world. Furthermore, employing symbols allows the research to consider gender at both an individual and institutional level.

The study simultaneously uses critical trans* theory and critical race theory as two pillars to support and understand the experiences of rural trans* students and how they navigate their place and gender identities. Overlap across the two theories allows the study to combine the three facets of critical Trans* theory with the five themes of critical race theory for rural students to highlight four intersectional themes:

1. Gender and Place Identities operate on individual, institutional and cultural levels.
2. Genderism and place oppressions intersect with each other and all other systems of oppression.
3. Epistemic injustice and the critical importance of rural trans* students’ experience, knowledge, and voice.
4. All knowledge is individual can be analyzed differently across methodologies and historical contexts.
   a. Rural place identities are influenced by both emic and etic experiences.

Critical trans* theory creates a foundation that helps ground and motivate the research to critique and understand the genderism that occurs across contexts. Similarly, critical race theory supports the research by critiquing urbannormativity and critically analyzing the oppression and conflict rural students will face as they enter a postsecondary institution. Symbolic interactionalist perspectives can be used to find consistent themes of marginalization, construct
symbols of meaning making across contexts, and investigate how those manifests across co-existing social norms.
Chapter III: Methods

The purpose of this critical narrative study is to understand how rural West Virginia trans* students navigate cultural norms of their rural home communities and higher education contexts. The research is guided by three research questions. (1) What are the normative tensions rural trans* college students experience across home community and postsecondary institutional contexts? (2) How do rural trans* students negotiate these norms and perform these identities across home and university contexts? (3) What institutional supports do rural trans* students perceive as influencing their experiences?

This study is informed by the four pillars found within the intersection of rural and place identities. Previous researchers have asserted that research that investigates the intersections of gender-related experiences in rural or Appalachian contexts should ground the study using feminist methods (Engelhardt, 2004; Oberhauser, 1997; Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011). By drawing inspiration from feminist research methods, the study positions the participants as experts in their Appalachian and gender identities and experiences (Oberhauser, 1997). Oberhauser (1997) asserts that feminist methods must “position the participant as someone who informs the researcher about the processes and relations under study, in contrast to the situation where the researcher is viewed as the expert on a separate critical plane from the subjects of study” (Oberhauser, 1997, p. 167). The following sections discuss the critical inquiry methodology that grounds the work and the research design being proposed.

Qualitative Inquiry

Qualitative research is used to address the research questions. “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 5).
Qualitative research highlights the importance of experiential knowledge while also acknowledging that there is no single interpretation of that experience or event. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 8).

The purpose of this critical narrative study is to understand how rural West Virginia trans* students navigate cultural norms of their rural home communities and higher education contexts. The goal of qualitative research inquiry is to help interpret individual experiences and the goal of critical research is to then question the social structures that have influenced those experiences; both are needed to address the research. By choosing a critical qualitative approach, the study can examine and question the social norms that have influenced the participants across contexts in a way that quantitative research would be unable to express. To that end, a critical qualitative approach is needed to fully address the research questions while also providing the study with flexibility and more rich details.

**Critical Inquiry Methodology**

Crotty (1998) explains that researchers can utilize a critical lens to interrogate and challenge social structures, engage in social action, investigate power structures, and expose power discrepancies in existing social norms (Crotty, 1998, p. 157). Critical research, “raises questions about how power relations advance the interest of one group while oppressing those of other groups, and about the nature of truth and the construction of knowledge” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 61). By using a semi-structured interview that is constructed with a critical lens, the researcher and participants can question social norms and how they have influenced their lived experiences across different contexts.

Karl Marx is often considered as providing a foundation for critical inquiry, as his philosophy called for change in social structures. “The philosophers have only interpreted the
world in different ways… the point is to change it (As cited by Crotty, 1998; Marx, 1961, p. 84).” Furthering Marx’s foundation, Paulo Freire continued and furthered critical inquiry. His combination of critical inquiry and phenomenological influences provides a unique perspective to consider social action research on oppressed groups. Freire’s motivation to liberate oppressed individuals by exploring their “human-world” relationship is helpful to understand how external contexts, relationships, and policies can influence lived experiences of oppressed communities.

Research Design

The research design used for this study is critical narrative inquiry. What separates narratives from other types of research is its ability to use stories as data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 33). “Stories are how we make sense of our experiences, how we communicate with others, and through which we understand the world around us” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 33). Narratives enable research to gather rich details about human experiences, cultural norms and pressures, and unique positionalities.

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data for the narratives. While specific questions were asked, semi-structured interviews allowed for more flexibility so that the interviews were more conversational and less structured. By choosing semi-structured interviews, the conversations were less rigid which allowed the participants to discuss topics in different orders based on the natural flow of conversation. While this type of interviews allowed for more flexibility, each participant discussed the same questions/topics and specific data was still collected from each participant. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)

Study Context: West Virginia

As the only state located entirely in Appalachia (ARC, 2021c), West Virginia’s version of the word rural is unique. West Virginia is situated on land that provides 53 of the 55 counties
with coal deposits making its’ coal its most economically significant resource (WV Office of Miners’ Health Safety and Training [WVOMHST], 2022), but the state is also rich in other mineral resources such as limestone, salt, sand, and natural gas (Clagg and Martis, 2021). Coal mining in West Virginia began in the early 1800’s, and the most notable growth occurred with the arrival of the railroads and industrial boom (WVOMHST, 2022). In addition to coal, agriculture has played a significant role in the communities of West Virginia. Following a peak in agriculture in 1935, however, the state saw a decrease in farming as people started to move away from rural areas and towards urban areas, which meant both the number of farms and the general farm size began to decline (West Virginia Department of Agriculture, 2020). In addition to the decrease in agriculture, the coal industry began to decline in the 1950’s which caused economic decline and an increase in unemployment. Over the last 70 years, the coal industry has been economically unstable, but the mining culture remains an important part of the Appalachian culture in West Virginia (World Travel Guide, 2019).

West Virginia’s diverse terrain and communities can serve as a way to divide the state into regions based on geography and/or cultures. The West Virginia Tourism website divides regions of West Virginia by considering both geography and culture: Northern Panhandle, Mid-Ohio Valley, Metro Valley, Hatfield-McCoy Mountains, New River-Greenbrier Valley, Mountain Lakes, Potomac Highlands, Eastern Panhandle, and Mountaineer Country (north-central or Monongahela Valley) (West Virginia Tourism, 2022). These regions reflect the history, urbanity, and culture of the region and are often divided along different geographical properties such as valleys, mountains, or plateaus. Even though West Virginia is situated entirely in Appalachia, these different regions across the state highlight the diverse communities and cultures of Appalachian communities.
The regional and cultural diversity in West Virginia can be informed by its economic and industrial past. Mass agriculture was made difficult by the state’s rugged terrain and acidic soil, which meant cattle and dairy production were more common. In the 1970’s, the Appalachian Regional Commission and the reliance on coal as an energy source revived West Virginia’s poor economic background and began to strengthen the state. Technological industries boomed in the Ohio and Kanawha valleys, which eventually lead that portion of the state to become more urbanized and more heavily populated, especially as people began leaving rural areas. The state’s forests, mainly located in the highland region, contribute to the state’s tourism, timber production, and wood working industries (Clagg and Martis, 2021).

In addition to economy and culture, the political history of West Virginia influences the lived experiences across the different regions of the state. Over the last few decades, West Virginia has politically shifted to become a red state. The state, while at one point blue, was always more conservative in its culture. Over the course of the last few decades, however, the political parties have become increasingly polarized, and the Obama administration found West Virginia “shifting” to a red state. Leading up to the 2008 election, the Obama administration made a promise to decrease carbon emissions from power plants by 32%\textsuperscript{22}. Obama’s action plan had a direct impact on the coal industry, making a significant impact in the state of West Virginia. While coal production in West Virginia has been declining for longer, there was a sharp decrease in coal production soon after 2008, making it clear that the Obama administration influenced the industry (EIA, 2021).\textsuperscript{23} Outside the coal industry, the Obama administration also promoted and implemented policies and supports for minoritized communities, and promoted a culture that was more inclusive than democrats had been openly willing to support previously.

\textsuperscript{22} https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/president-obama-climate-action-plan
\textsuperscript{23} It can also be argued that it was also combined with a general decline in coal and an increase in other fuel sources.
These cultural shifts ignited a radical conservative movement in the state that was motivated by an anti-democrat agenda.

West Virginia provides the study with a strong Appalachian context for investigating gender and place identities. Being situated in the middle of Appalachia (ARC, 2021c), West Virginia is one of the most rural states, with 75 people per square mile (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). West Virginia is also the least racially diverse state in the U.S., with 93.5% of the population identifying as white (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). While educational attainment of people living in rural areas has increased, individuals from urban areas are still more likely to obtain a bachelor’s degree or more, and this is reflected in West Virginia (Marré, 2017). Within WV, 20.6% of the population has a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 39% of the national population (NCES, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

In 2019, reports from the GLSEN National School Climate survey detailed the extent of harm that LGBTQIA+ youth faced in the state of West Virginia. The report found that most of the students had regularly heard anti-LGBTQ remarks, experienced harassment and assault, reported discriminatory policies or practices, and did not have access to in-school resources or supports (Kosciw et al., 2020). In addition to this, West Virginia LGBTQIA+ students reported being disciplined for expressing PDA, using bathrooms that aligned with their gender, using their chosen name or preferred pronouns, and using the locker room that aligned with their gender (Kosciw et al., 2020).

It is important to note that while the lack of general diversity in rural Appalachian communities can be seen across literature, Appalachian communities, especially in that of West Virginia, do not all look the same. Over the last decade, West Virginia has experienced an

24 West Virginia lost a seat in congress in April 2021 for the 2022 midterm elections due to decline.
increase in diverse populations. Data from the 2020 Census Bureau gives West Virginia a diversity index of 20.2%, which has increased from the 2010 survey that gave West Virginia a diversity index of 13.1% (Klein, 2021). Even as West Virginia gains diversity, however, many Appalachian minoritized communities face unique challenges being in a politically conservative region that often enforces traditional sexual and gender roles (Baunach, Burgess, & Muse, 2010). The lack of diversity, educational attainment, and political environment provides the study a case for questioning the social and institutional norms that influence the trans* population.

**Data Collection**

Each participant partook in a series of interviews to develop individual narratives. The narration developed from semi-structured narrative interviews. Semi-structured interviews provided a flexible but guided approach to the interviews that allowed both researcher investigation and participant reflection. Using the semi-structured interview approach allowed the conversation to vary when needed based on individual context and experience. In addition to individual interviews, participants participated in two focus groups that bookended the individual interviews. The purpose of these groups is to promote more authentic discussion and to compare experiences, cultural norms and expectations, and institutional supports. Individual interviews occurred either online or in person depending on student preference, and the focus groups took place via zoom. The interviews took place over the span of one month, and a transcription service was used to transcribe the interviews.

**Interviews**

Semi-structured interview questions explored the experiences of rural trans* students across different contexts. Interview questions discussed trans* and geographic background, participants’ intersectional identity, perspectives and experiences regarding cultural norms across
multiple contexts, and their perspectives on institutional supports. See Appendix E for the interview protocol.

**Participants**

Participants in the study were recruited from a large public four-year higher education institution in West Virginia and its branch campuses. Students were eligible to participate if they came from a West Virginia community and identified as transgender, nonbinary, or identified outside the typical cis-gender social norms. Choosing a large public four-year institution while also including branch campuses provided the study with two important benefits: it provided a larger selection of students to participate and opened the study to students who have diverse experiences and backgrounds from many different regions across the state of West Virginia.

The original goal of the study was to have between three to five students participate in interviews. Participants were solicited through cross-campus communications. Initial outreach began with an open call for participants. This yielded no feedback, so a follow up outreach was attempted through LGBTQ centers, and then a monetary incentive was provided for students who participated. During this third round of advertisements, the ad was posted via Facebook by the LGBTQ Center, which prompted over 200 emails of people claiming to identify as transgender, be from West Virginia, and attend a college or university. None of the emails sent during this period ended up being eligible, three students were transgender but not from West Virginia, one did not attend college, and the rest were SPAM or people looking to get the gift card. During this process, many offensive and uneducated emails were sent to me and the process of going through those emails was extensive to avoid unintentionally missing a student who genuinely wanted to participate. Through these three recruitment efforts, three eligible students volunteered and were selected to participate in the study.
In summary, the following outreach was used to reach potential participants:

- An open call was sent across all branch campuses of the university,
- Follow up outreach was attempted through LGBTQ centers at those campuses,
- A monetary incentive was added to the call for participants,
  - During this third round of advertisements, the ad was posted via Facebook by the LGBTQ Center,

Gender identity varied across participants: two students identified as nonbinary, and one student identified as a transgender male. All students were from West Virginia, and all three were active students attending WVU or one of its’ branch campuses. In addition to their rural trans* identity, two of the three students shared being first generation Hispanic Americans, which added complexity to their intersectional identities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Personal Pronouns</th>
<th>Region in WV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Micah</td>
<td>Transgender male/queer</td>
<td>He/him/his and they/them</td>
<td>Hatfield-McCoy Mountains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>South Central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skylar</td>
<td>Nonbinary</td>
<td>She/they/he</td>
<td>Potomac Highlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Eastern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riley</td>
<td>Nonbinary</td>
<td>Any</td>
<td>New River-Greenbrier Valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Southeast</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

To properly investigate the potential dichotomy that rural transgender and nonbinary students experience in undergraduate settings, the research grounded analysis in critical narrative

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25 Pseudonyms were used here, and in the data, to protect the identities of the participants.
analysis (CNA) which is a combination of critical discourse analysis and narrative analysis. Feminist methods were used throughout the narratives to situate the participant as the expert. **Critical Narrative Analysis.** Due to the nature of this research, it was helpful to analyze the narratives using critical narrative analysis, focusing particularly on critical meta-awareness (Freire, 2018). Freire’s narrative analysis differs from others by engaging in community analysis through co-constructing narratives, while also challenging the discourses and oppression that appears. Critical meta-awareness also encourages individuals to participate in social action by questioning their own narratives and established societal norms. “A deepened consciousness of their situation leads people to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation (Freire, 2018, p. 17).”

Mariana Souto-Manning (2014) investigated the nature of critical narrative analyses by examining the continuous interplay of critical discourses and narrative analyses. “Since social actions become realities through discourses, we cannot ignore the role of discourse in trying to understand complex relationships involving social interactions, structures, systems, and everyday lives” (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 160). Souto-Manning asserts that to truly participate in critical narrative analysis, researchers should use an interdisciplinary approach and investigate how social structures and power have influenced discourses throughout the narrative.

Data analysis occurred in two cycles. The first cycle was coded to highlight internal and external conflicts and how those have been influenced by external structures, institutional norms, and social expectations. During this cycle, the data was coded for both the four intersectional elements from the intersection of gender and place framework as well as for the six intersectional constructs. The second cycle of analysis was purely inductive by highlighting emerging themes.

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26 See Appendix D for frameworks used.
that authentically occur throughout the interviews. In the second cycle, data was deconstructed using content analysis, allowing the analysis to focus on, “indigenous conceptions rather than on analysts’ theory-imposed conceptions” (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 21).

**Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Qualitative research often uses triangulation, member checks, standards of objectivity, and peer review to measure trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because of the nature of critical narratives, the study utilized three methods: standards of objectivity, catalytic validity, and member checks. To maintain objectivity, regular notes were taken during data collection and analysis to acknowledge areas where my positionality intersects with the study or study setting to avoid distortion and biases in findings. These notes were taken in journals.

Trustworthiness was also measured using catalytic validity (Lather, 1991). Freire (1973) defined the concept of conscientization, which provides individuals the ability to critically analyze their social realities. “Provided with the proper tools for such encounter, the individual can gradually perceive personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of his or her own perception of that reality, and deal critically with it” (Freire, 2018, p. 217). Building off Freire’s concept of conscientization, catalytic validity establishes goodness within the study by acknowledging the participants’ ability to understand their own gender and place identity, analyze their own multicontextual experiences, and communicate needed and experienced institutional supports. In addition to catalytic validity, I utilized respondent validation, or member checks, which allowed the participants to confirm the findings and perceptions gathered during the interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
Ethical Considerations

Participants in studies of marginalized groups (by race, gender, class, sexual orientation) are often suspicious of those who are members of the dominant culture doing research on people of oppressed groups. They often worry about what the researcher’s agenda is and how they will be portrayed as participants. The point of critical research is generally to do research with people, not on people. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.63)

To be ethical and considerate of their time and efforts required of a narrative study, the participants were made aware that their participation was motivated by a shared goal to communicate their experiences as rural trans* students. By situating the participant as the expert, the study was grounded with the participants’ experiential knowledge and were regularly checked for objectivity. Member checks engaged the participants and were used to confirm observational analysis.

Positionality

“I have yet to see a piece of writing, political or non-political, that does not have a slant. All writing slants the way a writer leans, and no man is born perpendicular” (White, 1956). E.B. White does well to convey the difficulty in writing without bias, particularly when interacting with critical qualitative research. The emotional involvement of qualitative research requires the writer to look inward and understand their own position before falling headfirst into the research.

While teaching at a small rural community college, I was able to offer support and comfort to a rural trans* student in my own classroom whose lack of family support eventually led to his decision to drop out of school. This student had never registered their preferred name or pronouns with the school and had parents who refused to pay for his schooling after coming out. While I know I did what I could as a faculty member, and as an ally, the experience brought
to light the unique difficulties these students face and how difficult it is for them to find help and a place to feel comfortable. Even within the LGBTQIA+ community, a lack of understanding of transgender and nonbinary individuals has created a difficult personal environment for these students, and these environments could be altered and made worse by rural culture or family expectations. This experience enlightened me on how little research currently exists for these students. There is little, or no, research done on the dichotomy that is put on rural trans* students by rural and community pressures to conform to socially accepted gender norms.

Growing up as a bisexual, in a very small rural area, my points of view on the world often involved finding compromise, negotiating conflicts, and finding a balance. I was raised in a household that fell well below the poverty line, and I felt the strain of existing in a world where I lacked power and any ability to change it, particularly as I battled both emotional and physical abuse. By understanding what it means to live in a world “in between” worlds in a rural and undereducated area, and by experiencing social pressures to conform parts of my own identity, I am able to provide a rich narrative for these students in a more immersive way. As a cisgender woman, however, it is also important that I acknowledge my outsider perspective on gender related conflicts. By balancing both an insider and outsider perspective, I can provide the narratives with a balanced voice.
Chapter IV: Findings

The following chapter will discuss the findings of the interviews and focus groups. To organize my analysis of the interviews, I continually referenced my research questions to maintain focus. The following research questions functioned as reference points for my findings:

RQ1: What are the normative tensions rural trans* college students experience across home community and postsecondary institutional contexts?
RQ2: How do rural trans* students negotiate these norms and perform these identities across home and university contexts?
RQ3: What institutional supports do rural trans* students perceive as influencing their experiences?

To highlight students shared and unique experiences, findings are discussed as moments of convergence or divergence to share those themes that students had in common or that were unique to them. Relationality, power, social inequality, social context, managing complexity, and social justice were the intersectional lenses that were used to highlight emerging themes from the interviews, in addition to the gender and place framework. Within the findings, it was natural to discuss moments of convergence and divergence as students had both shared and individual experiences.

Findings

After the interviews were completed, I did the first round of data analysis and found three original themes that I brought to the students to discuss during the second focus group. I then worked with the students to close the loop on their first focus group and then discuss themes that emerged from their narratives. During this process, the participants had the opportunity to give

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27 See Appendix D for frameworks used.
me feedback on the themes I had already found from the interviews and were able to give me feedback and add any final thoughts. By doing this, students were an active part of creating the themes and drove the analysis. After this, I performed my second round of data analysis. Five main themes emerged from this process.

1. Tensions in home communities
2. Hesitance in relationships and social interactions
3. Dependence on online resources as an adolescent
4. Performance of identities
5. Desire for more mental health resources at their institutions

While each of these themes converged across all participants, each participant had experiences of divergence within each theme that will be explored in the following sections.

**Home Community Tensions: Bless Your Heart**

*Love the sinner, not the sin.*

When asked about their home communities, each participant described two things: how beautiful the area was and how negatively they felt about the people in the region. While all three were from different regions in West Virginia, each student shared feelings of isolation from their home communities.

**Micah**

Micah was raised in the Hatfield-McCoy Mountains in South Central West Virginia. The local economy centered around coal and described a very close community at home. The local economy being centralized around coal meant that blue collar work was more common than going off to college, so Micah experienced no community pressures to go. Due to the religious

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28 Students seemed to enjoy this process and were open and happy to share their feedback.
and conservative communities in his region, he shared feeling unsafe and had an unsupportive family and local community. Though Micah grew up feeling isolated from his home community, he has found pride in the state and has become more attached to the Appalachian identity with age and compares it to how the LGBTQIA+ community has reclaimed the queer identity. “Queer folks have been reclaiming that identity and making things about it, just more accepting for other people to claim that identity. So here recently, I've started to feel better about saying that I'm from Appalachia.”

**Skylar**

Skylar grew up in the Eastern part of West Virginia near the Virginia/West Virginia border. While explaining their experiences as a rural West Virginian, they naturally tended to approach their experiences from two perspectives: what West Virginia was and how it differed from Virginia. Early in the interview, Skylar described their perception of crossing the border to go to a more urbanized city in Virginia. “I remember feeling like I'm at the border of Heaven and Hell. I am literally touching the sky, but I'm not hearing the choir yet.”

Skylar’s family, who are from Hispanic countries, felt like their home life was indicative of both Hispanic and Appalachian culture as she described being raised to work the farm she lived on and how physical labor was a regular element to her daily life. Skylar was expected to perform the “womanly” duties at home, including washing dishes, cooking, cleaning, yardwork, and more, while the men in the family were expected to hunt and provide financial support. While there were expectations to be involved in all the physical labor on her farm, Skylar was also continually reminded to present hyper feminine and was forced to go to church.

Skylar’s connection to being Appalachian was complicated because of her Hispanic heritage, but it was also complicated because she felt like others did not connect her with the
rural identity. “I used to be called a little city girl, even though I did so much work for them in that stupid little garden[…] I grew up, I don’t know, singing Wagon Wheel with my little cracked voice. I consider that pretty rural.” When asked to expand on her rural trans* identity, she shared her experiences on being trans* in a rural area.

I would often hear “transgendered” or stuff like that and it made me so uncomfortable. Or “those people” or anything like… it was like if you said it, you were gonna catch it. But it was just so uncomfortable and weird because as much as I appreciate people from those areas, their vocabulary is pretty condensed to maybe, I don’t know, two syllables per word… Most of the time whenever it was something regarding sexuality or identity, it was homophobia or transphobia, or they’d get it blatantly wrong.

Skylar further noted that her family was equally confused or unsupportive. She described feeling like their mom was accepting of other people who were in the LGBTQIA+ community but cited religion when telling Skylar that it was not okay for them. When discussing her cousin who does drag, she shared that her grandpa would say things like, “he thinks he’s a woman” and even when they tried to explain to their family it would be disregarded or not accepted. Their family did not acknowledge or accept their nonbinary identity, and when asked to share how their family felt about the nonbinary community Skylar said, “We didn’t exist. That wasn’t a thing.”

Riley

Riley was raised in South East West Virginia in the New River-Greenbrier Valley. Riley’s father worked in the tourism industry, and he felt like the area was pretty economically stable because of those opportunities. In addition to tourism, the local economy was also supported by both coal and forestry industries. While Riley mentioned how naturally beautiful the region was, he also shared negative traits of the area such as drug trafficking, high
unemployment, and lack of understanding of mental illnesses. Riley passionately spoke about his perception of the communities, saying multiple times that he felt they were “hateful” and that they enforced a strict gender binary and that he was expected to present as hyper masculine. Of the three participants, Riley seemed to feel the least connected to his home community and was very mistrusting of the people and community.

*Shared Experiences*

Across all three participants, there was a consensus that their home communities were always nice to your face but judgmental behind closed doors. All three participants discussed how religion influenced this characteristic of their communities: “Love the sinner, not the sin.” To expand on this, Micah used “Bless your heart,” and “You’re so pretty” to explain the types of judgements experienced in his rural community. While technically not meant to harm, these kinds of comments and microaggressions held a clear undertone for the students that their community was not supportive of them even when they were being kind. While Micah was able to connect to his rural communities more after moving away, and was therefore able to compartmentalize those comments, both Riley and Skylar felt more disconnected from the regions they came from and were hesitant to discuss connections with Appalachia.

In addition to the community atmosphere, both Riley and Skylar discussed the tensions experienced in their home communities about being non-binary. Having described many gender norms and gender expectations they experienced in their home communities, both Riley and Skylar explained feeling like they didn’t fit into the prescribed expectations. Even when in more accepting environments, Skylar discussed being told on several occasions that they needed to “pick one,” when it came to their gender identity. These comments were echoed by Riley who agreed and said that their family couldn’t believe it, even going so far as to say, “Because it's sort
of, I guess, a gray area and I guess it's not gender at all.” When describing presentation, Skylar discussed how they felt like they often get comments about how they couldn’t understand how they were nonbinary since their hair is long. “They think I owe them androgyny or something.”

In passing, all three participants mentioned how the Trump administration impacted their home communities. They shared feelings that Trump’s election helped re-enforce negative perceptions of LGBTQIA+ communities and even empowered them to be more hateful in public. When asked to elaborate, Riley said, “Pence believes in conversion therapy. I think that is all that I need to say.” Most notably, Micah discussed a dramatic increase in fear when Trump was elected, and that when the results were posted he knew he would be losing what few rights he felt like he had and remembered feeling like he was afraid of being in public in the region. “I honestly felt like at any given moment I was going to be killed.” He continued further by saying, “I was a target just because he [Trump] kind of was really an instigator of sort of that sort of hatred.” When looking back, Micah shared that he felt like the community was permanently altered, even after Trump was no longer president, and that it feels more politically charged than it ever used to.

Building Walls

A common theme that emerged during the original data analysis was a shared hesitation when approaching relationships like friendships, intimate partners, and faculty/staff at their institution. When asked how they approached these, each of them used words such as cautiously, guarded, and difficult. Hesitation in relationships can have multiple causes, and each of their contexts vary drastically so a variety of factors impacted these experiences.

Skylar shared experiences of feeling very mistrusting and being initially unsure of people, but often attributed it to a rough homelife and a broken family instead of solely because
of their transness. “I try to execute all that stuff with caution.[…] I’m not gonna surround myself with people who dull my sparkle.” Skylar explained that the biggest difficulty is in navigating intimate relationships. She uses she/they pronouns in most relationships in their life, but also uses he in intimate relationships and this can feel difficult depending on who they are with. “In social settings it can get a little weird because I’m still very feminine presenting in what I wear and how I dress.[…] But with an intimate partner, I can get very personal. I can discuss my different feelings and my identity and stuff like that on a deeper level.”

Of the three participants, Skylar described the most on-campus involvement, participating in five on campus clubs, serving as the Vice President for two of those, and taking 18 credit hours. When prompted, I asked them if they felt like it was difficult to balance those expectations with their academic expectations and they shared that they felt like they were able to be successful across all of them but that they felt really stretched thin and that they have difficulty saying no to things. The clubs she participates in are often the same community of people, and so these clubs have become their main source of friendship community, which continues to motivate her to stay involved.

Skylar’s experiences with faculty on campus has always been positive, but Skylar had great insight about institutional supports that are missing. Skylar explained that faculty often use outdated terms but that they always felt like they didn’t mean any harm, just that they weren’t properly updated on acceptable terminology. In addition to this, only one faculty member she’s had has ever asked for pronouns. In addition to faculty, Skylar mentioned that they felt like housing and residence life needed to find better ways to support trans* students who may not want to stay on the floor that matches their sex. In addition to this, Skylar mentioned having
more inclusive options on surveys, and that the school should avoid doing: female, male, “other,” and to try and be more inclusive there.

Riley was not as hesitant in relationships, however, but was also the most dependent on online resources for communities29. “[…] But relationships, I feel as though I've been relatively lucky. And I'll have to credit that with dating apps and my photography history, because I can make myself look good.” He went on to share that he has a strong online community and was living with their girlfriend, which occupied a lot of the social time of their life, sometimes even to the detriment of other social engagements. He did speak to feeling a need to be very guarded when meeting people for the first time, and how gender discussions were often hard in those relationships. When discussing how they manage balancing social and academic expectations, they explained that they are doing their best to manage everything but admitted that motivation was often their downfall when it comes to doing well in academics. The lack of mental health resources on campus has made it difficult for him to find the tools needed to balance and focus when he needs to.

Micah was the only student who has begun a transition process, so he had additional hesitation when approaching relationships. Micah shared the difficulty in navigating intimate relationships because he’s a transgender male but has not undergone any physical surgery so there are additional difficult discussions that he has to present when in the dating world. He shared that prior to his current relationship, he felt a lot of hesitation because of body dysmorphia that he still faces.

It hits me sometimes randomly, it really just depends, […] I’ll pick something up or do something and I’ll be like, “Bro, I have small hands and tiny wrists.”[…] Sometimes I’ll

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29 This will be explored more in the online resources section.
just be walking and I’m like, “I walk like a girl,” and then I’ll change the way I walk, even if it makes me uncomfortable. The way I sit sometimes, I’ll be like, “Girls sit like that.”

In addition to these difficult moments of dysmorphia, Micah has experienced difficulties showering, or changing, and having to face the body he is in. At some points, he has mentioned needing to shower in the dark to overcome those feelings.

**Online Resources**

Across all three participants, using online resources was an important part of their adolescence. YouTube, Instagram, Reddit, chat rooms, and Discord were tools used across each of the students, and were important to each of their adolescence. The online resources were used to learn about LGBTQIA+ communities, terms the communities use, and to help find a community themselves. While each of the participants felt isolation within their own home communities, these online sources provided them a way to find their own community that they didn’t find represented in their own region.

Micah described using YouTube as a tool to learn. He was able to find YouTubers that described how they would bind themselves or pad, how they cut their hair, and how they would date. Micah was even able to find someone who would show the more honest side of surgeries and what options were out there. Having these videos, Micah was able to process his gender identity on his own without having to turn to in person friends and potentially put himself at risk. “I didn’t ever feel the need to interact with anyone about it because I felt like it was my own personal thing.” In addition to these YouTube channels, Micah used Facebook, reddit, and Instagram to find trans* communities who were investigating these things so that he had a community of people who knew exactly what he was going through.
Skylar and Riley both shared their experiences learning about the LGBTQIA+ community from online resources. Having the internet during adolescence gave them opportunities to answer questions about their identity and find communities that represented them. Riley, specifically, felt very dependent on online resources to find communities. When they were younger, a medical situation led to them being stuck at home for long periods of time, and they began their dependence on online resources then. Even though people in person knew their sexuality, Riley shared that they only felt comfortable discussing gender with the community that they had online and that it was much later that they would come out to others in person. Skylar echoed a reliance on online resources, saying that it was good to live in a time that allowed them to have a resource where they could easily answer questions raised.

Skylar did point out that while these resources are important and helped them, they also sometimes created more confusion. With seemingly unending information, the internet can sometimes provide so many terms and options that it may seem difficult to find yourself in the information. They felt like each time they learned a new term they had to go through a process of figuring out if that applied to them and it was sometimes mentally taxing. “It was really overwhelming, especially as a little child with unrestricted internet access.” In addition to this concern, Skylar shared a concern that while finding communities is good, it also has a lot of dangers being young on the internet and how much at risk that puts them. “I think our groups are so vulnerable and even though we all... I think, anyway, a lot of us build up these walls to keep us guarded. I think at least for me, if somebody says the right stuff, I'm pretty easy to break down those walls.”
Micah’s Dual Identities

Across the participants, it was shared that they were able to be themselves and found a welcoming community in college. They all shared experiences of having a community around them that was a family away from family and felt comfortable being themselves there. Because of this, it became clear that they were separating how uncomfortable they felt while in their home region because of the lack of support that was waiting for them there. While they didn’t each describe in great detail having two separate lives, their words made it clear that there was the person they were at home and the person they were at their college.

Among the group, Micah had the clearest desire to have two separate identities. Before college, he had a conscious fear and hesitation of dating because they may have known him before his transition. By being at college, however, he has enjoyed a separation from the region that knew him pre-transition. By being in a new area, he was able to fully express his gender presentation without a fear that the community would regularly see his past and had never known him by his dead name. “The animosity is great… I’m like an anonymous person. People just know what they’ve met from here.”

When going home for breaks, Micah has to face an unsupportive mother that dead names him frequently. Growing up, Micah was very close to his mother, and their relationship is very important to him. To try and keep the peace, Micah often acts and speaks differently while at home with her and has been forced to create a second identity to keep their relationship alive. “It does bother me knowing that I, since I am so close with my mom, that eventually she’ll want nothing to do with me.” While at home, he and his mother actively participate in religious events and community outreach with people who would not support Micah if they were aware of his identity. Micah makes himself uncomfortable by acting counterproductive to his identity to avoid
fights in his home community. “I just don’t act a certain way that I feel comfortable to act. I’m just kind of there, which is not miserable per se, but I am aware that I’m acting differently.”

_Campus Mental Health_

When going back through the interviews, it was clear that each of the participants were invested in mental health and voiced a need for mental health resources above any other institutional resource. Each of them had different prior experiences with mental health, but when asked about what institutional resources they needed or felt like the college could use, they all shared a frustration with the lack of mental health supports available. While each of the colleges they attended had counselors and other resources, the insurance plans available only covered a certain number of appointments, and all students shared that the wait time was so long that they had given up entirely or settled for minimal appointments and felt unsatisfied. Skylar shared that when they were referred to a therapist, the school counselor prepared them for a few months wait, but was surprised when it was much worse than expected. “I was like, you know what, two months is two months, I can wait. And then we called, and they were like, ‘it's gonna be 9 to 12 months. You're gonna be waiting.’ And I was like, ooh, might as well not do it.”

Micah shared how mental health was always a priority for their household because his mom went through a handful of marriages and divorces. With the support of his mother, he was able to get in therapy starting when he was 13, but Micah shared feeling like she was ultimately trying to use therapy to cure him of things she thought was wrong with him. “She went into it with the misguided intention that it would fix me.” In reality, the therapy helped affirm and support his gender identity and he felt lucky and happy with the resources he was given. When he turned 21, however, he was shocked to find out that he was unable to be on his parents’ insurance anymore, so he needed to turn to another resource to get therapy. When he reached out
to the school therapist, she was so overwhelmed that it took several weeks to respond and make an appointment, and at the time of the interview he still had not been able to meet with her. He suggested the school needed another therapist to help support the students since only having one therapist was clearly not enough for the needs of the school population. Other resources that Micah shared being helpful was being able to change his preferred name in the system and having faculty support when doing so to get it updated and to get a new ID printed with the correct name.

Skylar had never been able to see a therapist but had been trying to since they were a senior in high school. After years of telling people she needed help, she was finally able to convince their high school to meet with them to get diagnosed. When they were finally evaluated by their high school counselor, they were only able to get a pre-diagnosis and the school didn’t offer therapy. When the school gave her the pre-diagnosis, they suggested she talk to someone formally about it, and she was told she needed parent consent, but their family refused to sign the papers. After getting accepted to college, the school did a campus wide screening, and they were finally referred to a therapist. Skylar was given the opportunity to set up an appointment with the school counselor, but Skylar felt uncomfortable doing so. Skylar attends a smaller school where the counselor is an active part of campus and they felt ultimately uncomfortable talking to the therapist because of how well they knew the therapist already. The therapist did offer a referral, but when they reached out to set up an appointment there was a 6-month waiting period and Skylar decided it wasn’t worth the hassle.

Riley, like Micah, had been given the opportunity to get mental health resources, but when they went to college their insurance would only cover so many appointments. Once they’d passed the number, and it wasn’t covered, the bills were out of the realm of possibility for them,
so they stopped attending. Riley had been going to therapy for a majority of his life, and not having the resources needed has been very frustrating to them. The school they attend offers an online mental health resource, but they felt uncomfortable using those because of negative rumors about how it doesn’t provide good support and/or is difficult to get appointments. Riley also voiced a need for more LGBTQIA+ resources on campus, mentioning that they had used a discord server and no more.

**Conclusions**

This chapter contained results of the analysis found after coding the interviews using relationality, power, social inequality, social context, managing complexity, and social justice as intersectional lenses. The gender and place framework worked in conjunction with the intersectional constructs to highlight emerging themes. Three participants were interviewed and participated in pre and post focus groups for this critical narrative. Interview questions were structured to understand social norms that influenced the rural trans* students and how that was reflected across community and institutional contexts. Two students who participated were nonbinary, and one was a transgender male student. The participants represented three unique West Virginia regions and were actively enrolled in a college in West Virginia.

Cultural norms that were highlighted in the discussions revolved around conservative and religious ideals of the rural communities the students were from. Even though their schools were also located in West Virginia students did not see these norms reflected in their institutions except for in specific instances. Each student shared moments of performing their identity and finding ways to align their gender identity with their physical presentation, but their experiences diverged depending on their specific gender. While Riley and Skylar felt tension with their

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30 See [Appendix D](#) for frameworks used.
presentation not aligning with the gender identity, particularly in regard to the use of their preferred pronouns, Micah experienced more direct body dysmorphia that impacted their day-to-day life, even when their presentation and gender identity aligned. Most notably, all students made great effort to make a direct call for better mental health supports on campus. Chapter V includes a summary and discussion of the five themes that emerged from the analysis and explore how they are reflected within the research questions. Following this analysis, the chapter will discuss the nuances of the data, implications from the findings, and recommendations for practice and research.
Chapter V: Conclusion

Within West Virginia, genderism can be seen in both legislation and discriminatory cultural norms that isolate and shame trans* students. The combination of the genderism, enforced by traditional Appalachian gender norms, and the overall negative association of rural students being portrayed as uneducated and “less than” impacts rural trans* students from dual perspectives. The purpose of this critical narrative study was to understand how rural West Virginia trans* students navigate cultural norms of their rural home communities and higher education contexts.

The narratives explored a wide range of both shared and unique experiences. An intersectionality approach provided the tools to investigate how place and gender identities interact or create conflict within the lives of rural trans* students. Throughout the discussions, we were able to identify institutional norms, micro-contexts, stakeholders, and supports that are important to rural trans* students while also being able to highlight and analyze moments of internal and external conflict within the narratives. By using a critical narrative approach, the students were provided a manner to legitimize and share their lived experiences. While sharing their experiences, students critically analyzed moments of dissonance and other power differentials they witnessed across both home community and institutional contexts. The following questions helped guide the study:

RQ1: What are the normative tensions rural trans* college students experience across home community and postsecondary institutional contexts?

RQ2: How do rural trans* students negotiate these norms and perform these identities across home and university contexts?
RQ3: What institutional supports do rural trans* students perceive as influencing their experiences?

Using these research questions, an analysis of the interviews yielded the following five themes.

1. Tensions in home communities
2. Hesitance in relationships and social interactions
3. Dependence on online resources as an adolescent
4. Performance of identities
5. Desire for more mental health resources at their institutions

Interpretation of Findings

In the following sections, I explore the relationship between the research questions and the themes that emerged. Within each theme, there is a discussion of how the theme interacts with, or adds to, existing literature, and moments of convergence and divergence are referenced when relevant.

Theme 1: Home Community Tensions

One of the most heavily researched areas of LGBTQ literature examines the impact that family and family support has on LGBTQ youth. “Social and cultural stigmatization creates difficult challenges for lesbians, gay males, and bisexual people in core aspects of human development: the development of a personal identity, the integration of identity into the family, the development of intimate relationships, and the creation of a psychological sense of community within the larger culture.” (D’Augelli et al., 1998, p. 361) While much of the original research investigating this phenomenon focused almost entirely on the LGB community (Brown, 1995; D ’Augelli, 1994; D ’Augelli & Garnets, 1995; Fox, 1995; Gonsiorek, 1995; Worthen &
Jones, 2022), more recent trans* specific research shows that not only is it reflected in their community as well, it is even more important for gender minorities to have a supportive family (Lolai, 2015; Matsuno et al., 2022). Religious beliefs and community social expectations surrounding gender norms can impact a trans* students’ relationship with family and home communities (Whitley, 2016). These impacts are particularly highlighted in rural communities where more conservative religious beliefs and genderism are prevalent.

The first theme found highlighted students’ experiences with tensions in their home communities. This theme strongly aligns with this existing literature, and the impact of this isolation can negatively influence their lives across multiple dimensions. Within each conversation, the students shared generally negative views of their home communities, and shared feeling as though the region was not supportive of them or the LGBTQIA+ community. All participants felt like their families and home communities were not accepting of their gender identity, even if they had previously accepted their sexual identity. Each student gave a sense of detachment from their families, as though they had long ago accepted there would always be a barrier between themselves and their family and that this was either caused by, or worse because of, their gender identity. When discussing their home communities, religion and dominant religious beliefs of their home communities were offered as the reason that many of the local communities were not supportive of their identities. Skylar shared their frustration with some of the mixed messaging that religious communities had towards the LGBTQIA+ community and when venting shared, “God made the rainbow. He had to like something about it.”

It is important to note that while religion was discussed within their narratives, the students’ perceptions of their rural home tensions is only one part of their explanation of home experiences, and that their experiences are not meant to generalize beyond their own perceptions.
This is particularly important to avoid conflating place, rurality, and religion in the general sense. The purpose of highlighting these moments is to give voices to those within these regions who have religiously laden experiences that were adverse. The participants’ perceptions often included discussing a community of people who they thought they could trust or would be supportive, but would, because of their religion, not be supportive of their identities. When considering these experiences, it is possible that the students are unable to decouple church-going and religion. The students’ perceptions are based on individual interactions with church-going community members, and they have used those voices as proxy for the regional communities. This phenomenon has then been exacerbated by all participants acknowledging a prevalence of churches in their regions. In addition to these comments, it is important to note that two of the three participants had Hispanic heritage that may or may not have been indicative of the local rural regions.

The first research question posed was to investigate normative tensions rural trans* college students experience across home community and postsecondary institutional contexts, and this first theme highlights the shared tensions experienced in each of their regions. In addition to this context, these participants’ experiences also add to existing literature because their identity and lived experiences were impacted by a more socially conservative rural community. Their experiences add nuance to the literature, highlighting how dominant religious beliefs in Appalachian communities can influence feelings of belonging.

**Theme 2: Social Hesitation**

The first theme, as described above, situated the study by providing home community contexts. The second theme builds on this and provides social perspective across contexts. The combination of these two themes then helps us answer the first research question: the students
negative home community experiences provide insight on what tensions they experienced in their home region, and the social hesitation discussed on campus then provides insight as to how the students have navigated those tensions.

Little (or no) current research exists that explores rural postsecondary trans* students’ hesitation in relationships or social interactions. This gap could be attributed to being too broad of a topic, the small population size, and too many variables to pinpoint. Based on the interviews and focus groups with the participants, students’ hesitation in social interactions is closely tied to literature on family and community support, access to online resources during adolescence (which will be discussed in the following theme), and fear. While each of the participants had a shared experience of being guarded in relationships, the reasons for each were unique to each student which makes it difficult to make one overall conclusion aside from a way to mitigate or prevent perceived continued negative experiences learned in their home communities. The experiences shared by Micah, Skylar, and Riley add to existing literature on each of these individual topics while also providing evidence that more research is needed. Since all students experienced both lack of family support in rural communities and had access to online resources as an adolescent, this research also provides motivation for future research to investigate how these factors influence rural trans* students’ social experiences on campus.

Skylar directly shared why they felt guarded, explaining that their negative home life made them feel guarded and scared to open up to new people. “Because of that experience, I had to put up really big walls and I was like, ‘I can't really let any of my guards down otherwise something really bad will happen and I'll get really hurt by it.’” Riley did not share or expand on reasons they felt guarded, but they did discuss feeling very dependent on online resources during his childhood and adolescence. This dependence on online and distant community could be
impeding students’ in person social interactions. Micah, who was the only student to have begun transition, shared a lot of fear during our conversation. Fear of his home communities, fear of random acts of violence, fear of hate crimes, and more. Because of this recurring theme, it would be expected that his hesitation stems from a fear of not being accepted or of being judged.

Despite their unsupportive home communities, and in spite of feeling guarded or afraid, each student seemed happy in their higher education institution communities and shared feeling supported by their college’s queer friends and community. Riley said LGBTQIA+ members find each other. “I always feel like there is just an innate sense in every gay person called a gaydar. So it always just kind of attracts people.” Skylar’s active participation in campus activities and strong community ties provides an interesting contrast to what would be expected from students who reported feeling guarded when entering social and intimate relationships. This contrast provides insight on how students are navigating these relationships on campus and provides social context to the study. Future research might investigate if students are more trusting of those within the LGBTQIA+ community, and if they are doing so in a more unguarded, even potentially unsafe, way. Skylar, for example, mentioned that they felt like once they got a “vibe” from someone they bonded very quickly and strongly and admitted to feeling like their trust was often flawed.

Even though these communities exist, the hesitation the students shared when entering relationships and social interactions can still create social barriers, and this may be particularly influential when it comes to their relationships with authority figures, such as faculty or administrators. This hesitation with faculty aligns with the existing literature: trans* students feel fear that faculty and staff lack knowledge about their identities and experiences (Nicolazzo et al., 2017, p. 206; McKinney, 2005; Rankin et al., 2010). Micah directly shared concerns that he had
faculty who had never asked about pronouns and explained how important it was for him every time someone went out of their way to affirm their gender identity.

**Theme 3: Reliance on Online Resources**

Some rural communities, particularly those discussed in terms of their isolation, may not be able to experience the saturation of diversity that an urban community would. As technology became more prevalent in society, and as internet became more readily available, rural communities began to have access to information and communities that they may have otherwise been excluded from. This means that students who had access to online resources during their adolescence had access to ask questions freely, seek communities, and potentially reduce feelings of isolation.

In 2017, Cipolletta et al. found transgender participants were motivated to join online communities by the desire to share experiences, to develop close relationships, to test oneself, to ask or offer help, and to reduce prejudice. In addition to these motivations, they found that they were seeking online medical advice and psychological support. While having these resources provided the participants with these positive supports, they also found that participants faced transphobia, sexually explicit messages, and arguing within the community. Not only was the environment potentially harmful, but there were also instances of predators and trolls. The participants in the study suggested that there be protective measures taken for those communities to avoid these more negative associations.

Little research has been done on the impact of online resources and supports for transgender students, and how their experience in higher education is altered by the existence of these supports during their adolescence. Anderson’s (2019) dissertation provides the closest example, though the mixed methods study used a psychological lens. Like Cipolletta et al.
(2017), Anderson (2019) found participants reported both positive and negative impacts of social media with some of the participants even admitting that it increased feelings of isolation. While students experience benefits of having online access to communities and connections, there is also a tension they must experience when they log off and are left in the isolated community they started in. Nicolazzo et al. (2017) asserted that more research should be done to investigate how students, faculty, and staff interact on social media and how that may influence feelings of support or isolation. This study provides insight into both the first and second research question by illustrating how rural trans* students’ have navigated conflicts before and after transitioning to college, and it has highlighted the importance of online resources as supports for the students.

The shared experiences of Micah, Skylar, and Riley align with the above literature, and their experiences also highlight a need for more research on the impact of online resources for higher education students. Their shared experiences of turning to online resources for information, support, and communities echoed the findings in Cipolletta et al.’s (2017) research: each participant acknowledged the risks and fears that these platforms can pose (Cipolletta et al., 2017; Anderson, 2019). It is possible that the walls and boundaries felt by the students when in relationships could have been influenced by online dependence at a younger age, especially since Anderson (2019) found that it may increase feelings of isolation. Since this generation is one of the first to have wide-spread access to the internet at such a young age, more research is needed. In addition, COVID-19 occurred during their high school experiences; research on the influence of pandemic isolation could further contribute to an understanding of trans* students use of online resources.
Theme 4: Performing Gender

The shared experiences of participants on performing gender identities aligns closely with existing literature that discusses transgender experiences and gender expectations (Bilodeau, 2009; Butler, 2004, 2007; Fellabaum, 2011; Nicolazzo, 2016; Pryor et al., 2016; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This study adds to the literature with its focus on the unique experiences of rural trans* students, providing insight on how the intersection of gender and place influences the gender performance. Participant stories of identity masking and performance across different contexts, including Micah’s creation of a lived dual identity, generate new insights into how gender performance is navigated across contexts – the focus of the second research question.

All participants discussed performing gender within each of their unique perspectives which aligned strongly with the existing literature on genderism. We can see within their narratives that their gender performance is heavily influenced by genderism in social contexts, which enforces the gender binary (Hill, 2003; Nicolazzo, 2016). For Micah, this phenomenon manifests in his desire to present masculine while feeling shame at lingering feminine traits. For the other two participants, genderism presents as an antithesis of being nonbinary. Both Skylar and Riley shared that their nonbinary identities are often questioned and is still widely misunderstood by their home communities. In both cases, their home regions and families made it clear to them that they were supposed to present hyper feminine or hyper masculine, and that anything else was wrong.

In addition to experiencing genderism, Skylar shared experiences with internalized misogyny that were unique to them. This phenomenon has gone unresearched, especially within the intersection of gender, place, and higher education, as explained below. In addition to sharing moments of gender performance generally, Skylar provided insight on how that performance has
changed throughout their life. When younger, Skylar shared feeling severe internalized misogyny and discussed how that impacted their gender presentation and performance later in life:

I have a lot of internalized misogyny, and I refused for a couple of years to be called a girl or anything like that, and I would always have them [friends and family] refer to me as a tom boy or a boy 'cause I referred to myself more as that in time. It was just odd 'cause you don't feel like yourself as a kid and you're always having these things of like women are whatever, and you see it on the TV and you hear it within different communities around that women are this, women are that. And you're like, "I don't feel like any of that, so I must be a boy." And I started to think of women as that as well.

Luckily, I have come out of that.

She went on to reference this again when discussing being feminine presenting while being nonbinary. “I like presenting feminine 'cause I restricted myself from having that kind of identity for so long.” These conflicts that occur also influence their decision to only use he pronouns in intimate relationships. Since there is a normative disjunction between their presentation and their identity, they must navigate these conflicts within their nonbinary identity – a phenomenon echoed in existing literature. Duran & Nicolazzo (2017) found nonbinary students acknowledged a lack of understanding in social settings. “In the participants’ eyes, gender fluidity is not yet acceptable by the macro discourses that exist on campuses. Participants often described feelings of needing to fit within gendered scripts set by partners, pressures that would ultimately compromise their individuality” (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017, p. 540).

Experiences of internalized misogyny have gone unexplored in existing trans* literature, especially within the intersectionality of gender and place, and in higher education settings. The
research that does exist focuses on feminist perspectives instead of through a gender performance lens (Darnell, 2018; Lynn, 2020; Petkova, 2021). It is possible that the experiences of internalized misogyny experienced by Skylar is related to internalized transphobia, which has been researched more thoroughly, particularly through the lens of psychology. Internalized transphobia describes, “a transgender person’s internalization of a negative attitude toward transgender people,” (Helsen et al., 2022, p. 467) and creates a negative self-stigma towards their own gender identity (Staples et al., 2018). This stigma has been associated with increased likelihood of suicidality, depression, and social anxiety. (Helsen et al., 2022; Perez-Brumer et al., 2015; Testa et al., 2015; Testa et al., 2017), and more research is needed to investigate how this may be related to the internalized misogyny experienced by Skylar. This connection could be particularly important in helping challenge the subgroup of the feminist movement who oppose trans* identities and experiences.

In addition to adding to research on internalized misogyny, Micah, Skylar, and Riley’s narratives add nuance to the literature by highlighting how different students manage to balance their gender identity and presentation. Including students from different gender identities allowed the study to demonstrate how nonbinary and other transgender experiences differ in relation to gender performance. While nonbinary students battled with their nonbinary identity aligning with their gender presentation, Micah experienced more direct dysmorphia that was reflected in his own unhappiness with his physical appearance.

**Theme 5: Campus Mental Health**

The third research question sought to understand what institutional supports students perceived as being helpful, and the answer was an overwhelming desire for more mental health supports. The students discussed their dissatisfaction with the available mental health resources
at their institution and criticized online options. The students felt like their colleges lacked enough therapists, had disappointing insurance policies, and felt like the online options were useless and nonresponsive. All participants had previous experiences with needing and wanting mental health supports and each was disappointed in what their schools had to offer.

The importance of mental health resources has been well researched for rural (Nugent et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2018) and transgender populations (Greathouse et al., 2018; James et al., 2016; Rankin et al., 2019), respectively. Due to trans* students’ quality of family relationships, trans* students are more likely to experience mental health distress than their cisgender peers (Platt et al., 2022). In addition, trans* students are more likely to experience severe mental health concerns, such as suicide, trauma history, and mood disorders (Platt, 2020, p. 421). These needs are particularly alarming since schools have not been able to keep up with the recent increased demand for therapy and mental health supports (Francis & Horn, 2017). Reetz et al. (2014) found that counseling services at 2-year institutions are often given more expansive campus services than those at corresponding 4-year institutions. While those at the 4-year institution were able to focus more on more typical counseling services, those at 2-year schools were overwhelmed with providing both direct and indirect services (Reetz et al., 2014). In addition, the increase in mental health awareness and need has led schools to lack the proper staff to satisfy the demand needed and are often forced to refer students to other providers or are put on longer waiting lists (Francis & Horn, 2017).

Directly in line with this research, Micah, Skylar, and Riley all shared experiences of being unable to get the services they needed at their respective schools. The college that Micah and Skylar attends has one therapist, and since Riley attends a larger university, his had several more available therapists. In both cases, the demand meant that students were kept waiting
months or were told to use online resources, which the students viewed as being a less desirable option. The students appeared to acknowledge that there is greater personal connection with in-person therapy, and students are attempting to get the best option they can for mental health supports. Additionally, many online therapy options have individuals who are not local to the students, which could add to the distance felt by the online therapy options. Riley was also upset at the university’s insurance plans, which often only cover the first few appointments. After insurance, Riley shared that much of the cost is left up to the student and it made it difficult for him to get the help he needs since he was no longer on his parent’s insurance and had no family support.

Micah and Skylar were never able to secure an appointment with the school’s available therapist. Even though they couldn’t get an appointment, Skylar shared hesitation to make an appointment because the therapist was well known on campus and was an active part of the campus community. Since Skylar is so active on campus, they interact with the counselor regularly and it has made Skylar feel like talking to her about personal matters would be out of the question. “I just don't like talking about it with people that I see on a regular basis.” While there has been significant research on the mental health needs of colleges and universities, the phenomenon that Skylar experienced when seeking counseling supports in a rural college, particularly one with close social communities, has not been investigated. Since counseling staff at 2-year institutions are more utilized across other campus expectations (Francis & Horn, 2017), counselors at these schools may be more likely to interact and bond with the students. This could have both positive and negative associations: while this may comfort some students and allow them to consider counseling, it may at the same time deter students who want to maintain privacy and anonymity.
Theoretical Framework

The study used a combination of critical trans* theory and critical race theory to support and understand the experiences of rural trans* students and how they navigate their place and gender identities. The resulting theoretical framework combined the two above theories in conjunction with the three facets of critical Trans* theory and the five themes of critical race theory for rural students. This framework was used to create four intersectional lenses that helped inform the research questions and helped develop the interview questions and discussions. In the following, I interpret the findings through the lens of the four intersectional themes found in the theoretical framework.

Gender and Place Identities operate on individual, institutional, and cultural levels. The first intersectional theme acknowledges that identities function across multiple contexts, from personal to political. The aim of the study was not only to investigate the lived experiences of the individual, but also to understand how that manifested in institutional and cultural norms. Throughout the study, Micah, Skylar, and Riley shared their gender and place identities using their own individual vocabulary, pronouns, and perspectives, and were situated as experts in their experiences. While each of them had unique experiences, there were many shared phenomena that were discussed in the findings above. The participants’ experiences varied based on their college or university: their experiences converged when discussing the need for faculty training and mental health resources but diverged as the different institutions provided varied resources for the participants. Examples of cultural norms and expectations discussed were genderism and conservative home communities.

Genderism and place oppressions intersect with each other and all other systems of oppression. Participants in the study naturally fell within the intersection of gender and place by
identifying as rural West Virginia trans* individuals. Collins (2019) was used as inspiration when grounding the framework. To consider intersectionality with a critical lens, Collins (2019) suggested six constructs, including: relationality, power, social inequality, social context, managing complexity, and using social justice as a grounding praxis. These constructs were used to both inform the research questions while helping build the interview questions. Students are not only impacted by their gender, and they were not only impacted by the region they came from. Individuals and experiences cannot exist in a vacuum, so it was important when analyzing the findings to highlight that their gender and place identities were unavoidably interacting while also not falsely assuming that everything that happens within one identity was the result of the other. The intersection of traditional gender norms and religion within West Virginia, for example, are closely linked, but cannot be solely responsible for the genderism that rural trans* students experience in rural Appalachia.

**Epistemic injustice and the critical importance of rural trans* students’ experience, knowledge, and voice.** An essential part of this critical narrative is to provide rural trans* students with an avenue to share their unique experiences and give them a platform to share their voices. As part of the interviews and focus groups, students were given opportunities to provide honest narratives and were situated in the research as the expert. After the interviews, students were given the opportunity in the second focus group to provide feedback on initial themes and were given a last opportunity to clarify meaning or add anything they felt was important to inform the study. By situating the participants as experts, the study centralized their experiential knowledge and provided them an opportunity to attest to consequences of genderism and place oppressions. Their experiences not only inform the study, but also add to the literature, as discussed in the above sections.
All knowledge is individual can be analyzed differently across methodologies and 
**historical contexts.** Within each of the narratives, different themes or conclusions could be 
taken depending on the methods chosen. Since rural place identities are influenced by both emic 
and etic experiences, the study acknowledged individual and shared experiences. Each student 
was able to share their individual experiences that were informed by a different regional context 
across the state of West Virginia. “In the case of college students from rural areas, their identities 
can be understood as individual, as influenced by social groups, as the interaction between 
individuals as social groups, as impacted by environmental factors, and as changing based upon 
contexts. Each of these understandings can potentially uncover new insights about the students 
which may be neglected with a narrower approach” (Cain & Smith, 2020). While each of them 
had unique perspectives from their individual rural area in West Virginia, they also shared many 
of the same experiences, and the combination of these helped inform the study’s findings.

This method can also be used when considering the students’ gender identity. While the 
students all identify as rural trans* students, each of them has a unique gender identity which 
provides the study with more nuance and added a diverse set of voices to the existing literature. 
While each of the students experienced genderism and pressure to adhere to the gender binary, 
each student had cultural expectations that were unique to them.

**Social Identity Development**

Throughout the narratives, students’ perspectives and experiences were viewed through the 
len of navigation while situating students in their own nested series of contexts. The students 
shared experiencing tensions in their home communities, building walls, going to an online space 
for information and community, how they navigated their gender performance, and a desire for 
more mental health services. While each of these discussions helps us categorize and provide
language to discuss these experiences, it is clear through this research that the bounds of contexts are becoming more and more blurred with the increased prevalence of online spaces.

Bronfenbrenner’s nested series of contexts, from Microsystems to macrosystems, help discuss and analyze experiences that influence students by understanding how students adapt to their environment. Online communities have increasingly blurred spatial boundaries within place research. Because rural communities have smaller numbers of LGBTQIA+ community members, it may be even more important to those individuals to turn to an online community for support. The information and communities that are being dispersed across spatial boundaries continue to blur the spatial boundaries that once existed as hard borders. Most students, if not all, carry their phones in their pockets with them while in their rural and college communities, which means the separation from the in person and online world is also beginning to blur. Students seek information in online spaces, which adds to their language and understanding of their own communities. The access to instant information influences the way students begin to internalize and understand their identity, helping them create a personal foundation at a potentially younger age than has ever happened before.

The phenomenon of blurring spatial lines and adding complexity to place research adds to what we know about social identity development by adding nuance and modernizing our understanding of how students experience multiple contexts at once. Online communities provide a new, non-place bound community that exists simultaneously with geographic communities. This online context, especially within the addition of social media, brings culture, political contexts, and community pressures closer to an individual’s microsystem and broadens our understanding of navigation, place, context research.
Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings of this study, colleges and universities should work to increase faculty training, diversify course content, increase mental health supports, and help support trans students in residence halls.

Faculty Training

Garvey & Dolan (2020) highlighted the importance of faculty in the lives of queer and trans* students. “Faculty have a significant impact on QT students’ success, persistence, personal wellness, and academic outcomes, whether it be positive or negative” (Garvey & Dolan, 2020, p. 19). Because of the students’ shared experience of feeling guarded and how important college communities are to them, it is important that higher education institutions take steps to professionally train faculty and staff in updated terminology and to increase diversity in the classroom. Not only did Micah have faculty who never asked for pronouns, Skylar admitted to hearing slurs that faculty used without knowing it was a microaggression or offensive.

In addition to increased faculty training, faculty should work to increase diversity in the class materials presented in class. Throughout the interviews, Skylar referenced content taught in both high school and college. They posed questions about how most authors in their STEM classes referenced male authors and rarely women and discussed gendered expectations of careers. In addition to the negative associations of gendered classroom experiences, they also discussed how much they enjoyed learning about intersex and the gender spectrum in a high school biology class. This highlights the need to diversify classrooms and classroom materials, and institutions should begin requiring more in-depth training about how to implement these practices.
Increased Mental Health Services

Schools need to work to increase mental health supports on campus and make sure that students can get help when needed. While there are certainly various levels of concern with mental health, both rural and transgender students experience lower than average mental health. Furthermore, transgender students experience suicide ideation at alarming numbers so having immediate access to counseling services could be life or death for these students (Smith et al., 2018). In addition to increasing access and availability for their students, institutions should work to help students who need financial assistance so that students are not worrying about the financial burden of requesting for help. Rural students are more likely to come from a lower socioeconomic status (Koricich et al., 2018), and without supportive families (Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017), they often need to rely on their own financial stability and out of pocket costs may be out of the question.

Residence Life

Serving transgender students in campus housing is one of the most researched topics in trans* literature. Since each student has unique experiences, each student has diverse needs and it is impossible for schools to be “one size fits all.” Schools should continue to work to create gender inclusive housing policies and do their best to keep in mind that students who are not out or supported by families may need extra accommodations. Students may want to stay in the dorm that aligns with their sex. Other students may want to stay in a dorm that aligns with their gender identity but are afraid to do so when their families visit them.

Micah expressed fear in staying in the dorm that aligns with their gender identity because their mother visits campus occasionally and he knew that they would be unsupportive. In addition to this, Micah expressed how his body dysmorphia sometimes makes it difficult to
shower. To try and ease this, Micah shared wanting to shower in the dark, but having to share a common bathroom makes this difficult while on campus. Trans* students should be given a variety of housing options, including to stay in an individual room so that they may have their own bathroom if that is something they would be more comfortable with. Unfortunately, most schools charge extra for these, and schools should find a way to support the students without creating extra financial burden.

Designating specific halls, spaces, or rooms to be specific to trans* students creates an environment of separateness and should be avoided when possible. While there is no “one size fits all” approach, a current inclusive practice is for campuses to create a Gender Inclusive Housing option that is offered to students regardless of sex, gender, or sexual orientation (Garvey et al., 2018). Because of the inclusiveness involved with gender inclusive housing, there is never a concern that a student would be identified as trans*, or any other member of the LGBTQIA+ community. Having this as an option allows students to be in an inclusive space without having the need to out themselves on campus. If colleges and universities do not have an inclusive housing option, trans* students must out themselves to receive housing accommodation, and this may end up also outing them to their families (Garvey et al., 2018).

Recommendations for Research

While research concerning LGBTQIA+ communities has experienced a steady growth in the last decade, transgender research only began to gain momentum in 2014, with much of the research focusing on mental health and transgender identities (An & Batra, 2022). Because of the broad spectrum of identities experienced within the LGBTQIA+ communities, there is still a relatively small amount of research that exists for transgender individuals, and this number gets smaller when considering intersectionality. Research regarding rural trans* students remains
minimal, and more research is needed to explore the impacts of online dependence, social contexts, family supports, rural communities, politics and legislation, and gender performance.

Future research should consider what connection, if any, exists between online dependence, family supports, and social hesitation. While the findings here align with the research of Cipolletta et al. (2017) and Anderson (2019), there is very little qualitative research that exists investigating how these resources are influencing higher education students. If the students are turning to online resources for information, support, and communities, colleges and universities need to continue to investigate how we can use those resources to add support and to better understand the needs of the students. These students may be less interactive in person, and future research should investigate how having online resources as an adolescent helps or hinders the students’ ability to create in-person communities. Lastly, we should consider how the online resources benefits the students, how to educate them about the risks involved, and how we can use online resources within a college or university to meet the students where they are.

Since many rural communities are more politically conservative (Dillon & Savage, 2006), future research should investigate how the Trump election impacted rural trans* students who were adolescents during the election. Every student in the study expressed how violent their respective home communities got during the election and shared feeling an increased amount of fear because it felt like their communities were being empowered to voice and outwardly express violence towards the LGBTQIA+ communities. After the Trump administration, negativity towards the LGBTQ communities led an intense “rainbow wave of LGBTQ voters” (Worthen, 2020, p.1), which increased political polarization. Heightened political tensions has influenced incoming LGBTQ youth, and these students are beginning to avoid states that have anti-LGBTQ legislation. “Students, parents and college counselors say some LGBTQ youth are choosing not
to attend colleges in states that have passed legislation targeting their rights” (Horowitch, 2023). In West Virginia alone, there are 12 anti-LGBTQ bills that target healthcare, schools and education, free speech and expression, civil rights, and more (ACLU, 2023).

Future research should also investigate how internalized misogyny and gender identity interact to influence a students’ gender presentation. No research currently investigates how this presents within the intersection of gender, place, and higher education contexts. It is possible that rural students are facing this internalized misogyny based on the gender expectations of rural communities, and more research would be needed to understand what factors influence these feelings.

Throughout this process, there are also two research methods recommendations: an increase in gender inclusivity in mental health research and improving calls for participants. While mental health for both rural and trans* student populations has been well researched, there is a body of mental health research utilization which disaggregates by race, but not gender minoritized populations. The current study highlights the importance of the inclusion of these voices in large scale studies, which could help improve and add nuance to what research does currently exist. For example, many Healthy Minds studies examine stigma toward mental health services, depressive symptoms, and mental health service use (Lipson et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2017), and these studies should work to be more inclusive within gender minorities.

Another research method that needs to be improved is how we call for participants. Because of the spam and discriminatory emails that were received after the third call for participants, I suggest future research regarding sensitive topics avoid putting a call for participants on social media. Looking back, a better way of reaching these communities would have been to go in person to the LGBTQ centers of the campuses. The lack of trust, and the
social hesitation, that these students experienced highlights the importance of being able to interact on a personal, in person, level so that students are better able to understand researcher intention and to gain trust. In addition to this, getting students to agree to a time-commitment could be difficult, so explaining the study in person may have been received better than an electronic call.

Conclusion

The purpose of this critical narrative study was to understand how rural West Virginia trans* students navigate cultural norms of their rural home communities and higher education contexts. The findings suggested that the normative tensions rural trans* college students experience across home community and postsecondary institutional contexts stemmed from negative home community experiences that reinforced traditional gender norms. Negative home contexts and experiences forced students to feel like they had to build walls and distance themselves emotionally when interacting in social and academic situations both leading up to and while attending college. Students are often pressured to perform their gender identity to negotiate these norms and perform these identities across both home and university contexts. The institutional support that the students perceived as influencing their experiences the most was a lack of mental health supports. In addition to this, students made important suggestions to increase faculty training so that they are more prepared to offer support to their diverse students and to diversify the classroom materials to be more diverse and inclusive. Higher education should seek to continue to support their diverse student populations and consider their students’ voices when making policies and offering supports.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Rural Classifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fringe</td>
<td>Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant</td>
<td>Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Adapted from [https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/definitions.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/definitions.asp). Copyright 2006 by NCES.
Appendix B: Subregions in Appalachia

The Appalachian subregions are contiguous regions of relatively homogeneous characteristics (topography, demographics, and economics) within Appalachia. This classification was developed in the early history of the ARC and provides a basis for subregional analysis. ARC revised the classification in November 2009 by dividing the Region into smaller parts for greater analytical detail and by using current economic and transportation data. Public Law 117-58, signed on November 15, 2021, added three counties (Catawba and Cleveland in North Carolina and Union in South Carolina) to the ARC program and altered the definition of North-Central Appalachia by including the West Virginia counties of Brooke, Hancock, Marshall, and Ohio.
Appendix C: 6 Tenets of Critical Race Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenant 1</th>
<th>racism is normal and the system prioritizing white over color serves many purposes for the dominant group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tenant 2</td>
<td>since racism advances White people both materially and psychically, a large part of the population has little incentive to eliminate racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenant 3</td>
<td>race and racism are social constructions, meaning they result from social relations and thoughts not biological or genetic reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenant 4</td>
<td>dominant groups racialize different groups of people at different times, shifting popular images and stereo-types over time as well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenant 5</td>
<td>no person has just a single, easily described identity, but has multiple and possibly overlapping or conflicting identities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenant 6</td>
<td>people of color have a unique voice and assumed competence to speak about race and racism due to their histories and experiences of oppression</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; As cited by Cain & Smith, 2020).
**Appendix D: Frameworks Used for Content Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intersectionality constructs</th>
<th>Relationality, power, social inequality, social context, managing complexity, and using social justice as a grounding praxis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender and Place Framework</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Gender and Place Identities operate on individual, institutional, and cultural levels.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Genderism and place oppressions intersect with each other and all other systems of oppression.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Epistemic injustice and the critical importance of rural trans* students’ experience, knowledge, and voice.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. All knowledge is individual can be analyzed differently across methodologies and historical contexts.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Rural place identities are influenced by both emic and etic experiences.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Interviewee Name:

Documents Obtained:

Introduction

To facilitate our note-taking, would you be okay if I recorded our conversations today? Only myself and my dissertation committee will have access to these recordings, and they will be deleted after the interview is transcribed. This interview will last no more than one hour, and I have a set of guided questions to be used during our time, but if you think of something during the interview that strays away from the set questions, we have the flexibility to do so.

Opening

You have been selected to join me today because you have been identified as someone who identifies as a transgender student from West Virginia who is currently enrolled in a college or university in the state. This research project seeks to understand how rural West Virginia trans* students navigate cultural norms of their rural home communities and higher education contexts. My goal is to provide you with a platform to share your experience in an open and honest space, and for us to look at your experience critically in order to better understand cultural and institutional norms and how they have impacted your experiences across contexts.

1. Interviewee Transgender and Geographic Background
   - Before we get started, would you feel comfortable telling me your gender identity and what pronouns you prefer?
   - Where in West Virginia are you from?

2. Interviewee Transgender Identity
   - When did you first experience feelings that made you realize you were not cisgender?
   - What were some challenges you faced during that time?
   - What were some supports you had around you?

3. Interviewee Appalachian Identity
   - Tell me about the place where you grew up.
   - How do you feel you are connected to an Appalachian identity, if at all?

4. Interviewee Intersectional Identity
   - What was it like being a trans* person in your home community?

5. Interviewee Perspectives on Cultural Norms
   - Home Context
     - What social norms did you experience in your home region?
     - Did those social norms manifest in community expectations? If so, how did you respond to those expectations?
     - How did you use online platforms to access informational resources, supports, or communities?
   - University Context
     - What social norms did you experience when you went to college?
o Did those social norms manifest in institutional expectations? If so, how did you respond to those expectations?

o How did you navigate social experiences, such as dating, friendships, fraternities, etc?

o How did you balance academic expectations/experiences with social experiences?

o Did you experience expectations or pressures from your home community regarding your university experience?

• **Tensions experienced**
  
o Have you experienced any tensions regarding your rural trans* identity?

o What tensions did you experience in your home community?

o What tensions did you experience in your university community?

6. **Interviewee Perspectives on Institutional Supports**

• How do you feel you are supported in your college community?

• What institutional supports exist that you use that has helped you as a rural trans* student?

• What institutional supports do you feel are missing from your campus?

• What advice would you give other rural trans* students thinking about coming to your campus?