DISCOURSES OF SEXUAL ASSAULT:

PROJECT UNBREAKABLE AND “THE ART OF HEALING”

A Thesis

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in

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by

Victoria Elizabeth Thomas

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DISCOURSES OF SEXUAL ASSAULT:

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Approved by:

__________________________________, Committee Chair
Jacqueline A. Irwin, Ph.D.

__________________________________, Second Reader
Michele Foss-Snowden, Ph.D.

__________________________________, Third Reader
Nicholas Burnett, Ph.D.

____________________________
Date

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Student: Victoria Elizabeth Thomas

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S. David Zuckerman, Ph.D.  
Department of Communication Studies
Abstract

of

DISCOURSES OF SEXUAL ASSAULT:

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by

Victoria Elizabeth Thomas

This thesis examined rape and sexual assault survivor narratives in visual images to better understand lived experiences of sexual assault. The thesis sought to determine ideologies of sexual assault that emerge on the tumblr blog Project Unbreakable through examining eight survivor narratives. In addition, this thesis focused on discovering rhetorical strategies employed by survivors of rape and sexual assault when explicating their experiences. A rhetorical ideological critique informed by theories of feminism and cultural studies discovered ideologies of sexual assault in chosen images by employing Rice’s (2004) omnaphistic visual schema to analyze postmodern visual images. In highlighting oppositional elements, co-constructed elements, contextual elements, and ideological elements in each image, this thesis was able to discover rhetorical strategies used by survivors to shed light on experiences of sexual assault.

_____________________, Committee Chair
Jacqueline A. Irwin, Ph.D.

_____________________
Date
I dedicate this thesis to JJ. At the age of thirteen, you taught me what it meant to be brave. Thank you for teaching me about strength, courage, and what it means to be a survivor.
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I had an amazing support system behind me throughout this strenuous process and saying “Thank You” doesn’t even begin to cover the gratitude that I feel. Nonetheless, I shall try.

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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

On November 6, 2011, Grace Brown posted her first photograph of a sexual assault survivor on Project Unbreakable’s tumblr page. The photograph featured a person, whose face was hidden, holding a white poster board with the following quote handwritten on it: “you wanted it though” (Brown, 2011). The quote written on the poster board, said to the survivor by his or her attacker, gives viewers a glimpse into lived experiences of sexual assault and rape. Project Unbreakable contributes to discourses of sexual assault and rape by bringing numerous survivor voices into public discourse. According to Giuntinti (2013), “Sexual assault is an extremely difficult topic to talk about, and Project Unbreakable works to start a conversation using survivors who are ready to share their experiences” (para. 6). To date, Project Unbreakable has brought over 2,000 survivors of sexual assault into public discourses on sexual assault (Patel, 2013), thus contributing these survivor stories to the body of knowledge on sexual assault.

Literature traces rape and sexual assault in the United States to the colonial periods (Donat & D’Emilio, 1992), yet feminist groups introduced sexual assault and rape as a form of social oppression during the 1960s-1970s (Connell & Wilson, 1974; Donat & D’Emilio, 1992). In April 1971, the New York Radical Feminists held a rape conference in which they organized “a body of information that dealt with rape from the political, social, and psychological point of view of its victims” (Connell & Wilson,
Because of the conference, multiple experiences of rape and sexual assault, as well as resources for survivors, were collected and published in sourcebook for women (Connell & Wilson, 1974). The sourcebook was an initial step in raising consciousness about sexual assault and established rape as a political matter (Connell & Wilson, 1974). A resource for survivors, the sourcebook provided personal stories of survivors, thus, bringing survivor’s stories into public discourses of rape (Connell & Wilson, 1974). These stories confronted the survivor’s attackers and a rape culture that often ignored the prevalence of sexual assault.

Sexual assault and rape, as defined by the Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (2013) is:

Rape is forced sexual intercourse, including vaginal, anal, or oral penetration. Penetration may be by a body part or an object. Sexual assault is unwanted sexual contact that stops short of rape and attempted rape. This includes sexual touching and fondling.

These definitions can vary depending on state laws. Furthermore, sexual assault and rape are also further categorized as acquaintance rape, child sexual abuse, incest, male sexual violence, partner rape, stranger rape, and drug facilitated sexual violence. These categories help make clear, specific acts of sexual assault, allowing survivors with vast situations to connect their experiences. Rape and sexual assault definitions have developed over decades through feminist scholarship that saw rape and sexual assault as “physical and emotional terrorism against women” (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 2005, p. xi). Through the expansion of definitions of sexual assault, feminist scholarship effectively argued for sexual assault and rape as a political issue that is shaping the
United States culture.

Sexual assault is not an individual phenomenon, but instead can affect anyone, thus making it a political issue. “When more than two people have suffered the same oppression the problem is no longer personal but political—and rape is a political matter” (Connell & Wilson, 1974, p. xv). Although it is a political matter, sexual assault is still a personal experience that the survivor must articulate for himself or herself. Through disclosing one’s personal experience, survivors draw attention to the larger societal structures that play a role in sexual assault. Sexual assault relates to an overall ideology of subordination and domination, as one gender is more susceptible to violence to reinforce this power relationship. Sexual assault, therefore, is an issue that intertwines with all societal institutions. In bringing sexual assault as a form of social control into public discourse, Connell & Wilson (1974) were influential in shaping academic inquiry into sexual assault and survivor discourses.

The experience of sexual assault coming into public discourses begs two questions: What is rape? What is sexual assault? An early definition of rape described by The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (1970) saw rape as “coitus without the consent of the woman” and sexual molestation as “non-coital sexual contact without consent” (as cited in Connell & Wilson, 1974, p. 203). This definition considered rape and sexual molestation as experienced only by women. Crucial in viewing rape from a feminist perspective, Brownmiller (1975) and Rose (1977) sought to reaffirm the relationship between sexual aggression and women’s fear through discussing anti-rape
agendas that developed from the feminist movement of the 1960s. As defined by Brownmiller (1975), “If a woman chooses not to have intercourse with a specific man and the man chooses to proceed against her will, that is a criminal act of rape” (p. 18). Feminist redefinitions in the 1970s saw rape as a “means of enforcing gender roles in society” (Donat & D’Emilio, 1992, p. 14) and maintaining a social hierarchy of men as dominant, recognizing rape as an act of violence against subordinates. This feminist redefinition brought about more scholarship on rape and sexual assault.

Further academic inquiry focuses on survivor blaming in criminal trials (Luginbuhl & Mullin, 1981), occurrences of childhood sexual assault (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Siegel, Sorensen, Golding, Burnam, & Stein, 1987), male sexual assault (Mezey & King, 1989) and legal discourse pertaining to sexual assault (Donat & D’Emilio, 1992; LaFree, 1981). While early research sought to prevent rape, speak out against rape, and analyze rape from a feminist perspective (Brownmiller, 1975; Connell & Wilson, 1974; Rose, 1977), few studies actually described the act of rape or sexual assault. This could have contributed to the low number of survivor’s discussion, as to speak out about an experience requires naming that experience, and is filled with difficulties (Connell & Wilson, 1974; Alcoff & Gray, 1993). Studies on survivor’s discourse did not emerge until the early 1990s when Alcoff & Gray (1993) reflected on issues that emerge from survivor’s speaking out about their experiences. Alcoff & Gray’s (1993) seminal article on survivor discourses led to the understanding of survivor’s discourse as a political tactic.
Of primary interest in Alcoff & Gray’s (1993) research are ideologies that silence survivor’s experiences and exploitation of survivor stories by the mass media. Sexual assault survivor stories have been silenced through statistics, legal discourse, or access to public spaces (Alcoff & Gray, 1993; Donat & D’Emilio, 1992). “At various times and in different locations, survivor speech has been absolutely prohibited, categorized as mad or untrue, or rendered inconceivable” (Alcoff & Gray, 1993, p. 256-6). Through typical discourse that negates experiences of sexual assault (Alcoff & Gray, 1993; Brownmiller, 1975), ideologies that devalue experiences that typically occur to women are reinforced. Oppression, in a patriarchal system that devalues women’s experiences, makes sexual assault survivors and their experiences invisible; it is in these marginalized spaces that their stories go untold.

Sexual assault survivors occupy spaces along the margins of privilege as the majority of sexual assault survivors are women (Reddington & Kreisel, 2005; Russell & Bolen, 2000). In utilizing the concept of spaces, the idea of marginalization is present, which allows for a connection between marginalized groups occupying only the spaces the dominant groups have set aside for them. In many cultures, the elite or dominant in society occupy spaces of power and advantage; people or experiences not considered dominant by society become part of the margins (Frye, 2001; Miller, 2001). According to Miller (2001), “dominant groups usually impede the development of subordinates and block their freedom of expression and action” (p. 89), providing an effective implementation of hegemony as, “the power or dominance that one social group holds over others (Lull, 2011, p. 33). Most cultures have a hegemonic ideology that dictates
where the power is rooted in that culture. For American culture and many cultures worldwide, patriarchy is a dominant ideology (Johnson, 2001; Lerner, 1986). A patriarchal society typically mutes women and their experiences in both the public and private sphere, or the dominant group often devalues women and their experiences (Kroløkke & Sorensen, 2005; Narayan, 1989). In the case of sexual assault, this idea is no different, due to the notion that sexual assault is a private matter.

The hegemonic ideology of shame and powerlessness of sexual assault survivors typically keeps survivors from speaking out and reporting their attacker, as about 2/3 of rapes are committed by someone that the survivor knows (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, 2014), often preventing survivors from reporting their attackers. A hegemonic ideology prevents other ideologies from having a valued voice in culture; as a result, silence and marginalization of these ideologies occur (Orbe, 1998). These marginal spaces do not include privilege, power, or even voices. Marginalization confines persons to spaces where participation in public discourse is discouraged, an opportunity that the dominate group has the means to participate in (Frye, 2001). To maintain the dominant position, a hegemonic ideology must be renewed, reinforced, and defended continually with the use of rhetorical strategies and practices in discourse (Foss, 2009).

Discourse, considered to be groups of statements utilizing language, both visual and verbal, to represent a distinct knowledge about a subject determines how a culture views a particular subject matter (Hall, 1992; McKerrow, 1989). As discourse functions to gain and maintain power, marginalized groups are currently and have been prevented from participating in public discourse; thus, public discourse is a sign of privilege in American
culture (Hall, 1992; Lull, 2011). Thus, sexual assault survivors are rarely given avenues
to speak about their lived experiences.

Yet, survivor discourse is transgressive because it challenges conventional
speaking arrangements by bringing typically private matters into public discourse and
changes the way we view other vocabulary in dominant discourse (Alcoff & Gray, 1993).
As stated by Alcoff & Gray (1993):

> Given that such terms as “husband” have historically been defined as the man to
> whom a woman has given unconditional sexual access, the term “husband rapist”
> will necessarily transform our previous understandings of the terms “husband”
> and “rapist,” which in turn will affect how we understand “wife,” “woman,”
> “sexuality,” “heterosexuality,” and even “man.” (p. 268).

To re-conceptualize how we view discourses of sexual assault is to re-conceptualize all
social categories that pertain to gender, sexual orientation, and social relationships. This
shift in dominant discourse has the potential to cause a change in not only social
institutions, but in how survivors view and negotiate their personal experiences. To name
an experience as sexual assault or rape is to recognize that you have been oppressed, yet
resist that oppression in naming your experience. Through this naming, you engage in
consciousness-raising and rebel against dominant discourses that devalue your
experiences. This consciousness-raising occurs in Grace Brown’s *Project Unbreakable*.

**Justification of Thesis**

In a world where sexual assault and rape experiences go unreported and, thus
become muted, survivors have little or no opportunities for healing; this is where *Project
Unbreakable* comes in. *Project Unbreakable* has been described as a “blog dedicated to
empowering survivors of sexual assault by allowing them to reclaim the words that had been used against them” (Giuntini, 2013). The actual stories are locked away in the minds and bodies of sexual assault survivors; *Project Unbreakable’s* rhetoric on the situation allows sexual assault public discourses to consider survivor’s discourse of sexual assault experiences. In bringing the situation of sexual assault survivors into the public sphere and thus the public frame of discourse, *Project Unbreakable* highlights a muted group and their experiences, illuminating ideologies in visual images.

Visual arguments show “deep divisions in social and civic hierarchies of power, illuminate instances of perceived injustice, and persuade diverse publics of the necessity for social change” (Finnegan, Olson, & Hope, 2008. p. 199-200). As *Project Unbreakable* features discourse from marginalized individuals, it is essential to examine the rhetorical strategies employed by them in order to understand sexual assault as a worldwide experience. To gain insight into how a particular culture or group regards a particular topic, it is critical to analyze cultural artifacts created by those individuals. As we live in a visual world, visual images produced have meaning embedded in them that have the power to influence individuals. “For images, like language, have a structure—they appear in contexts—and they must be interpreted so as to extract meaning from them” (Brummett, 2006, p.162). In extracting meaning from visual images, one analyzes a speech act, employing rhetorical methods to critique cultural artifacts.

Rhetorical criticism as a method to analyze speech acts originally focuses on the subject matter and purpose of speeches; yet, the changing culture and world moved
rhetorical critics to make moral judgments and discover ideologies embedded in artifacts. As an interrelated system of meanings (Brummet, 2006), ideologies constitute what McGee (1975) believes a people to be—the collective identity of society’s ideologies perceived to be true through rhetorical strategies utilized in public discourse. Criticism should situate an artifact in its proper context, through considering ways other discourses influence artifacts and taking into account its historical context. Influenced by notions of power, social change, and ideologies, the modern field of criticism has defined the role of a critic as analyzing speech acts or artifacts to influence social change. Recognizing ideologies in artifacts allows critics to acknowledge all aspects of society that influence criticism and artifact production (Wander & Jenkins, 1972), having the potential to effect social change.

In addressing the potential for rhetoric to influence social change, rhetorical criticism recognizes that there are multiple and competing realities in public discourse. These competing realities are displayed in public discourses, which illustrate lived experiences of various groups in society and what subject matters are important to specific groups. Rhetorical choices enacted on by the rhetor have the potential to show power, domination, and oppression in cultural artifacts. Therefore, the primary purpose of (deliberative) rhetoric is to persuade an audience to approve or disapprove of a situation and to act accordingly (Abrams, 1999, p. 268). “Project Unbreakable works to start a conversation using survivors who are ready to share their experiences” (Giuntini, 2013, para.6). Through visual images, Project Unbreakable attempts to confront social injustices by giving survivors a platform to speak out about their experiences, which
allows society to begin a discussion on the effects of survivor blaming, shame, and silence in sexual assault experiences. In giving a voice to survivors of sexual assault, *Project Unbreakable* challenges dominant ideologies of sexual assault in society that keep marginalized groups in subordinate positions.

Ideologies in visual arguments can be traced back to Foss (1982), in which a preliminary schema was developed to evaluate visual images using rhetorical methods and theories. Foss’ schema opened the door for more scholars to consider rhetorical strategies for analyzing visual images, increasing the field of visual rhetoric to examine not only photographs but also architecture, public performances, and body art (Briggs, 2003; Foss, 1987; Hariman & Lucaites, 2001). Visual artifacts are, “symbolic, involve human interaction, and must be presented to an audience for the purpose of communication” (Foss, 2004, p. 305) in which critical perspectives can be utilized to analyze visual culture in a given society. A critical perspective is fundamental in interpreting meaning and ideologies embedded in visual artifacts, therefore, this thesis argues for a critical/cultural approach, informed by feminist theories of oppression and intersectionality to examine visual images of *Project Unbreakable*.

With a moral responsibility for discovering ideologies embedded in cultural artifacts, a critical perspective informed by cultural studies and feminist studies to gain a broader understanding of artifacts say about sexual assault in our culture is particularly useful when rhetorically analyzing images from *Project Unbreakable*. In conjunction with cultural studies and feminist studies, *Project Unbreakable* “inquires into the point of
view assumed in a text or image, and how the object would be different were it made from a point of view that was connected to a different ideology or way of life” (Brummett, 2006, p. 173). Rhetorical choices made by sexual assault survivors when explicating their stories via Project Unbreakable give insight into how attackers and survivors perceive sexual assault, often times showing multiple and competing discourses. “Most cultural understandings come to us from learned experiences” (Trend, 2007, p. 17). As a result, how we classify and understand our everyday world is based on our individual experiences and gives each person a unique standpoint in which to interpret and negotiate meaning. For that reason, a critic’s ideological standpoint plays a large role in the critique of cultural artifacts. Criticism is, therefore,activistic in nature, highlighting what the rhetorician judges as important through the rhetorical lens that is applied.

The rhetorical lens employed in a criticism determines the kind of meaning the critic is hoping to uncover, as artifacts are polysemic. Thus, texts as sites of struggle over meaning move beyond rhetorical implications and reflect what “kind of society we will live in and what sort of people we will be” (Brummet, 2006, p. 5). It is in these multiple and competing discourses that the rhetorical power lies (Brummet, 2006), for the struggle over power and meaning relates directly to societal struggles of power, privilege, and identity. To be influenced by an artifact in any way, determines what type of society you specifically live in and what type of person you are; it is also a reflection of the power that the rhetor does or does not have over its audience. Typically, marginalized individuals in society, such as minorities and women, have had very little power over
audiences, as their experiences have rarely been included in public discourse. Driving these ideological struggles over power, cultural studies and feminism studies, wish to articulate voices of typically oppressed groups. The in between spaces that cultural studies and feminism operate in allow a critic to classify and critique artifacts from various perspectives, privileging no method or artifact over the other, effectively tying it to a critical ideological approach of rhetorical criticism. This thesis presents a case study of visual images, which may possibly serve as support for what could be a major contribution to visual communication by furthering the discussion on communication strategies employed by typically marginalized voices through visual discourse.

**Justification of Artifact Selection**

Typical discourse surrounding sexual assault centers on statistics and prevention of sexual assault (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, 2013; Russell & Bolen, 2000). Every two minutes someone in the United States is sexually assaulted; statistically speaking that amounts to an average number of 237,868 survivors of sexual assault each year (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, 2014). Furthermore, “1 in 6 American women will be a victim of sexual assault” (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, 2014). These statistics represent the prevalence of sexual assault in the United States; yet, statistics do not tell us the effects of sexual assault or ideologies of sexual assault that permeate our society. With staggering numbers such as these, sexual assault is widespread among persons in the United States although it is seen as something that is rare and uncommon in our society (Russell & Boylen, 2000). With only 40% of all sexual
assault and rapes reported to the authorities, leaving 60% of crimes going unreported, sexual assault and rape are seen as crimes that actually happen to few individuals, yet statistically that is untrue (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, 2014). By viewing sexual assault experiences as rare, sexual assault survivors are reduced to spaces of shame and powerlessness; with only 3% of offenders serving time in prison (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, 2014), sexual assault survivors have limited avenues for their voice to be recognized in public discourse.

*Project Unbreakable*, founded in October 2011, features photographs of sexual assault survivors taken by Grace Brown, as well as email submissions from survivors worldwide (Brown, 2012g). In explaining the purpose of *Project Unbreakable*, Brown (2012g) states, “I just wanted to shed light and awareness” (para. 16). Brown holds photograph days in various cities across the United States and the United Kingdom. Brown advertises the days she takes photographs on *Project Unbreakable*’s tumblr page, website, and Facebook page. The photographs taken by Grace Brown show images of women and men, in which the person holds a white poster board. With the slogan “The Art of Healing,” *Project Unbreakable* seeks to “give these people a voice, because I [Brown] know how hard it is because they feel so ashamed” (O’ Reilly, 2011, para.16). Individual experiences of survivors of sexual assault are rarely included in the public discourse on sexual assault, as the subject is typically considered a private and shameful experience; their experiences of sexual assault are almost nonexistent to the public. Brown’s photographs and web submissions to *Project Unbreakable* together present a visual argument from marginalized voices. In bringing multiple voices of survivors of
sexual assault into current public discourse, Project Unbreakable gives insight into the way society currently discusses sexual assault.

This thesis collected all images posted on the tumblr page between the dates of October 2012 and March 2013. The images were collected during this six-month timeframe because October 2012 was the first anniversary of Project Unbreakable, and images posted before April 2013 will follow the regular interval schedule of posting one or two images a day. As April is Sexual Assault Awareness month (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2013), Project Unbreakable participates in awareness through advocating resources, in addition to posting images. Collection of data in months proceeding to Sexual Assault Awareness month offered a larger selection of lived experiences. As a result, this thesis was able to see a scope of sexual assault survivors that crossed intersections of race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation and class. Project Unbreakable posts one to two images per day that Brown took or between five to ten images submitted via email by others. As the submissions are compiled, a greater number of images are posted on certain days. A total of 287 images were collected as part of the data sample to choose from.

After the date collection, 287 images grouped by similarities led to the discovery of six categories. The six categories are as follows: (1) A typical photograph taken by Grace Brown showing the survivor’s face; (2) A photograph that Brown takes which does not show the survivor’s face; (3) Multiple photographs of the same survivor where he or she shares several experiences of sexual assault; (4) Images of individuals who are significantly older than the majority of college-aged individuals that Brown photographs;
(5) Submissions from individuals that are sent to *Project Unbreakable*; and (6) Male survivors of sexual assault who are photographed by Brown. Three survivor stories analyzed from the first category provide a characteristic model of typical visual choices from survivors. One survivor story, analyzed from the remaining categories provides a look at other visual choices enacted by the survivors. As category three includes multiple experiences from the survivors, the image count for that survivor’s experience appearing on *Project Unbreakable* was four. Thus, eleven images representing eight survivor narratives emerged from the data collection. The eleven images used for the study are representative of the six categories that emerged from the data collection. A rhetorical ideological critique informed by theories of intersectionality and feminist cultural studies discovered ideologies of sexual assault on chosen images by using an omnaphistic visual schema.

**Justification of Method**

Enacting agency and coming into public discourse in our current culture can come in a variety of forms; visual forms of communication are a predominant avenue for public discourse (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001; Lister & Wells, 2001). Therefore, marginalized communities have used visual communication as a way to enact agency (Bloom, 2003; Dow, 2004; Fusco, 1994; Hammond, 2000). The use of images provides many advantages to marginalized communities, as it is a way to visually articulate experiences that illustrate meaning, ideologies, and representations of everyday life (Jones, 2003; Lister & Wells, 2001; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). As visual rhetoric is a fairly new field of study, new avenues for studying visual rhetoric are postulated frequently.
A preliminary schema for visual rhetoric provided by Foss (1994) and expanded on by Peterson (2001), their schemas sought to provide a method to study postmodern rhetorical texts. Rice’s (2004) schema employs abductive thinking and four elements to examine postmodern visual text: oppositional elements, co-constructed elements, contextual elements, and ideological indicators. This thesis utilizes a schema developed by Rice (2004) utilizing and extending elements of Foss’s and Peterson’s schemas. The omnaphistic visual schema outlined by Rice (2004) is utilized for the following reasons: (1) the omnaphistic visual schema begins with abductive thinking. Abductive thinking starts with a logical pattern through which intuition and personal ideologies lead a critic to images that have rhetorical power to that particular critic. Thus, abductive thinking is the salience that draws the critic to a particular image. (2) As Project Unbreakable is a postmodern text, emphasizing marginalized voices and uniqueness of experiences, a schema that specifically addresses these elements is needed to understand meaning embedded in the text. (3) The use of an omnaphistic visual schema, with four indicators focusing on various aspects of an image, allows for balance between all elements in the images that point to the rhetorical power that lies in the text. (4) As the omnaphistic schema is recent, few studies have employed it to examine images; therefore, this thesis is a case study employing Rice’s (2004) indicators in hopes of extending the literature on visual rhetorical methodologies for postmodern images.

In analyzing images from Project Unbreakable, this thesis offers a range of stories and perspectives of sexual assault, illustrating the diverse range of individuals affected by sexual assault. In utilizing survivor discourses of textual and visual elements
to examine sexual assault discourses, survivors become important in unmasking their experience of sexual assault or rape through enacting their agency. *Project Unbreakable* is a visual argument, giving permanence to a subject that society has typically ignored (Alcoff & Gray, 1993; Connell & Wilson, 1974; Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, 2013). As a result, the critical problem of this study is to show how visual argument can persuade, argue, and confront social injustices by looking at images from *Project Unbreakable*.

**Chapter Breakdown**

Chapter one introduces the thesis by providing justification of the proposed study, artifact selection, and methodology. As discussed, sexual assault survivor discourse is rarely analyzed as survivors rarely speak about their experiences of sexual assault. With *Project Unbreakable* becoming a one of the only platforms for their voices, in the history of the United States’ society, survivor’s discourse is publicized on their terms. In contributing to the discourse of sexual assault, survivor’s discourse changes the body of knowledge on that subject matter. In choosing the specific images to analyze, abductive thinking takes place to discuss what is most salient to the critic. Lastly, a brief explanation of Rice’s (2004) omnaphistic schema that will be utilized to examine the photos to answer the research questions was introduced.

Chapter two will provide a review of literature pertinent to the study, including an overview of the field of rhetorical criticism, focusing on scholars and research that lead to ideological criticism. The literature review will also cover the field of cultural studies and feminist studies, as this thesis uses these to examine images of *Project*
*Unbreakable* from an ideological standpoint. With an emphasis on theories of intersectionality, the approach to ideological criticism explicated in the literature review will provide support for critical approaches to examining visual rhetoric. In particular, critical approaches to analyze discourse from marginalized individuals allow for an understanding of how “relations of power and domination are encoded” (Kellner, 2011, p. 9) in visual images, thus providing avenues for how marginalized individuals can use rhetoric to shift power relations. In addition, discussed in the literature review is a brief overview of the history of visual rhetoric and perspectives used to study visual texts that lead to the omnaphistic visual schema (Rice, 2004) utilized to analyze the artifact. The literature review is essential to situating *Project Unbreakable’s* images in public discourses of sexual assault and rape.

Chapter three includes the analysis of the eleven images selected. This chapter will further explicate the methodology for selecting the artifact and will describe the procedure for analyzing the images collected from *Project Unbreakable* that Chapter 1 briefly references. The analysis will start with a description of the image and then move on to explicate the four indicators of the omnaphistic visual schema that compose each image. A description of the image aligns first with abductive thinking outlined by the omnaphistic visual schema. Illuminating the indicators that make up the images would fulfill the second component of the omnaphistic visual schema.

Chapter four of this thesis conveys conclusions from the analysis and offers implications for the field of visual rhetorical studies. Following the analysis of the individual images will be a discussion of the overall ideologies that comprise *Project
*Unbreakable*, with a discussion of secondary images that also appear on the tumblr blog. Implications for future research will also be included in chapter four. If the omnaphistic visual schema is useful for analyzing *Project Unbreakable’s* images, then additional support for the use of the schema in analyzing visual images in our postmodern society will be provided. If the omnaphistic visual schema proves to be ineffective in revealing ideologies and meaning in the images, recommendations will be offered to better account for shortcomings in Rice’s (2004) schema. To further account for the meaning in visual rhetoric a working schema is imperative; this thesis hopes to provide support for the visual omnaphistic schema when it comes to cultural artifacts produced by marginalized voices.
Chapter 2
RHETORICAL CRITICISM

The field of modern rhetorical criticism can trace its roots back to Wichelns’ (1925) seminal essay in which he argues that literary criticism and rhetorical criticism have important differences and hence should be separate disciplines. According to Wichelns (1925), rhetorical criticism sees speeches as communication that is directed at a specific audience; the critic’s purpose is to analyze the orator’s method of presenting his speech, and therefore, is concerned more with the effectiveness of a speech. In providing an argument for the separation of literacy criticism from rhetorical criticism, Wichelns (1925) provides a purpose for the field of rhetorical criticism—analyzing speech acts (p. 3).

The introductory method for the field of rhetorical criticism is modeled after Aristotle’s five canons of rhetoric. Wichelns (1925) asserts that criticism is analytical and considers the speaker’s arrangement, the speaker’s audience, the delivery method, and the ideas that the speaker expresses in the speech (p.24). The characteristics above outlined by Wichelns, focus on subject matter and purpose of speeches, leading to Neo-Aristotelian criticism. With the Neo-Aristotelian method as a way to critique speech acts, the field of rhetorical criticism produces various works studying famous speeches and people (McCain, 1940; Henrikson, 1944; Zelko, 1942) although largely failing to analyze speech acts from many individuals in society. Key contributions to the field of rhetorical criticism between the 1940s-1960s expand upon Wichelns’ concept of rhetorical criticism by relating public address to social and intellectual history (Wrage, 1947, p 45) and
evaluating the quality of speeches apart from its effect (Parrish, 1954, p. 37). In adding these elements to the Neo-Aristotelian method, Wrage and Parrish attempted to broaden the method, yet the field was still limited to one approach.

The limits of the Neo-Aristotelian method of the rhetorical criticism went largely unchallenged until Black showcased the flaws of the Neo-Aristotelian method. According to Black (1965), criticism as a discipline, is unable to accomplish the task of effectively appraising the activities of speech acts through utilizing Neo-Aristotelian criticism (p. 90). Specifically, the method of Neo-Aristotelian fails to consider the “influence of the discourse on its author: the future commitments it makes for him, rhetorically and ideologically; the choices it closes to him rhetorically and ideologically; the public image it portrays to which he must adjust” (Black, 1965, p. 35). In addition, Black (1965) sees the rhetorical critic as “preserving a morally significant event” (p. 65), thus accounting for salience. Therefore, Black suggests that rhetorical criticism should encompass more than just Aristotle’s canons, or the style and logic of the speech act.

Furthermore, Black states that rhetorical criticism should be concerned with finding the proper context of speech acts, so the critic can see the “life” of the speech act, allowing for the understanding that the speech act as discourse, “joining the dialogue” on a specific subject (Black, 1965, p. 83). In recognizing this conception of the proper context of a speech act, one should situate discourse in its historical context and determine other discourse that influences the speech act. A speech act goes beyond its current effectiveness on the present audience and provides an interpretation of historical
events. In situating the speech act in its proper context, a more coherent analysis of the speech act is given. Thus, the field of rhetorical criticism progresses in a direction that considers multiple ways to analyze speech acts.

**Ideological Criticism: A New Direction**

The field of rhetorical criticism struggled to find new approaches to criticism to account for the limitations of Neo-Aristotelian criticism pointed out by Black (1965). The perspective offered by Black (1970) asserts that critics have moral obligations to recognize ideologies in artifacts. Making a moral judgment will afford the critic more freedom in approaches to rhetoric and allow for a more comprehensive look at history; yet, this can only occur if communication scholars are able to explicate human dimensions of discourse and see its character (Black, 1970). By recognizing the second persona of the implied auditor and ideology, the critic is able to complete this obligation. Black (1970) situates ideology in a Marxist perspective, arguing that ideology “is the network of interconnected convictions that functions in a man epistemically and shapes his identity by determining how he views the world” (p.71). Ideologies embedded in artifacts allow the critic to discover values and beliefs of rhetors and individuals who abide by these ideologies. The critic is thus able to utilize the discovery of ideologies in his or her criticism of the artifact.

With new perspectives for viewing speech acts, a variety of influential articles and notable critics emerged in the 1970s and 1980s to delineate the field of ideological criticism and the role of the rhetorical critic. Wander and Jenkins (1972) also address the
moral responsibility of the critic to unmask ideologies of speech acts, stating:

The rhetorical critic seeks to unfold meaning in a body of verbal discourse, but the dimensions of meaning making up any symbol must be interpreted through his personal experience, as his symbols must be interpreted through our personal experience, as these symbols are being interpreted through your personal experience (p. 445).

The critic’s unmasking ideologies of an artifact allow him/her to get closer to the system of beliefs of that particular culture. Thus, a critic must be aware of and acknowledge his/her ideologies when choosing artifacts. As stated by Wander & Jenkins (1972), “To set aside passion and personal involvement means that one, either in apprehension or communication, or both, distorts what he talks about” (p. 444). In approaching rhetorical criticism from this perspective, the critic opens up the field of rhetorical criticism to subjectivity and allows for multiple and competing realities of knowledge.

In recognizing multiple and competing realities, the field of rhetorical criticism begins to address the criticism expressed by Black in which he emphasizes that Neo-Aristotelian criticism primarily focuses on rhetoric from orators who are in power, thus privileging certain discourses over others. This, in effect excluded a large number of speech acts from being analyzed in the field of rhetorical criticism. As a critic should “assist us in discovering a vision more at one with truth than the vision imposed on us by our social and political institutions” (Wander and Jenkins, 1972, p. 445), discourses from diverse individuals are important to understanding truth. This is important in discovering which discourses have been privileged in our society and which have been marginalized. Criticism is consequently seen as “informed talk about matters of importance” (Wander
& Jenkins, 1972, p. 450). If rhetorical criticism is primarily concerned with “enriching our understanding of the rhetorical uses of language,” (Black, 1965, p. 177) then it becomes essential to look at matters of importance to various groups of individuals in society, especially communities who have been typically left out of public discourse—including women and minorities.

Campbell (1973) discusses the United States’ women’s liberation movement in the 1960s-1970s, becoming one of the first rhetoricians to explore the rhetorical strategies of marginalized communities. The fight for women’s liberation was of importance, as it provides a further basis to see flaws in traditional concepts of the rhetorical process. Campbell (1973) argues that “the rhetoric of women’s liberation is a distinctive genre because it evinces unique rhetorical qualities that are a fusion of substantive and stylistic features” (p. 75) and that the women’s liberation movement confronts the “fundamental values underlying this culture” (p. 78). In doing this, the women’s liberation movement is unique, radical, and must not be treated with Neo-Aristotelian critique, because Neo-Aristotelian critique cannot fully account for rhetorical strategies utilized by marginalized individuals. As traditional rhetorical critiques only considered discourse of males in society, dominant views of rhetorical strategies are considered to be the norm (Campbell, 1973). This created an ideology of rhetorical strategies as masculine. In asserting that not all rhetoric adheres to these dominant rhetorical strategies, Campbell builds a solid case for viewing rhetorical practices of groups who have been typically left out of the study of rhetoric. As a result, Campbell connects discourse to activities that seek to produce changes in society.
McGee (1975), another leading advocate of ideological criticism, also contributed to the reconceptualization of the critic’s role in the late 1970s and early 1980s. McGee (1975) addressed the idea of “people” in rhetoric that seeks to “warrant social action”, (p. 242), linking rhetoric to socialization and the role rhetorical devices can play in ideologies. To have a “people” in the way McGee (1975) utilizes it, is to have individuality succumb to collectivism through an ideology that is constitutive through rhetorical devices in public discourse. McGee further bridges the gap between rhetoric and ideology by coining the term ideograph. McGee (1980) argues that ideologies are cultural bound and “human beings are ‘conditioned’, not directly to belief and behavior, but to vocabulary of concepts that function as guides, warrants, reasons, or excuses for behavior and belief” (p. 6). This “vocabulary” is what McGee (1980) describes as an ideograph; the revelation of ideographs shows how ideologies help shape reality.

Although McGee (1980) explicated a connection between rhetoric and ideologies, ethical issues still plagued the field of rhetorical criticism in reference to completing an ideological critique (Wander, 1983). Wander (1983), aligned with Black, advocates for situating a text in its historical context, allowing the text to be seen as a cultural artifact that would constitute a value judgment about a critical problem of a society. As Wander (1983) states:

More than ‘informed talk about matters of importance’ criticism carries us to the point of recognizing good reasons and engaging in right action. What an ideological view does is situate ‘good’ and ‘right’ in an historical context, the efforts of real people to create a better world. (p. 18).

Wander (1983) goes on to outline a perspective in which to view criticism as further
separating the field of criticism from the traditional method of Neo-Aristotelian, yet McGee and Wander still barely touch on specific ways the critic could apply these perspectives. Although McKerrow (1989) advocates that his perspective is not a method, his conception of critical rhetoric moves closer to a defined role of a critic.

McKerrow situates rhetoric as social change and the study of meaning in society. McKerrow (1989) states that:

In practice, a critical rhetoric seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power. The aim is to understand the integration of power/knowledge in society—what possibilities for change the integration invites or inhibits and what intervention strategies might be considered for appropriate to effect social change (p. 91).

Therefore, a critical rhetorician acknowledges how power and domination in all aspects of culture, especially discourse, play a role in oppression. McKerrow attempts to draw ideological criticism away from the traditional systematic process of rhetoric and situate criticism in social practices of what a society can be.

In recognizing these aspects, a critical rhetoric can account for artifacts that are not specifically studied by critics and their relationship to dominance and power. Discourse, according to McKerrow (1989), is a tool utilized tactically to disperse power; the critic’s role is to “attend to the ‘microphysics of power’ in order to understand what sustains social practice” (p.99). Although McKerrow (1989) believes that the critic should expose power to “thwart its effects in a social relation,” (p. 98) he also advocates that critical rhetoric should consider that power is both repressive and “potentially
productive” (p. 101). It is McKerrow’s concept of “potentially productive” which can be used to consider the power of marginalized groups to circumvent traditional oppression in society. As such, critical rhetoric, as a perspective, becomes important in recognizing rhetorical devices that typically marginalized groups may utilize in their rhetoric—leading a critic to deal with various cultural conditions.

Acknowledging that a culture has individuals with multiple realities also recognizes that a culture is fragmented, and thus so are cultural artifacts. McGee (1990) addresses this notion, stating, “The apparently finished discourse is in fact a dense reconstruction of all the bits of other discourses from which it was made. It is fashioned from what we can call ‘fragments’” (p. 279). A critic may never be able to get a true sense of a specific culture, yet can get close to a complete picture by looking at various fragments because, in every instance, discourse will implicate cultural values (McGee, 1990). While rhetoricians frequently address social concerns in criticism, McGee believes that the relationship between discourse and culture is largely unfamiliar to rhetoricians—attempting to bridge the gap between rhetorical criticism and culture. Therefore,

If you can account for the sources of discourse, but have difficulty understanding the cultural milieu in which it was socially and politically significant, you reduce the communicative event to a simple stimulus-response mechanism wherein discourse is said to have discrete and independent effects on history (McGee, 1990, p. 283).

In situating texts into the overall context of discourse, McGee (1990) shows the interconnectedness of all texts as representations of a particular culture. McGee adds another aspect to the role of the critic and uses critical rhetoric to link culture and the
field of communication studies.

Multiple perspectives on rhetorical criticism once again provided much debate, leading to a forum involving Charland (1991), Hariman (1991), and McKerrow (1991) appearing in *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Of particular concern was the process of completing a critical rhetoric in a postmodern world, when critics were primarily use to analyze modernist assumptions of knowledge. Hariman (1991) states, “...at worst critical rhetoric replaces strong versions of modern concepts with weaker versions that, while they might not reinforce power, can not protect the powerless” (p. 69) and for this reason; critical rhetoricians need a stronger sense of how discourses can be used in specific situations. This concern led to another issue addressed in the forum—the notion that praxis will only be carried so far because a telos is lacking, and the critic is unable to take a stand (Charland, 1991). Ono and Sloop (1992) address this concern in more detail, arguing that freedom and domination are two perspectives of the same phenomenon. Domination and freedom “encourage the critic to work to initiate new relationships, to imagine new ways of constructing the world, and to replace the logic of dichotomies with alternatives” (Ono & Sloop, 1992, p. 50). Therefore, the critic is tasked with social change through explicating moral judgments.

Ono and Sloop (1992) call on the critic to attempt to effect social change by connecting criticism to social and cultural communities from which it arose, using criticism as activism. Critical rhetoric adheres to an ideology of criticism as activism—a sustained praxis. A sustained praxis, as the end goal of critical rhetoric, attempts to
connect an artifact to its culture and the critic. Driven by Ono and Sloop (1992), ideologies in rhetorical criticism are acknowledged, allowing for the notion that criticism can be activistic in nature. Criticism, as a component of activism, focuses on the need to celebrate the benefits of both subjective and objective perspectives of criticism (Anderson, 1993). If a subjective criticism is conducted, then one should fully state that and the reader can then evaluate the critic’s work and judge its worth based on his/her own terms (Anderson, 1993). In stating that a subjective criticism is occurring, critics recognize that it is impossible to write “ideological neutral criticism”; therefore, it is also the audience’s responsibility to be critics, as well. In emphasizing the activist power of ideological criticism, Anderson (1993) states that “once a critic exposes the covert or overt ideology underpinnings of a movement, a speaker, or a policy he/she already has entered the world of the activist” (p. 248). Criticism as activism is important if a critic wishes to discuss matters of importance in hopes of advocating for what the world could and should be because discourse can effect social change.

The contributions of McGee and McKerrow set a path for a criticism informed by power and ideologies of freedom and domination, a path that Cloud (1994) explores with the materiality of discourse in rhetorical studies. Outlining the shift in thinking about critical rhetoric, Cloud (1994) asserts that discourse is not the only thing that matters in criticism, and to “suggest that rhetoric is all [cultural notions] are to leave critique behind” (p. 159). Therefore, a critic’s ideological stance directly influences the type of criticism he/she completes, and Cloud (1994) asserts that this type of critique is in danger of reducing human experiences to merely a materiality of discourse. According to Cloud
(1994), a materiality of discourse has been problematic for two reasons; it is either idealist or relativist, neither of which fully accounts for an activist position that includes the potential for actual social change (p.142).

Taking a similar position as Anderson (1993), advocating for a rhetorical criticism that seeks out counterhegemonic texts in hopes of emancipating real people, Cloud (1994) also warns the critic to keep in mind that people’s experiences go beyond the representation of the artifact. As Cloud (1994) states, “yet, we ought not to sacrifice the notions of practical truth, bodily reality, and material oppression to the tendency to render all of experience discursive” (p. 159). A critical rhetoric that includes this in one’s analysis seeks artifacts that represent a counterhegemonic culture and explores experiences that have the potential to dismantle hegemonic discourses; this includes the telos advocated by Ono and Sloop (1992). Thus, one can and should situate Grace Brown’s Project Unbreakable with other discourses on sexual assault participated in by the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (2013), Oprah Winfrey (Alcoff & Gray, 1993), Amnesty International (2013), and United State legislation (Cornell University Law School, 2014) to understand the cultural significance of Project Unbreakable as a speech act. In considering other discourses and the historical context of sexual assault, a rhetorical analysis of Project Unbreakable would be able to discover what the artifact says about the ideologies of the rhetor and society.

A critical, ideological approach to sexual assault discourse reveals this ongoing struggle for meaning and power in Project Unbreakable, encompassing an activist
component that is “geared towards the emancipation of real people engaged in struggle” (Cloud, 1994, p. 159). A moral responsibility, outlined by Wander and Jenkins (1972), is placed on the critic to discover rhetorical devices that are used to support ideologies and how these ideologies shape reality for the individuals that adhere to them or challenge them. Hence, “ideological struggles are struggles over meaning. Meaning is a social production; a practice of making the world mean something, and this meaning is produced through language” (Crenshaw, 1997a, p. 256). In discovering the rhetorical devices that underline the ideologies of visual images in Project Unbreakable, this criticism would move closer to understanding the effects of competing ideologies of sexual assault on current United States’ society. Driven by questions that seek to discover ideologies of sexual assault and rhetorical strategies employed by marginalized individuals, this thesis uses critical perspective informed by cultural studies and feminist studies. These perspectives are essential to determine ideologies and rhetorical strategies of marginalized individuals.

**Cultural Studies and Feminism: Ideological Perspectives**

From the early inception of cultural studies and feminist studies in the 1960s, the two interdisciplinary fields have been intrinsically linked to one another (Women’s Studies Group, 1978; Long, 1989). While theoretical contributions to each field were considered to be separate disciplines, their contributions taken together provide a better perspective to address visual images of sexual assault. Although the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham has typically been seen as only representing theoretical contributions of men, (Women’s Studies Group, 1978) some of
the early theoretical works associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies were written by the members of the Women’s Studies Group. Among the first to address the intersection between feminism and cultural studies, by addressing invisibility of women’s intellectual work in cultural studies, the Women’s Studies Group advocated for a feminist standpoint to be recognized and included in the cultural studies discipline.

The field of cultural studies has a fragmented beginning, originating from The Frankfurt School of Thought and British cultural studies; yet, the current interdisciplinary field of cultural studies is heavily influenced by the work of Stuart Hall. Hall (1980), in one of his seminal articles, explicates two paradigms of defining a culture that have shaped the contemporary field of cultural studies. The two paradigms addressed are structuralism and culturalism. Culturalism refers to the notion that experience is the predominant basis of culture, and structuralism assumes that culture does not derive from experience; rather experience is the effect of an unconscious culture (Hall, 1980). These two paradigms are opposing, yet the field of cultural studies according to Hall (1980) lies between these two paradigms, as both are relevant to understanding what a culture is and the role of cultural artifacts.

The culturalist position has strength in its assertion for the need of conscious struggle and organization to analyze aspects of culture, as this provides agency for individuals to collectively resist cultural oppression (Hall, 1980). Hall maintains that the structuralist position insists on determinate cultural conditions, when situating agency of individuals. Agency is directly tied to pre-existing cultural conditions and the systems
that are available to individuals to exhibit agency in society. The two paradigms that Hall (1980) addresses, trace the contributions of Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michele Foucault, and Antonio Gramsci, effectively leaving out feminist contributions to the field of cultural studies, a trend that most academic fields have been guilty of, thus opening the door for an articulation of a feminist standpoint in understanding cultural practice.

A feminist standpoint has the potential to explicate how patriarchal institutions and ideologies oppress women’s experiences in a given culture (Hartsock, 1983), which is directly linked to the culturalist perspective that addresses how criticism can serve to resist cultural oppressions (Hall, 1980). Hartsock (1983) proposes that a feminist standpoint can only occur through recognizing (1) that culture is fundamentally structured into two opposing groups—dominant and oppressed and (2) the embracing of a standpoint will expose relations between the opposing groups and has a potential liberatory role (p. 316-317). In postulating a feminist standpoint related to how we understand cultural relationships, the world of feminism becomes further intertwined with cultural studies; to fully understand a fragmented culture, we must look at multiple experiences:

The feminist standpoint emerges both out of the contradiction between the systematically differing structures of men’s and women’s life activity in Western cultures. It expresses women’s experience at a particular time and place, located with a particular set of social relations (Hartsock, 1983, p. 93). Therefore, understanding women’s experiences in culture is seen as central to addressing theoretical gaps in cultural studies. This position was further explored by Johnson (1986)
in which he traces the field of cultural studies, as well as explores future research paths
for cultural studies.

Three main premises are outlined by Johnson (1986): cultural processes are
directly linked to social relations; culture is linked to power and this power is used to
define the needs of individuals and groups; and lastly, culture is, and always has been a
“site of social differences and struggles” (p. 39). With these three premises outlined,
Johnson (1986) stresses the multiple theoretical assumptions that are open to critics
utilizing a cultural studies perspective. Central to this proposed thesis is Johnson’s (1986)
theory that public and private forms of culture are opposing and that they directly relate
to ideological struggles of power. As women’s experiences have typically occurred in
private culture, their experiences have often been left out of discourse (Hartsock, 1983).
Discourse mirrors a fragmented culture; if culture is considered a site of difference and
struggle, then discourse can be considered to be culture, as at any given moment there
can, and usually are, multiple and competing discourses. The competing discourses,
hierarchical in nature, are but representations of a subordinate social group or hegemonic
society, resituating culture in ideological concepts of the oppressed and the oppressor.

Johnson (1986) asserts that ideological struggles of power are seen in the way that
typically private forms of culture are made public, usually only on certain terms, allowing
them to be transformed and framed for certain purposes. The framing and transformation
of private forms of culture that are made public allow that artifact to be either a
hegemonic representation of culture practices or counterhegemonic, with emancipatory
capabilities (Johnson, 1986). It is in this dichotomy of the function of power (oppressive or emancipatory) that a critic can address the notion of authenticity, representation, and social change in the artifact. As stated by Johnson (1986), “such work may even aspire to help give hegemonic or non-corporate turn to cultures that are usually privatised, stigmatised, or silenced” (p. 73). It is in this statement that one can see yet again, the connection between cultural studies and feminism, an idea elucidated by Long (1989) and Balasmo (1991).

Long and Balasmo are essential to illuminating the relationship between feminism and cultural studies. Long (1989) situates the relationship between feminism and cultural studies in that feminism is the best avenue to maintain the critical stance associated with British cultural studies in cultural critiques of the United States. A feminist standpoint is deeply connected to a social movement that is more than just academic and works across a variety of disciplines in marginal positions (Long, 1989). Understanding how feminism and cultural studies are connected is Long’s central focus, while Balasmo (1991) identifies “significant issues” (p. 50) in the merging of feminism and cultural studies and traces the field of what she refers to as “feminist cultural studies”. The merging of feminism and cultural studies challenges both mainstream feminism and mainstream cultural studies by asserting that to fully study a fragmented culture is to be open, inclusive, and critical (Balasmo, 1991). In studying a culture, one can look at a range of things, as culture is a site of struggles. Therefore, examining discourses of typically marginalized individuals highlights struggles between marginalized and dominant groups.
In keeping with a feminist and cultural studies perspective, making sense of discourse and its ideological assumptions is central to understanding marginalized groups and their intersections of oppressions. Discourse sustains culture, which is constantly renegotiated and reimaged through the use of new ideas and concepts. Thus, discourse carries historical functions, as well as ideological functions (Hall, 1992). Hall’s (1992) assertion of the dichotomous function of “the West” and “the rest”, allows for a cultural system of representation, the “organizing concept or term in a whole way of thinking and speaking” (p. 187), which creates a hegemonic norm in society. This effectively silences the other or “the rest” and their unique contributions in society. Specifically, this concept is applied to multiple subordinate groups, but this thesis will consider the consequences this ideal carries for sexual assault survivors who are painted as “the other” and are silenced, taking into account their intersections of oppressions.

Hall (1992) provides a basis for understanding the marginalization of subordinate groups; discourse is hierarchical and ideological, thus it is a representation of encounters between those that are unequal, an account of who has power in society. When considering whether individuals are the oppressed and the oppressor—subordinate versus dominant—the question is how do we know who is oppressed and who is the oppressor? Accordingly, what happens when subordinate groups or individuals have the capacity to control the discourse? To control the discourse is to have power and agency; to be controlled by discourse is to be powerless. To have agency is something that is often enacted on by the oppressor, yet the oppressed has the potential for agency. It is the potential for agency that a cultural studies perspective seeks to explore in marginalized
discourses, for the choice to enact agency brings marginalized identities into public
discourse.

A cultural studies perspective, informed by feminism allows for a critical
consciousness (hooks, 1984) when studying competing discourses, produced by
marginalized and dominant individuals. The fields of ideological rhetoric, cultural
studies, and feminist studies have explicated experiences of individuals in society through
highlighting power relations between the oppressed and the oppressor. These
contributions gave way to a theory of intersectionality, which focuses on gender
intersecting with other identity categories, which are also marginalized to create multiple
oppressions.

**Intersectionality: A Perspective for All Oppressions**

Several scholars (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 1990; hooks, 2000;
Narayan, 1989) have theorized gender intersecting with other identity categories to create
multiple oppressions. Originally attributed to the field of feminist studies, theories of
intersectionality, sought to navigate between gender and race to determine how these
specific identities contributed to oppression in society. Intersectionality in its broadest
form “refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in
individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies, and
the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (Davis, 2008, p. 68). Utilized by a
small number of communication scholars (Crenshaw, 1997b; Enck-Wanzer, 2006), the
concept of intersectionality provides a more comprehensive view of sexual assault
Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) is loosely credited with the concept of intersectionality, in which she sought to define a Black feminist criticism, as she recognized the consequences of viewing “race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience” (p. 139). Neglecting to highlight the intersectionality of race and gender in individuals produced a hegemonic experience of women’s experiences as white and middle class, minimizing the role other identity categories play. Examining how the legal system in the United States frames and interprets experiences of Black women plaintiffs who filed discrimination lawsuits, Crenshaw (1989) shows how dominant societal structures have minimized experiences of Black women. This realization was essentially the foundation of the intersectionality. Intersectionality recognizes that there are hierarchies of oppressions and having to choose an identity category to attribute a particular experience to is another form of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). This realization further expanded the inquiry of knowledge about marginalized individuals and called for research that was inclusive and embraced multiple viewpoints.

Although originally associated with Black feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984), intersectionality has also been utilized by nonwestern feminist scholarship. According to Narayan (1989), “At the most general level, feminist epistemology resembles the efforts of many oppressed groups to reclaim for themselves the value of their own experience” (p. 333). This can only occur if individuals are allowed to fully articulate all aspects of their identities and the complex role that their
identity plays in their lived experiences, allowing them an “epistemic advantage” (Narayan, 1989, p. 337). This epistemic advantage allows individuals to speak to the oppressor and the oppressed, providing a unique worldview and language to articulate experiences and understand other oppressions (Collins, 1990; Narayan, 1989). Thus, solidarity is more likely to occur through experiences than through identities, as identity politics in the feminist movement have often divided individuals (hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984; King 1988). In this aspect, it is important to understand that misrepresentation of experiences occurs when one is unable to focus on “parallels” of experiences and instead focuses on “identities” associated with experiences (Narayan, 1989). Narayan (1989) advocates for feminist studies that recognize similarities in experiences by focusing on individuals taking into account experiences that include race, sexual orientation, geographic location, socioeconomic status in conjunction with gender.

At the center of intersectionality is recognizing that various identity categories will lead to vastly different experiences and oppressions can be attributed to more than one thing. As stated by Crenshaw (1991), “The violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class” (p. 1242). With this being so, to analyze violence against women, a critic must take into account intersections of an identity to fully account for these experiences. Examining the ways in which gender and race intersect in violence against women, Crenshaw (1991) uses intersectionality to explain how differences can be acknowledged and used to negotiate identity politics. While Crenshaw (1991) mainly focused on Black women, her research has led to considering other categories of identities that intersect to contribute to
experiences of oppression and the use of intersectionality as a research paradigm.

Among the first to utilize the intersectionality thesis in the field of communication studies, Carrie Crenshaw (1997b) expands on Crenshaw’s (1989) thesis by approaching intersectionality from a feminist ideological rhetorical perspective, analyzing news reports of the Gulf War utilizing two different methods: gender as a single category and an intersectional method. Crenshaw (1997b) utilizes the news reports to show the shortcomings of using gender as a single category while asserting that “oppressive ideologies intersect in mutually reinforcing ways” (p. 230). In employing the intersectional thesis in the field of rhetorical studies, Crenshaw (1997b) highlights political implications of criticism for society.

In this way, tracing categories to their intersections fulfills the ideological commitment not just to equality between men and women but also to equality among women. An intersectional method can help feminist rhetorical criticism to realize more fully its theoretical commitment to valuing the diverse experiences of all women (Crenshaw, 1997b, p. 232).

Crenshaw (1997b) analyzes the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation to re-examine and re-define the role of the feminist ideological critic, in essence, allowing for a more thorough investigation of artifacts.

Through bridging academic disciplines, intersectionality is utilized in critical theory and deconstructivist approaches (Hancock, 2007), connecting all social identity categories (Shields, 2008) and a commitment to understanding connections between individuals’ lived experiences (Davis, 2008). This thesis seeks to use intersectionality to account for connections between sexual assault experiences of individuals participating in
Project Unbreakable. For example, both men and women can be survivors of sexual assault. Thus, a focus should be on explicating experiences of sexual assault of both men and women. In doing this, one is able to see a common pattern of sexual assault that is situated in ideologies of power.

A focus on ideologies in artifacts highlights beliefs and values of individuals who abide or reject certain ideologies, thus, connecting individual identities to shared experiences. This connection of shared experiences, rather than similarities in identity categories, leads to solidarity between vastly different individuals such as sexual assault survivors. Approaching the images from an ideological analysis informed by perspectives of cultural studies and feminist studies allows the critic to articulate power struggles and ideologies in marginalized communities, while also highlighting its location in present public discourse.

Visual Rhetoric: Illustrating Ideologies in Images

With a culture that is ever changing, a digital visual world emerged, presenting challenges for rhetorical critics who were unaccustomed to thinking of visual communication as rhetorical (Foss, 1982, p. 55). Yet, the center of rhetorical criticism is the analyzing of cultural artifacts to understand symbols and how they operate in discourse; one could classify visual communication as a cultural artifact comprised of symbols, thus rhetorical (Foss, 1982). Foss (1982) offers a resource for developing methods to rhetorically analyze visual images using contemporary rhetorical theories from “Chaim Perelman, Kenneth Burke, Richard Weaver, Stephen Toulmin, Erving
Goffman, Marshall McLuhan, and I.A. Richards” (p. 56). Foss went on to complete visual rhetorical analyses on various subjects such as The Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial (1986), body art (1987), and Judy’s Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* (1988). These analyses sought to utilize traditional rhetorical theory in visual analysis and led Foss toward developing a schema for visual rhetoric, which was deductive in reasoning.

Published in 1994, Foss’s schema presents rhetorical critics with a preliminary theory for evaluating visual images using rhetorical constructs. Foss (1994) asserts that the schema would serve to further reconstruct the purpose of the rhetorical critic and allow for an evaluation of visual images that emphasize the function of the visual artifact. Foss’s (1994) schema takes an anti-intentionalist stance in that it “suggests that a work, once done, stands independent of its production, and the intentions of artists or creators are irrelevant to critics responses to their works” (p. 215). The rhetorician is tasked with naming the function of the image and it is his/her responsibility to determine how well the function is communicated through visual elements. Foss (1994) further goes on to explain the scrutiny of the function, asserting that:

This assessment is made according to the critic’s initial reasoning for analyzing the image—the critic might be interested, for example, whether the image is congruent with a particular ethical system or whether it offers emancipatory potential (p. 217).

It is specifically in this function that ideologies embedded in visual images are considered. If a visual image has a function, then the function of the visual image has the capacity to carry an interpretation of some aspect to the world. The nature of that interpretation relates closely to a culture and its representation of its reality—its
Foss’s (1994) schema rhetorically analyzes visual images or objects and carries several implications for the rhetorical study of visual images. It is an initial step that addresses postmodernist theorists’ call for a thorough evaluation of a fragmented culture and encourages the use of rhetorical theories when studying visual imagery. Scott (1994) articulates that pictures, symbolic in nature, construct the customs of a culture. Therefore, pictures are composed of qualities that are equal to that of verbal arguments. Central to Scott’s (1994) thesis is that “receivers of the [visual] message use the same body of cultural knowledge [that the rhetor used to construct the visual image] to read the message, infer the sender’s intention, evaluate the argument and formulate a response” (p. 252-253). Situating visual images in a rhetorical perspective, Scott (1994) recasts visuals as information in symbolic form, thus accounting for meaning in visual images.

Using advertising images as a means to explicate the need for a theory of visual rhetoric, Scott (1994) asserts that present consumer research is inadequate to address meaning in advertising images and does not situate the pictorial image in culture. The need to situate images in culture would account for rhetorical devices that are used to represent interpretations of cultural aspects and would, according to Scott (1994), have “profound implications for cultural criticism” and allow critics to “critically consider ideological impact of commercial texts” (p. 271). Although Scott (1994) dealt specifically with advertising images, her article was influential in pushing research to analyze advertising images for cultural meanings of race (Bristor, Lee, & Hunt, 1995;
Robinson, 1996) and gender (Sandikci, 1996), thus a theory of visual rhetoric as a viable way to complete ideological critiques of visual imagery became more readily accepted.

As with any theoretical framework, visual rhetoric was not without its challenges. *Argumentation and Advocacy* published a special issue in 1996 to address the ambiguity of visual rhetoric and present a better understanding of visual rhetoric to “understand the role of advertising, film, television, video, multi-media, and the World Wide Web in our lives” (Birdsell & Groarke, 1996, p. 1). Birdsell and Groarke (1996) support Scott’s (1994) position, asserting that visual arguments have similarities to verbal arguments, although vague and ambiguous, visual images do present arguments. In conveying arguments, visual images communicate meanings that involve context: “a wide range of cultural assumptions, situational cues, time-sensitive information, and/or knowledge of a specific interlocutor” (Birdsell and Groarke, 1996, p. 5). Consequently, the context of a visual image involves representation and resemblance (Birdsell and Groarke, 1996). As stated in Scott (1994), “In sum, we learn to understand cameras not as machines that record as it is (or even as we see it), but as machines designed to represent the world in the manner we have learned to show it” (p. 261). Consequently, just because a visual image is able to resemble something does not mean it represents that thing; it merely shows the world how we have learned to view that thing, a view that is inherently hegemonic in nature. The politics of representation present further challenges for visual rhetoric; keeping this in mind, a critic can provide a more detailed explanation of the context of the artifact.
Visual rhetoric studies that are published, begin to consider the role of race, gender and disabilities in artifacts (Briggs, 2003; Demo, 2000; DeVoss, 2000; and Garland-Thomson, 2002), analyze photographs (Finnegan, 2006; Lucaites & Hariman, 2001, Lucaites & Hariman, 2002; Lucaites & Hariman, 2003; Lancioni, 1996) and critique memorial spaces (Blair, Jeppeson, & Pucci, 1999; Blair & Michel, 2000; Foss, 1986). As the field of visual rhetoric began to further develop, theoretical perspectives of visual rhetoric were also expanded upon. Peterson (2001) asserts in “that “Foss’s schema gives undue precedence to visual images, supports critical circularity, divorces function from aesthesis, and reflects modernist assumptions that may work against important critical projects” (p. 21). With this observation in mind, Peterson (2001) presents a schema that begins with visual elements of a visual image, situating the critique in the details that make up the image and not in the image as a whole.

Beginning a critique from inductive reasoning would allow the critic to describe an image based on its visual elements, avoid circularity, and expose the critic’s assumptions of what constitutes an image (Peterson, 2001). In expanding on Foss’s (1994) schema, Peterson (2001) highlights possible ideologies of the critic and situates the critic’s vocabulary in a cultural context of postmodernist thought, evaluating “visuals that do not fall as neatly as others do into modernist categories or assessments” (Peterson, 2001, p.26). Peterson (2001) provides justification for analyzing visual images that waver from the hegemonic view of what an image is. With a preliminary schema and justification for evaluating visual images, scholarship continues to emerge which studies visual images in multiple ways.
In their study of iconic photographs, Hariman and Lucaites (2001) push the idea that iconic photographs “reflect social knowledge and dominant ideologies, shape understanding of specific events and periods (then and subsequently), influence political action both topically and by modeling relationships between civic actors, and provide figural resources for subsequent communicative action” (p. 7). Discussing the function that the iconic photographs communicate, Hariman and Lucaites (2002) point out that power and ideology are embedded in photographs, subsequently tying ideology to visual rhetoric; stating, “both traditional conceptions of persuasive appeal and modern methods of ideology critique are needed to explicate the icon” (p. 387). Using these two techniques, persuasive appeals and ideological criticism, allows the critic to discover the full cultural context of an icon.

Additionally, Hariman and Lucaites (2003) address the notion that iconic photographs can also function to reproduce “normative conceptions of gender, race, class, and other forms of social identity” (p. 37), as an iconic image is widely recognized and culturally significant. Normative reproductions can serve the function of creating a homogenous idea of collectivism that excludes marginalized voices, yet the use of a visual image to convey identity offers numerous benefits to marginalized communities. If one considers Blair’s (2004) assertion that “visual expression communicates something unavailable to the verbal version, whether it is communicated or in writing” (p. 53), then visual images would seem to be a useful way for marginalized voices to be publicly heard.
In a fragmented postmodern culture, a greater number of individuals have the capacity to produce visual cultural artifacts, thus calling into question which cultural artifacts are given hierarchy over others. A postmodern theoretical framework for visual rhetoric calls into question ideas of authenticity, as well as emphasizing ideas of pluralism and multiplicity, understanding that “systems of representation do not reflect an already existing reality so much as they organize, construct, and mediate our understanding of reality, emotion, and imagination” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 13). Visual culture informs our everyday life, often in subtle ways, invoking meaning to help interpret a fragmented culture. Postmodernism recognizes that a fragmented culture produces multiple realities; as such, each individual that views a cultural artifact can interpret it differently. Hence, meaning in cultural artifacts is polysemic.

Using a postmodern framework, Rice (2004) contributes to theories of visual analysis by answering the question: “How can analysts better understand postmodern visual rhetoric?” (p. 64). Rice (2004) sets forth an omnaphistic visual schema. Omnaphistic originally utilizes in Lester’s (2003) theory of visual communication means “all in balance”. The term is broadly used in Rice’s schema to refer to the notion that the scheme balances out all aspects of an image and allows for an analysis that takes into account the full context of the image. Rice (2004) posits an omnaphistic visual schema, utilizing abductive thinking, as the starting point to analyze visual rhetorical artifacts.

Abductive thinking, coinciding with postmodernist thought as a process, would begin with visual observation before anything else, which is more intuitive and personal
and doesn’t “adhere to external, commonly agreed-upon standards” (Rice, 2004, p. 68). Utilizing Peirce’s (1976) concept of abductive thinking, Rice (2004) wishes for the critic to approach images from a standpoint that preceded “both induction and deduction” (p. 67) and begins by visually observing images. Abductive thinking allows the critic to guess or infer what an image may mean before looking at specific criteria to determine the meaning of an image. As a result, the critic would look at the entire image first and determine subjective meaning before moving to objective meaning (the four indicators). Abductive thinking moves the critic closer to a postmodern way of viewing artifacts, celebrating fragmentation, irony, a rejection of grand narratives, and appreciation of multiplicity (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 2002). This allows the critic to acknowledge their ideologies and perspectives and determine meaning in their critique before moving on to identify specific elements of images.

As visual culture is transcultural and a direct representation of a postmodern world, “layers of approaches and methods” (Rice, 2004, p. 64) should be utilized to examine artifacts. Rejecting notions of an agreed-upon standards, a critique of a postmodern visual text would analyze a text for four indicators (elements): oppositional elements, co-constructed elements, contextual elements, and ideological indications. Simplified by Rice (2004):

Oppositional elements focus primarily on text with the unavoidable yet subordinate presence of the critic, the co-constructed element focuses on text and audience equally, while the contextual element focuses on text with context. Ideological indicators focus on text and all its surrounding elements, which results in a revelation of rhetorical power (p. 72).

These four indicators carry epistemological and ontological implications for the study of
visual rhetoric, contributing to the growing body of theoretical and methodological approaches to visual rhetoric. Rice’s (2004) omnaphistic visual scheme and indicators are utilized in this analysis of images from Project Unbreakable.

The first indicator that makes up the omnaphistic visual schema is concerned with elements that are in opposition to one another. This indicator is the most basic level of perception, and the critic would search for signs in the image that “violate cultural generic norms” (Rice, 2004, p. 69) or juxtapose one another. To complete this indicator, the critic would need to understand cultural norms and ideologies that align with the image and search for elements that are ironic, conflicting, or violations of that norm. An oppositional element “has at its center the text with the critic, or a receiver, at the periphery” (Rice, 2004, p. 69). This element has the potential to lead the critic to the central rhetorical purpose of the image, as it conveys what may have drawn an audience to the particular image.

Rice’s (2004) second indicator, co-constructed elements are centered around the text and the audience the text is aimed at. The roots of the co-constructed elements are symbolic interaction, essentially asking in what ways do the symbols in the text work in conjunction with the audience’s experiences? Rice (2004) asserts that post-modern experiences are collective and because of this, an interactive experience can occur when viewing an image. Thus, co-constructed elements are components that allow the audience and the text to interact with each other. These elements are mostly found in performances and exhibits, yet there is potential for these indicators to be embedded in images. In
viewing an image, the image becomes a part of the audience’s reality—whether they see the image as true or false. The reality the audience bestows upon any particular image is the reality that image has socially—a meaning that becomes socially constructed. This social constructed meaning becomes a part of the discourse on that particular subject matter.

Contextual elements, the third indicator, addresses the relationships between the text and its context. This indicator focuses on a sociocultural-historical context that gives the image value and meaning (Rice, 2004). As stated by Birdsell & Groake (1996), “context can involve a wide range of cultural assumptions, situational cues, time-sensitive information, and/or knowledge of a specific interlocutor” (p.5). In determining contextual elements in an image, a critic looks for images that give meaning to the time, place, cultural and cross-cultural elements of the visual (Rice, 2004). As the visual allows rhetoric to break from traditional narrative forms, contextual elements are utilized to piece together the events that take place in the image. Expounded on by van Dijk (2009), context of speech acts are “defined to be relevant in the social situation by the participants themselves” (p. 5). The rhetor decides which of the elements (time, place, cultural and cross-cultural, etc.) are most important to the speech act, therefore directing meaning towards a certain ideology.

Additionally, contexts are “subjective, they represent personal experiences, namely the experience of the current communicative episode, and they also feature instantiations of sociocultural knowledge we share about social and communicative
situations and their participants” (van Dijk, 2009, p. 6-7). To fully understand what the rhetor is communicating, one must understand the context of the speech act. Thus, contextual elements play a key role in argument and meaning embedded in visual images. Contextual elements help the audience understand how the text relates specifically to subject matter included in the image. Contextual elements are essentially building blocks of meaning; hence, contextual elements in images will give way to the survivor’s interpretation of his or her experience and how that experience connect to other discourses of sexual assault and rape. Having the potential to “illustrate how people define their identities” (Rice, 2004, p. 71) through rhetorical choices they make leads to the fourth postmodern indicator.

The last indicator of postmodern visual text is to challenge ideological elements (Rice, 2004). This indicator is driven by an interrogative stance and seeks to find ideologies embedded in artifacts, hoping to “understand power structures and knowledge in human relations” (Rice, 2004, p. 71). This indicator is essential in determining the overall rhetorical power that lies in the image as the other three elements contribute to the ideological stance that the artifact carries. According to Rice (2004):

This indicator must be saved for last. It serves as a culminating experience for the critic. Rather than focus on core elements of the experience, this indicator is far more abstract and links elements of text, audience, context, and critic as the composite rhetorical force.

The fourth indicator will lead the critic to discovering ideologies that may be oppressive, empowering, or political. Showcasing how individuals come to be affected by the visual, the four indicators have the power to show how “social conflict can be resolved with
rhetorical effects” and “create social solidarity” (Brummet, 2006, p. 164). As a result, the omnaphistic visual schema is utilized to analyze images from *Project Unbreakable*.

Guided by the omnaphistic visual schema, eight survivor stories will be analyzed via images in Chapter 3 to answer the following research questions:

(1) What ideologies of sexual assault emerge in *Project Unbreakable*?

(2) What are common rhetorical strategies employed by survivors of rape and sexual assault when explicating experiences?

If we are to fully understand the experiences of marginalized groups, then it is essential that we look to them for their voices (Kroloke & Sorensen, 2006). *Project Unbreakable* provides a space for survivor stories and allows society to being a conversation on survivor blaming, shame, and healing when it comes to sexual assault experiences.
Chapter 3

ANALYSIS

An omnaphistic visual schema posited by Rice (2004) is utilized to examine images from *Project Unbreakable*. This methodological approach is used to understand how content and form merge to create meaning in postmodern visual images (Rice, 2004). Beginning from abductive thinking and moving to identify four indicators of a postmodern visual image, this analysis determined ideologies of sexual assault in *Project Unbreakable* through rhetorical strategies employed by survivors of sexual assault. The four indicators that will be analyzed are (1) oppositional elements, (2) co-constructed elements, (3) contextual elements, and (4) ideological indicators.

*Project Unbreakable* is a photoblog on tumblr® that features images of sexual assault survivors. Tumblr is a blog host site founded in 2007 by David Karp (Tumblr, Inc., 2014). Tumblr allows its users to share a variety of content including “text, photos, quotes, links, music, and videos” (Tumblr, Inc., 20014), allowing any individual with an email address to create a space to share whatever they choose. Tumblr, thus, becomes the perfect avenue for *Project Unbreakable* to bring sexual assault narrative into public discourse. Sexual assault survivors who participate in *Project Unbreakable* are either photographed by the founder, Grace Brown or submit an image via email (Brown, 2013). As of March 2014, the tumblr blog features over 2,000 images of sexual assault survivors, with the majority of the images photographed by Brown (Brown, 2012g).

Photographs taken by Brown feature survivors holding white poster boards that explicate their sexual assault experience. Each poster board features text that is
handwritten by the sexual assault survivor. The statements written on the poster board were said to the sexual assault survivors during or after his or her sexual assault. Statements written include quotes from the survivor’s attacker, as well as with individuals that the survivor shared their experience. These individuals have included the survivor’s family members, significant others, friends, and even law enforcement (See Appendix A). Some images have also featured thoughts from the survivor (See Appendix B). Texts in the images can explicitly or implicitly state what the perpetrator said to the survivor or what a member of society said to the survivor when she or he shared her or his experience of sexual assault. Other images state what the survivor was thinking during the attack or how they have coped with the attack (Brown, 2012g). It is ultimately up to the survivor on what to include on the poster board(s) that communicates their survivor narrative. Originally, Brown’s photography asked participants to use quotation marks for artistic purposes, but as of now, survivors have the choice to use quotation marks or not. This usually depends on the message(s) they decide to write on the poster board (Brown, 2012g).

Submissions posted on the website, tumblr blog, and Facebook® page include handwritten words and typed text in various fonts and colors (Brown, 2012g). Individuals and groups can submit submissions (See Appendix C). A submission must adhere to the following guidelines: the image must be clear and easy to read, the words should be in quotations, the person in the photo must be of the survivor only, and no names should be on the poster (Brown, 2012g). Submissions may or may not feature individuals holding a poster board, and sometimes only the written or typed text is shown without any visible
part of the sexual assault survivor. Submissions have ranged from images with pictures of the survivor, typed text, images that show survivor’s personal rooms, images taken outside, and images with typed text on various backgrounds (See Appendix D and Appendix E). Various images have also presented text in languages other than English (See Appendix F). Images submitted via email are often grouped together and posted as one collaged image. Thus, one submission posted on the tumblr page can contain up to 10 images at a time (Brown, 2012g). Due to this, the sample set included a large number of submission images in conjunction with images taken by Grace Brown.

In an attempt to accumulate a representative sample of the images, the images that were collected were posted on the blog between the dates of October 1, 2013 and March 31, 2013. Project Unbreakable posts about one to two images daily, allowing for the sample set to contain close to 300 images. This six-month time frame was chosen because October 2012 is the one-year anniversary of Project Unbreakable, allowing the blog to participate in sexual assault discourse for one year, increasing its chances of featuring more survivor narratives. The data collection ended on March 31, 2013 as April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month, and Project Unbreakable posts information on awareness events often during that month. These posts during sexual assault awareness month lower the number of images of sexual assault survivors that appear on the tumblr blog. A total of 287 images were posted on the tumblr page during the data collection time frame. This selection of images allowed for a sample of current cultural notions of sexual assault reflected in visual images. Of the 287 images that were collected: 34 images were posted in October 2012; 37 images were posted in November 2012; 41
images were posted in December 2012; 71 images were posted in January 2013; 51 images were posted in February 2013; and 52 images were posted in March 2013.

To select the images for the analysis, images posted from the dates of October 1, 2012 and March 31, 2013 were downloaded from the tumblr blog and printed out. Once the photographs were collected, a critical examination of the images was completed utilized using Rice’s (2004) omnaphistic visual schema. Beginning with abductive thinking, images selected were salient to the researcher. The images were grouped into the following categories: (1) Category one is made up of typical poses in which the image is taken by Grace Brown and displays the survivor’s full face. (2) Category two features images where the survivor does not show his or her face. As a result, the poster board is the focal point of the image taken by Brown. (3) Category three includes a series of photographs taken by Brown in which one survivor appears in multiple shots. These narratives feature several quotes on the survivor’s sexual assault experiences. (4) Photographs of individuals who are significantly older than the typical college-aged demographic Brown photographs are in category four. (5) Submissions sent to Project Unbreakable comprise category five, and (6) male survivors photographed by Brown are included in category six. From the six categories above, three separate images were analyzed from the typical pose category. Four photographs were analyzed from a series shot of one survivor, and one image was chosen from the remaining four categories. Thus, a total of eleven separate images are examined in this thesis; although, these images only constitute a total of eight survivor stories.

The main purpose of examining the photographs is to discover similarities in
experiences of sexual assault, draw connections between lived experiences of sexual assault survivors, and discover ideologies of sexual assault. Each image has been included in the text of this chapter, and the omnaphistic visual schema analysis will follow the image of the survivor. The images are presented in order of the categories outlined in the previous paragraph.
Figure 1- October 1, 2012. The photograph was taken in Arlington, VA on August 5, 2012 (Brown, 2012a).
Figure 1 posted on October 1, 2012, was one of five in a collection of photos taken by Grace Brown; this image features a Caucasian woman holding a white poster board with a handwritten message. The image was taken in Arlington, VA on August 5, 2012 and originally appeared on the tumblr page on August 12, 2012. The image was re-featured on October 1, 2012 as re-blog from the tumblr page of reasontbodies, who featured Brown’s photography with a blog post on sexual domination in culture (Brown, 2012a). The image is in color and is taken outdoors. In the image, one can see green grass, trees in the background, and a glimpse of the sunshine illuminating patches of green grass. The woman holding the poster is wearing a pink dress, which has a crocheted pattern and fringe at the bottom of the dress. The dress is around mid-thigh length, and some of the fringe reaches the knee. She has brown hair that is cut into a pixie style and is wearing earrings that dangle almost to her shoulder. Her mouth is open, yet not smiling, and a total of eight fingers are shown as she holds her poster board. The statement that this survivor has chosen to share, which appears in quotation marks is, “I kinda feel like you cheated”. Directly following this statement is, “-my then-boyfriend, when I told him” which describes the speaker of the quoted text.

The oppositional element of irony appears in this image via the text written on the poster board. The text that the survivor decided to include on the poster board is a contradiction of social support. A survivor expects to receive understanding and support when they tell a significant other about the experience of sexual assault. As experts have shown, support for survivors of sexual assault is paramount in their healing. As stated by the Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (2013), the best way to help a loved one is
to “Listen. Be there. Don’t be judgmental”. Yet, the statement on the poster board, from her then-boyfriend is “I kinda feel like you cheated.” This statement is the opposite of support and ultimately unhelpful to a survivor of sexual assault or rape. Furthermore, this statement reinforces the misconception that sexual assault and rape are the fault of the survivor (Buckwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 2005). In making the choice to include this quote, the survivor’s use of irony shocks the audience into the lived experiences of sexual assault and shows how the current public discourses excludes real experiences.

Survivor’s discourses are few and far between; as a result, typical discourses of sexual assault are painted to show support, understanding, and empathy (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, 2013). Yet, in the case of this survivor, she did not experience support from her significant other after her sexual assault, something that became a significant part of her experience of sexual assault, as she shares this over what her attacker said.

The second indicator of postmodern visual text is co-constructed elements. This image evokes emotion through the expression in the survivor’s eyes and mouth. Particularly haunting in this image is the shape of her mouth, as it appears to be speaking the words she wrote on the poster board. While a still image, her mouth gives the image movement. Although the text is written on the poster board, the captured moment of her mouth makes it easy for the audience to envision hearing her voice, actually voicing those words. In hearing those words from her mouth, the audience is allowed to participate in her experience, and for that split second, her experience becomes a part of theirs. A meaning is constructed that the audience and survivor share. This interactive experience is overwhelmingly significant in understanding sexual assault through the
survivor’s eyes, as empathy can lead to understanding. Operating in much the same ways as her mouth, her eyes are deadlocked on the audience. Her stare is penetrating, and in her blue eyes you see pupils that are dilated with emotion; her right eye looks watery and is slightly smaller than her left, as if she attempted to blink away emotion—and possibly the experience.

The third indicator of a postmodern visual text is contextual elements. Contextual elements of cultural assumptions of social, romantic relationships appear in this image. In looking at the norms of romantic relationships, cheating is considered to be a negative thing and a deliberate choice. With the survivor’s “then-boyfriend”, making this statement, the cultural assumption is that the survivor committed an act that violated the social norm of her relationship. However, cultural assumptions of sexual assault provide implications that the survivor has no choice in the matter. One can see in this image that various norms are violated; yet, the audience must decide who has violated that social norm—the survivor or her then-boyfriend. Also, utilized to show context is the background of the image. The survivor has chosen to take her photograph outside in a public place, as she participated in one of the open call photograph days hosted by Grace Brown. Taking a photograph in a public place allows anyone to see, thus spreading her message to an even larger audience. This act is also potentially a public performance.

The fourth postmodern indicator of ideologies that the image highlights is that of norms of romantic social relationships. As the survivor stated that the quote is from her then-boyfriend, the audience is aware that the relationship has ended. It is apparent that
the survivor or her then-boyfriend ended the relationship, leaving the audience to speculate whether it was because she violated the social norm of cheating, or if it was because the survivor’s then-boyfriend violated the social norm of not supporting your significant other in traumatic times. This ideology reinforces the notion of what a romantic social relationship should encompass. Furthermore, it advocates for survivors to surround themselves with supportive individuals.
Figure 2- January 25, 2013. The photograph was taken in London, ON on October 16, 2012 (Brown, 2013c).
Figure 2 appeared on *Project Unbreakable’s* website on January 25, 2013. The image features a woman of color holding a white poster board with two quotes. The image was taken on October 16, 2012 in London, ON. The image is in color and takes place inside a building. The background of the image contains windows and chairs, although they are blurred. This technique allows for a central focus on the survivor. The woman holding the poster is wearing a multi-colored scarf, a necklace, a tank top, and denim blue jeans. Her hair is almost shoulder length and is dark brown. Her mouth is closed. You can see all of her fingers, in which her nails are unpainted. The following statements are written on the poster board: (1) The first statement in quotation marks is, “By the time I am done, no one will want you. I will break you.” This quotation is followed by “-my attacker.” (2) The second statement in quotation marks reads, “You work at a sexual assault centre. You should have known better.” This quotation is followed by “- my brother”.

The oppositional element in this image is the survivor’s ethnicity and race. While it is not possible to determine the survivor’s exact ethnicity, she appears to be of Indian or Middle Eastern descent. The intersection of the survivor’s race and ethnicity are in direct opposition to her voicing her experiences. Women of color have higher rates of being raped and sexually assaulted (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, 2013); yet, images of sexual assault survivors that permeate the media are predominantly of white women. This is also true of *Project Unbreakable*, as the majority of individuals featured are white women. As a woman of color, occupying spaces of privilege is rare; therefore, participation in public discourse draws attention to multiple oppressions. Survivors of
sexual assault who are racial or ethnic minorities have vastly different receptions of their experiences than white women (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, 2013). At the intersection of her ethnicity and gender are cultural norms that pertain to traditions of privacy about matters surrounding sexual issues. Although rape and sexual assault are vastly different from consensual intercourse, often individuals adhering to these cultural norms do not see this distinction. Thus, to discuss the matter of sexual assault outside the home is considered taboo and in violation of their cultural norms.

The second indicator of a postmodern text is co-constructed elements. The co-constructed element that appears in this image is that of the survivor’s kinesics, mainly her eyes and the tension in her face. Her eyes are staring directly into the camera, and her pupils are wide. Her facial expression carries tension and resignation. There is little to no emotion behind her eyes. This explicates to the audience that her experiences have drained positive emotions out of her; the audience also shares in the feeling of emotional depletion. Her emotionless eyes establish a connection through the shared feeling of emotional trauma, allowing the audience to feel empathy for the survivor. The audience becomes part of her experience through co-constructing the emotional strength it took to survive her ordeal. Furthermore, the color photo allows the audience to visualize the exact moment she shared her experience. The blurriness of the color background further contributes to co-construction. The audience focuses solely on her sexual assault experience due to the small depth of field in the photograph; there are no distracting components embedded in the background of the image.
The third indicator of a postmodern text is that of contextual elements. The first contextual element is that of the environmental background, which is the inside of a building. The survivor has more privacy inside, as opposed to individuals whose photos are taken outdoors. The choice to photograph the image inside limits the number of people who physically see survivor statements the day Brown takes the image. Thus, the survivor must have felt as if this indoor location was a safe space for her to show her face as a sexual assault survivor. This affords the survivor more time before the world connects her identity to that of a sexual assault survivor.

The next element that gives context to her sexual assault is the physical size of the quoted text. The size of the quote from her attacker is much larger than the size of the quote from her brother. This gives more attention and significance to the attacker’s words, which leads the audience to believe that the survivor’s experience with her attacker plays a larger role in her narrative. In addition, giving context to the survivor’s experience is the quote she included from her attacker on the poster board. The first quote, “By the time I am done, no one will want you. I will break you,” said by the attacker gives the audience insight into the attacker’s intentions. It is apparent that her attacker had malice towards her. In addition, it is obvious that her attacker intended to inflict enough physical or emotional harm to “break” her. The attacker wishes to damage the survivor and once the attacker is “done”, the survivor is no longer “whole”. As a result, no one would want her. In choosing this quote, the survivor wishes to highlight that a survivor’s experiences of sexual assault have the potential to affect all areas of their lives. The experience is not an isolated event but carries over to other areas of the
survivor’s lives, affecting future social relationships.

The third contextual element that is present is the second quote from the survivor’s brother, which states, “You work at a sexual assault centre. You should have known better.” This quote demonstrates a male family member’s response to the survivor’s experience. The brother’s quotation gives insight into the survivor’s job, her prior knowledge of sexual assault, and resources that were available to her outside of her brother’s non-support. Although the survivor did not receive adequate support from her brother, the audience can infer that if she chose to share her experience with individuals at her job, she would most likely receive support.

The fourth indicator of postmodern visual texts is ideological elements. The quote from the survivor’s brother is indicative of the ideology of survivor blaming. Often advocated for in sexual assault literature is the prevention of rape and sexual assault by protecting oneself, assuming that women have the potential to take steps to protect themselves from rape (Rape, Abuse, and Incest, National Network, 2013). The statement from the survivor’s brother directly relates to sexual assault prevention literature; yet, it is in direct opposition to support literature, in which one is encouraged to listen and suspend judgment. The survivor’s brother adheres to the ideology that survivors can prevent rape or sexual assault because he places blame on the survivor. This ideology, inherent in the quote from the survivor’s brother, carries the notion that if we teach women about the dangers of sexual assault, they have the power to prevent attacks. This ideology leaves the eradication of rape up to the survivors and not the attackers.
Another ideology that constructs the image is that of sexual assault attackers as intentionally violent and abusive. To wish to break someone, whether physically or mentally, is a deliberate act of force. Additionally, having the audacity to tell a person your intentions hints at the amount of power an attacker believes he or she has. The attacker’s statements are cruel, highlight a lack of empathy, and ultimately negotiate power in his or her favor. Sexual violence reinforces a dominant/subordinant relationship that is representative of patriarchal societies. Thus, rape for the attacker is a tool to make his power over the survivor known. An ideology that has been advocated by several scholars such as Brownmiller (1975) and Donat and D’Emilio (1992). Rape and sexual assault are ultimately representations of domination and power, and not sex.
Figure 3- December 22, 2012. The photograph was taken in Boston, MA on October 4, 2012 (Brown, 2012b).
Posted on Project Unbreakable’s tumblr page on December 22, 2012, Figure 3 features an African American woman holding a poster board with one quote on it. The image was taken on October 4, 2012 in Boston, MA. The image is in color and photographed outside. The background of the image is blurry, although you can see specks of green toward the bottom of the image, which appears to be grass. The woman holding the poster board is wearing long earrings that hang past her shoulders, a white shirt, brown jacket, and a ring on her left ring finger. She shows her full face with her mouth closed. The image shows nothing past her torso. Written on the poster board is the following statement in quotation marks: “You’ve been avoiding me all day on purpose, haven’t you, you little bitch.” This quotation is followed by “-I was 9 years old.” The tumblr blog also has a caption underneath the survivor’s image. The caption states, “It was Christmas Day…and I was just a 9 year old little girl who still believed in Santa. Christmas hasn’t ever been the same” (Brown, 2012b).

The first indicator of a postmodern text is oppositional elements. Oppositional elements in this image pertain to the survivor’s race and the age at which her sexual abuse occurred. African-American communities in the United States have a cultural norm of oppression that has devalued their experiences (hooks, 1984; Collins, 1990). African-American women have often faced sexual violence due to white classist patriarchal notions that have used racial profiling to control African-American communities (Axtell, 2012). As a result, African-American women are more likely to experience sexual assault and more likely not to report their attacks (American Bar Association, 2013). Therefore, African-American survivor narratives rarely make it into public discourse. This survivor
narrative coming into public discourse gives value to her experiences, directly opposing a
hegemonic cultural norm of African-American narratives as lacking significance.

The second oppositional element that occurs also violates a cultural norm; the survivor was a child when her attack took place. The cultural norm of activities that are appropriate for children do not involve sexual acts. As a result, there is an age of consent for sexual intercourse. The age of consent varies state by state in the United States, with the lowest being 15 (Global Justice Initiative, 2013), therefore she was unable to consent. While childhood sexual abuse is a violation of a cultural norm, it is a common occurrence. For example, “approximately 40% of Black women report coercive contact of a sexual nature by age 18” (American Bar Association, 2013). The act of her narrative coming into public discourse highlights how common this hidden form of abuse is. Furthermore, it highlights that children rarely speak out about their abuse at the time that it is happening.

Co-constructed elements are the second indicator of a postmodern visual text. A co-constructed element appearing in the image is the emotion behind her eyes. Her eyes are staring straight into the camera lens and they are bloodshot. Her eyes, filled with water, carry the emotion of pain and sorrow. This makes it possible for the audience to not only to feel the emotion, but the color in the photo allows them to visualize it. This emotion embedded in her eyes helps the audience experience empathy, and they are able to picture her experience from her point of view. Furthermore, the caption offered underneath the photo allows the audience to visualize a 9-year-old girl at Christmas who
had a traumatic experience. Christmas is often a happy time in people’s lives, therefore the audience can differentiate their Christmas from the survivor’s Christmas. In the audience connecting their Christmas experiences with hers, they see how different Christmas that year was for the survivor compared to a typical Christmas. Posting the image on December 22, 2012 further solidifies the connection to Christmas, as individuals who follow the blog regularly would have seen this image close to Christmas 2012.

Contextual elements that help narrate the survivor’s experience are her age, the quote she handwrites, and the fact that she never names her attacker. In stating that she was 9 years old, the audience knows that this is an experience of childhood sexual abuse. In addition, the quote highlights that the survivor knew her attacker. Her attacker states that she was “avoiding” him, which allows the audience to see that the survivor not only knew her attacker, but also interacted with her attacker on a regular basis. Hence, her experience is also an example of acquaintance sexual assault. The choice to label the quote with her age, while omitting specific details of her attacker makes her being a child at the time of the attack more salient. She wishes for the audience to view her as a child and not as the adult woman before them speaking out decades later. Including a caption for her image, something that is rare for the images posted on the tumblr page, the survivor gives even more context to her experience. She wants the audience to know when the attack occurred and that she relives aspects of her experience every Christmas.

The fourth indicator of a postmodern text is ideological elements. Ideological
elements embedded in the image highlight the hierarchal relationship between the survivor and her attacker. The survivor is subordinate during and after the attack; thus, the attacker is dominant. The survivor, as a 9-year old, had little to no power in her experience. She was unable to consent and could not surround herself in a supportive environment, as she was unable to get away from her attacker. As this was an experience of acquaintance sexual assault, the survivor had to interact with her attacker after the experience. In being able to maintain contact with the survivor, especially when the survivor attempted to cut it off, the attacker shows he or she has more power. Furthermore, the language her attacker uses when addressing her highlights how he or she devalues her as a human. Calling a 9-year-old child a “bitch” violates a cultural norm and is further used to assert power. The use of this term allows the attacker to erase her age and her humanity. The survivor is no longer a child, and no longer a person. This may occur because it is easier to justify or explain the act that the attacker committed. If the attacker can name the survivor as less than human, then her experience becomes devalued.
"Well, we told you that you were gonna get raped. You thought we were joking. Looks like the joke's on you."

*Figure 4*-February 12, 2013. The photograph was taken in Buffalo, NY on October 25, 2012 (Brown, 2013a).
Posted on *Project Unbreakable*’s tumblr page on February 12, 2013, Figure 4 features a poster board with handwritten text from a survivor. The image, taken by Brown on October 25, 2012 in Buffalo, NY, only features the survivor’s hands and the quote the survivor chose to share. The hands appear to belong to a Caucasian person with fingernails painted a dark color. This infers that the survivor is likely a woman due to a United States cultural norm of women having painted nails. Written on the poser board is the following statement in quotation marks: “Well, we told you that you were gonna get raped. You thought we were joking. Looks like the joke’s on you.”

The first postmodern indicator of a visual text is oppositional elements. This appears when the attackers tell the survivor they are going to rape her or him. Most people do not expect someone to say they will rape him or her. The quote states that the attackers said they would rape the survivor and that the attackers believed that the survivor thought they were joking. As verbal and nonverbal communication is ambiguous, there is potential for misinterpretation (Wood, 2014). Thus, one can understand how the attackers believed that the survivor thought they were joking. The audience is capable of connecting with the survivor in terms of understanding cultural notions of what is considered a joke and what is not. As a result, this statement is appalling to the audience. Another oppositional element is the notion that someone would think raping an individual is equal to playing a joke on him or her. Classifying rape as a joke goes directly against cultural norms of the serious nature of the violent act. Jokes are something that cause amusement and are humorous; this is obviously not the case in rape and sexual assault. When rape and sexual assault survivors are thirteen times more likely
to abuse alcohol, twenty-six times more likely to abuse drugs, and four times more likely to contemplate suicide (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, 2013), sexual assault experiences are in no way humorous.

The third indicator of a postmodern text is co-constructed elements. Co-construction is evident in details of the attackers, especially with the use of “joke” by the attackers. It is obvious that the attackers saw the experience as a joke and not serious; hence, the survivor is the person who the “joke” is on by making him or her the target of the joke. This highlights a shared experience of humiliation and a common experience of being the target of someone else’s idea of “fun”. This quote co-constructs an experience between the audience and the survivor, as the audience is able to connect other experiences they may have had (as a target) with the survivor’s experiences. This co-constructed element creates the reality of sexual assault as a humiliating experience and addresses the forceful manner in which attackers view their actions. Sexual assault is a domain of the powerful over the powerless.

The third indicator of a postmodern text is contextual elements. One contextual element that is in the image is the use of plural language in the survivor’s handwritten quote. The survivor chooses to use the term “we” twice. In using “we” in the quote, the survivor discloses that her assault included more than just two people. Sexual interactions between more than two people violate a hegemonic norm of traditional sex acts; this element highlights the distinctive nature of her sexual assault. Typical sexual assault discourse discusses the survivor having one attacker, predominantly ignoring cases of
multiple attackers in sexual assault. Yet, statistics have shown that 10-20% of rapes that occur are group rapes, representing a very small number of rapes reported (Ullman, 2013). Bringing an experience of gang rape into public discourse highlights values and attitudes surrounding the act.

It is no wonder that the survivor decided not to show his or her face because gang rape “carries with it an added dose of humiliation of the victim that may be absent in single-assailant” experiences (Warshaw, 1994, p. 102). In accordance with research, survivors of gang rape are twice as likely to experience: “insult; forced fellatio; pulling, biting, and burning the breasts; urinating on the victim; putting semen on her body and demanding manual masturbation or masturbating in her presence” (Warshaw, 1994, p. 102). In knowing that gang rape is especially brutal, the audience glimpses the type of violence the survivor may have endured.

The fourth indicator of a postmodern visual image is ideological elements. Ideologies embedded in this image coincide with patriarchal values of power. Gang rape reinforces the ideology of sex as “violent” and “aggressive”; therefore, the more violence, the more power the attacker feels (Warshaw, 1994). Thus, to commit rape in the presence of people is even more a show of power. The survivor witnesses the power and other individuals see that the attacker has dominance over the survivor. The amount of degradation and humiliation that the survivor experiences at the hands of each rapist is in direct proportion to the power the rapist perceives he gains (Ullman, 2013). The survivor is but a “tool” that the attackers use to demonstrate their power.
Another ideological element in the image is one of survivor blaming. The quotation featured in the poster board puts blame on the survivor. The attackers have no responsibility for the attack. The attackers told the survivor he or she would be raped; this puts the responsibility of the sexual assault experience on the survivor and not the attackers. The attackers essentially blame the survivor for his or her rape because they believe the survivor thought they were joking and did not heed their warning. This supports the idea that rape and sexual assault are preventable if the survivor follows certain precautions.
Figure 5-November 7, 2012. The photograph was taken in Chicago, IL on September 27, 2012 (Brown, 2012c). The images are placed in the order that they appear on Project Unbreakable’s tumblr page.
Figure 5 was posted on Project Unbreakable’s tumblr page on November 7, 2012. The survivor narrative includes four images total and features a woman of color, holding a white poster board in each image. The image is in color and takes place outdoors in Chicago, IL on September 25, 2012. The woman holding the poster board has her brown hair pulled back, bangs that cover her forehead, and wears glasses. She shows her full face and hands, both of which have tattoos on each visible finger and has a closed mouth in all four photographs. She is wearing a grey jacket, blue jeans, and a ring on her right index finger. She has keys in her right pocket. The keys in her right pocket are on a lanyard with ID badges or credit cards. She also has what appears to be a smartphone in her left jean pocket. The image also shows blue headphones on the right side of the survivor’s body.

The survivor’s narrative includes five quotes from four individuals. The survivor narratives are not in chronological order based the survivor’s age. They appear above as they appear are on the tumblr page. On the poster board, located on the top left, is the following statement: “I don’t want to marry you because you’re not a virgin.” This statement is followed by “—after telling my next boyfriend about rape. I was 16; he would assault me later saying ‘I was already ruined’”. The second image, appearing on the top right, is a sexual assault experience that occurred when the survivor was 20. Written on the poster board in quotation marks on the top right is, “I thought I could have you”. This is followed by “(I was sleeping) – @ age 20, boyfriend.” The third image, appearing on the bottom left, is an experience about gang rape. The following, written on the poster board, in quotation marks is, “Don’t tell the police. You will ruin our lives.”
Following that quotation is, “—@ 21, good friends gang assaulted. I did tell.” The last image, appearing on the bottom right, describes one of the first sexual assaults that the survivor experiences. Written on the poster board in this image is, “You should be thankful I didn’t get you pregnant.” It is followed by “—@ age 15, first boyfriend.”

The first indicator of a postmodern text is oppositional elements. The first oppositional element that appears in the images is that of multiple attacks. Statistics on rape and sexual assault rarely address one survivor experiencing multiple attacks by different people. While Project Unbreakable’s audience expects to see a survivor story of one attack, a survivor with four different incidents of sexual assault is shocking. Another oppositional element that occurs is the fact that the survivor knew all of her attackers. The survivor was sexually assaulted by three different boyfriends and gang raped by friends. Most people do not expect significant others or friends to sexually assault him or her, as that is in opposition to those social relationships. The social relationship between significant others and friends is usually one of trust, love, and respect; yet, approximately 2/3 of rapes are committed by someone the survivor knows (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, 2013). Her sexual assault and gang rape by acquaintances is inherently a violation of cultural norms.

The second indicator of a postmodern text is co-constructed elements. The first co-constructed element that appears is that of the objects the survivor has on her person. In the image, the audience can see components of the survivor’s personality in the keychain she has, the phone in her front pocket, and her headphones. These items show
that the survivor has objects that many individuals have. Most people can identify at least one or more items they have in common with the survivor. As a result, the audience has a connection to the survivor and can see elements of themselves in her. To co-construct this experience, the audience’s reality is ultimately influenced by the knowledge that they too, can be sexually assaulted or raped by someone they know. If this can happen to her, then it can also happen to anyone, highlighting that no one is exempt from sexual assault or rape.

Another co-constructed element is the facial and body expressions of the survivor that appears in all four images. In the image on the top left, her facial expression is slightly different from the other three. Yet, each expresses acknowledgment of her sexual assault experience. In the top left image, she is looking straight ahead. In the other three images, her body and face tilt to either the left or right. The changing facial and body expression in the first image could reveal that this experience is more significant than the other experiences. This image also features two quotes, hinting that it very well may have been more significant to her than the other experiences. Allowing the audience to focus more on this experience offers a construction of meaning that leads to significance of what it felt like to be “unworthy” of marriage.

The third indicator of a postmodern text is contextual elements, which appear in the details about her age. The images appear out of chronological order and the audience must place them in order to understand the full range of her experiences. Although, the audience does not know why the images are out of chronological order it serves the
purpose of drawing their attention more closely to her narrative to construct all her experiences as one narrative. This survivor narrative spans a period of 7 years; the first attack occurred when she was 15, and the last attack mentioned occurred when she was 21. The audience is able to construct each incident in chronological order and imagine the survivor at each age of her attacks.

Another contextual element alerts the audience that she experienced acquaintance rape and gang rape. The first quote written on the top left said by her boyfriend when she was 16 states his response to her first rape. This tells the audience she shared her experience with someone she trusted. It also conveys that her boyfriend used her rape against her. Her boyfriend, when she was 16, would later assault her, as he believed she “was already ruined”. This contextual element indicates that her boyfriend was not only unsupportive but felt as if her first sexual assault gave him access to her body. This element was repeated in the image on the top right. The audience discovers that one sexual assault occurred while she was sleeping. Her boyfriend at the time states, “I thought I could have you.” With her boyfriend stating this, he is asserting that his thoughts are all that he needs for her consent and that he thinks that he has certain rights to her body, simply because he is her boyfriend.

Another contextual element that appears in this survivor’s narrative is featured on the bottom left in the written text, “I did tell”. This is in response to her attackers asking her not to tell the police about her gang rape. The audience knows that she told the police about one experience of sexual assault, making her gang rape one of the 40% of rapes
that are reported to police (Rape, Abuse, Incest & National Network, 2013). The audience realizes that her attackers have limited remorse. Their primary concern is of consequences they will face. As stated by them, “You will ruin our lives” (Brown, 2012c). In making this statement, the attackers have placed the blame on the survivor. “She” is the one who ruins “their” lives although they committed the act. We also observe a lack of empathy and remorse in the quote from her first boyfriend when he tells her “You should be thankful I didn’t get you pregnant.” The attacker justifies raping her because the survivor is not pregnant. He raped her, yet she should be thankful because he had the “generosity” to make sure he did not impregnate her.

The fourth indicator of postmodern visual images is that of ideological elements. Ideological elements in this survivor narrative correspond with the idea that sexual assault experiences involving acquaintances are insignificant. The text presented in quotation marks shows a disregard for the sexual assault attack, often times providing excuses that put blame on the survivor. Survivor blaming and shaming is also a key ideology of sexual assault presented in the quotations written on the poster board. One attacker goes as far as to say “I don’t want to marry you because you’re not a virgin” and that the survivor “was already ruined”. These statements are an attempt to shame the survivor. Furthermore, they let her know that due to her sexual assault, she is not as “pure” as other women who have not been sexual assaulted. Thus, the ideology of virginity as purity also appears.
Figure 6 - March 16, 2013. The image was taken in Charlottesville, VA on November 7, 2012 (Brown, 2013b).
Posted on Project Unbreakable’s tumblr page on March 6, 2013, Figure 6 features a Caucasian middle-aged woman holding a poster board with two quotations handwritten on it. The color image was taken outdoors on November 7, 2012 in Charlottesville, VA. The background is blurry towards the top of the image, yet the bottom of the image is much clearer, and grass is plainly visible. The woman holding the poster board is wearing sunglasses, earrings that hang down and touch her shoulders, black pants and a multicolored shirt, underneath a black coat. The poster board contains the following introduction to her sexual assault experience: “Adult ♂ family friend:” The words of the attacker come next in quotation marks: “Pretty, pretty please?” The next written line states, “17-year old me (after 10 years):” This statement is then followed by “I’m not doing this anymore.” in quotation marks, showing the survivor’s answer to her attacker.

The first indicator of a postmodern text is oppositional elements. The oppositional element that this image highlights is that of sexual abuse lasting for ten years. Sexual abuse and rape are predominantly discussed as a single attack that the survivor experiences. Yet, this survivor endured ten years of abuse. Furthermore, the abuse that the survivor experienced was childhood sexual abuse. Her survivor narrative violates the norm of appropriate ways to treat children and highlights how long sexual abuse can last. Another oppositional element appearing in the image is the survivor sharing a quotation that she said to her attacker. Quotations that are usually written on the poster board are from the attacker or from individuals whom the survivor told about the attack (Brown, 2012g). In this case, the audience is presented with a survivor narrative where the survivor confronted her attacker face to face. Discourses of sexual assault rarely discuss
survivors who confront their attacker; therefore, this narrative also highlights a specific type of response to sexual assault experiences.

The second indicator of a postmodern text is co-constructed elements. A co-constructed element the image shows is that of the survivor confronting her attacker by stating, “I’m not doing this anymore.”, as well as her facial expression in the image. Wearing dark sunglasses, her eyes are partially hidden, but the audience is still able to see her eyes. Her eyes are intense, powerful, and slightly filled with pain, displaying somberness. Although she has decided to speak out about her experience and is clearly recognizable to anyone who might know her, wearing dark glasses still offers privacy. Often times, sexual assault survivors are plagued with psychological issues when healing from abuse (Russell & Bolen, 2000). Although they may be ready to discuss their experiences, they may need items or people who offer comfort and reassurance. Many people can identify with items or people that bring comfort and assurance. The dark glasses serve a protective function for the survivor. She is able to show her face, while hiding the majority of the emotion behind her eyes. This co-constructed element allows the audience to connect to the survivor’s need for public acknowledgment of her attacks, as well as wanting privacy to come to terms with her ordeal.

As we can only partially see her eyes, our attention must explore the tension in her cheeks and jaw indicate her current emotions. Although her mouth is closed, it is slightly turned up, and she has a serious expression on her face. Her facial expression evokes a straightforward humorless demeanor. The audience can envision how she
probably felt when she confronted her attacker. In making the decision to confront her attacker, she made the decision to speak on her behalf. Many people are able to connect with the need to stand up for themselves and the strength it takes to do this. Furthermore, a verbal confrontation between the survivor and her attacker, which she initiated, allows her to challenge the typical hierarchy of power between a survivor and attacker. This co-constructed element allows the audience to see her as a fighter and not a victim, co-constructing what it means to be a survivor of sexual assault.

The third indicator of a postmodern text is contextual elements. The first contextual element is the length of her abuse and the age that it began. The audience discovers the abuse lasts ten years and that it began when she was seven years old. The quote from the attacker shows that he asked, yet as she was seven years old, she did not have the ability to consent. Another contextual element is that of her current age. Although the audience cannot specifically tell her age, she appears to be middle-aged due to her graying hair. Thus, it is clear her abuse occurred decades before she made the decision to participate in public discourses surrounding sexual assault. The third contextual element in the image is in the description of her attacker. In describing her attacker, we learn it was an adult male family friend. This information tells the audience that her attack falls into the categories of acquaintance rape and childhood sexual assault. Her sexual assault, therefore, serves as a case of juvenile sexual assault survivors that know their attackers (Rape, Incest, & National Network, 2013). In addition, the use of “♂” is an indicator of the sex of the attacker. Thus, her sexual assault experience is a typical experience of female assault by a male perpetrator.
The fourth indicator of postmodern visual images is that of ideological elements. An ideology that is supported by this image is the notion that sexual assault survivors are strong. The survivor in this image confronts her attacker, which takes a lot of strength, considering he abused her for ten years. We are also presented with an image of a woman who was abused at the age of seven but appears to be physically and mentally stable. This conveys that sexual assault is something that one can survive; it does not necessarily make an individual “broken” or “damaged”. Also in this image is the ideology that adult males are sexual attackers and they prey on young children. This ideology reinforces notions of males as aggressive and violent.
Figure 7- February 8, 2013. This image is an email submission posted as one of the ten images grouped together (Project Unbreakable, 2013c).
Posted on the tumblr page on February 8, 2012, Figure 7 features a young Caucasian woman holding a spiral notepad with handwritten text on it. The image is in color and taken indoors, in what appears to be the room of the survivor. The background of the image shows a tall bookshelf on the left, a lamp next to that bookshelf and a colored drawing directly behind the left side of the survivor’s head. The colored drawing has Alice in Wonderland on the left side and is in a white picture frame. The woman in the picture has long red hair that is partially visible, and she is wearing silver and black nail polish. All of her fingers are showing, and she has on a long sleeve shirt that is a light shade of blue. Written on the notepad that she is holding in quotation marks is, “It’s ok if you like it.” This quote is followed by “–my grandfather I was only 13 Only one person knows…”

The first indicator of a postmodern text is oppositional elements. The first oppositional element that appears in this image is that of the identity of the survivor’s attacker. The survivor identifies her attacker as her grandfather. The cultural norm of a social relationship between a grandfather and his granddaughter does not include sexual assault. Due to the nature of the relationship between the survivor and her attacker, we know this is a case of incest. Thus, this sexual assault experience falls in the 7% of reported cases where the attacker is related to the survivor (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, 2013). This sexual assault case highlights not only a distinct type of attacks, but also a cultural violation of norms because incest is a social taboo. Another oppositional element appearing in this image is that of the attacker’s insinuation that it is acceptable for a 13-year old child who is being sexually assaulted to “enjoy” the act. As a
minor, the survivor had no consent in her sexual assault, so it is understandable that she
did not enjoy it. Furthermore, her grandfather telling her to enjoy sexual acts is an
inappropriate topic of conversation for this social relationship.

The second indicator of a postmodern text is co-constructed elements. The first
core-constructed element appearing is the image being photographed in the survivor’s
personal space. Most images that Brown photographs are in public places. As a result,
elements that allow the audience to connect with the survivor are artifacts, physical
appearance, and written text. Submitted images allow survivors to interject more
environmental elements that serve the purpose of displaying more of their personality and
individuality. As a result, the audience can see components of the survivor's life that
may or may not relate to her sexual assault experience. The audience may also have a
connection to the artifacts in her room, as they may remind them of their bedrooms. In
the case of this image, audiences can co-construct her experience as potentially occurring
in the room that is the background of her photograph. This makes her lived experience
more concrete, as the audience can draw a connection between the background of her
room and artifacts that may have surround her during her assaults.

Another co-constructed element in the image is the survivor emphasizing that she
was “only 13” during the time of her sexual assault. She even double underlines the
number 13 on her notepad. This emphasis on “only 13” is a direct connection to the
audience, asking them to envision what it means to be 13. Many of the individuals who
view this tumblr page understand that at the age of 13 her experience was atypical. A 13-
year-old child should not have to worry about sexual assault, especially from her grandfather. Accentuating her argument of only being 13, is her facial expression. Her eyes are staring directly in the camera, filled with sorrow. She is not smiling, and her face looks drained and devoid of all happiness. This helps co-construct the emotion of sadness for the audience, and they are able to empathize with the survivor.

The third indicator of a postmodern text is contextual elements. The environment of the survivor’s room appearing in the background gives context to her as an individual. The environmental factors point to a person who enjoys books and has a connection to the character of Alice and Wonderland. Another contextual element present is that of her specifically naming her attacker and the age of the attack. We know she is a survivor of childhood sexual assault and incest. The third contextual element appearing in the images draw attention to the fact that she only told one person. Because of this, the audience may infer that she did not report her sexual assault to the authorities. If she chose to report her sexual assault to the police, she most likely would have recounted her narrative numerous times to a variety of people. Thus, we understand that this narrative makes up one of the 60% of cases of sexual assaults that goes unreported (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, 2013).

The fourth indicator of postmodern visual images is ideological elements. One ideology that is present in this image is that of secrecy surrounding sexual abuse experiences, in particular incest. The survivor only told one person. This could indicate that she did not feel that she had a safe space to discuss the matter or that she felt shame.
As a large number of sexual assault survivors have stated that they feel embarrassed and ashamed during and after their attack (Jackson, 2004; Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, 2013; Sable, Danis, Mauzy & Gallagher, 2006), the audience can attribute her secrecy to the latter. Furthermore, as this is an image submitted via email, the survivor may have only felt comfortable sending her image directly to the tumblr page.

Participating in a photograph day is a very public matter, as a minimum of one person will be standing directly in front of you as you hold your handwritten survivor narrative. The choice to submit an image allows the survivor to limit the amount of people she has to see in person. Thus, even though she shares her narrative, she is able to do it on her own terms and in a way that is reassuring to her.
"We don't have to hook up... Let me get you another drink..."
Figure 8 was posted on *Project Unbreakable’s* tumblr on December 27, 2012 and features a Caucasian male holding a white poster board with the following text written in quotation marks, “We don’t have to hook up…Let me get you another drink…” The image is a color photograph and was taken inside a building. In the image, a mirror and a few chairs are visible behind the survivor. The survivor has short brown hair, is wearing blue jeans, and a striped shirt. We can see his full face; he has a short beard and his mouth is closed.

The first indicator of a postmodern text is oppositional elements. An oppositional element that appears in this image is that of the sex the survivor. The survivor is a male, making up a small number of sexual assault narratives. According to Mezey and King (2000), “Male rape is a taboo subject; it happens but is concealed by victims who are too ashamed to speak out and by a society that is not prepared to listen” (p. v). Thus, this survivor narrative coming into public discourse is a violation of male survivors of sexual assault as being silent, as well as the cultural norm that males cannot be sexually assaulted.

The second indicator of a postmodern text is co-constructed elements. The text on the poster board allows the audience to imagine someone buying a drink for the survivor. Buying a drink for someone is considered courteous; so, it is easy to imagine the survivor saying yes to the drink offer. When someone offers to buy a drink, you believe he or she has good intentions; yet, recently this practice has become a tool to commit sexual assault (Jackson, 2004). This statement allows the audience to identify with the survivor. The
majority of individuals may have bought a drink for someone, had a drink bought for them, or observed this action in person or in the media; thus, his experience becomes an everyday occurrence. In co-constructing this survivor narrative, the audience realizes that this can happen to them. Hence, his experience is not in isolation to his worldview but is connected to the audience’s reality.

The third indicator of a postmodern text is contextual elements. The first contextual element in the image is the quote when it mentions buying a drink. This highlights that his sexual assault may have been a drug facilitated assault. Drug facilitated assaults diminish the capacity of the survivor to consent and often times affect his or her memory of the event (Jackson, 2004; Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, 2013). Another contextual element is the omission of details about his attacker. This could point to the notion that the survivor does not know his attacker or cannot remember the sexual assault. The third contextual element that is present is that of his facial and physical appearance. The audience knows that he is a male sexual assault survivor. The audience can also see in his facial expression and his readiness to tell his story. He is stating straight into the camera, and the emotion in his face shows determination.

The fourth indicator of postmodern visual images is that of ideological elements. This survivor narrative carries ideologies of acknowledgment of male sexual assault survivors and compassion for survivors of drug-facilitated attacks. An ideology that is embedded in this image is that men can be sexual assault survivors. With this survivor narrative coming into public discourse, ideologies that devalue male sexual assault are
challenged. This image also challenges the ideology that it is only sexual assault if you can remember all aspects of the experience. Survivors who have trouble remembering their assault often experience doubt when they share their narratives.

This chapter analyzed eight narratives of sexual assault explicated through visual images posted on *Project Unbreakable*’s tumblr page. The eight narratives are a representative sample of sexual assault survivors who participated in public discourse through visual rhetoric. The first figure analyzed, featured a young Caucasian woman who discloses a quote from her ex-boyfriend. The second figure that was analyzed includes two quotes from a woman of color—one from her attacker and one from her brother. Figure 3 featured an African-American woman explicating an experience of childhood sexual assault. Figure 4 was an image in which the survivor chose not to show his or her face. The narrative explicates surrounds gang rape. In Figure 5, one survivor describes multiple instances of sexual assault in four images. The sixth figure discussed an experience of childhood sexual assault that lasted for a period of at least ten years. The seventh survivor narrative analyzed a submission from *Project Unbreakable* in which the survivor shares a sexual assault narrative of incest. Figure 8 features a male survivor of sexual assault.

An omnaphistic visual schema developed by Rice (2004) discovering oppositional elements, co-constructed elements, contextual elements, and ideological elements was applied to each survivor narrative. Oppositional elements embedded in each image accounted for violations of cultural generic norms. These elements allow the critic to
focus on what may have drawn an audience to a particular image. Co-constructed elements describe social construction of meaning about the artifact; this social construction occurs between the audience and rhetor. Contextual indicators highlight elements that contribute additional details in images; these elements allow the audience to further unravel meaning embedded in images. The last element that the analysis focused on was ideological elements. Ideological elements in images demonstrate ideas or values that have the potential to be oppressive, empowering, or political. The omnaphistic visual schema that was utilized, uncovered ideologies embedded in survivor narratives and discovered rhetorical strategies. Marginalized individuals use these strategies to explicate their experiences of sexual assault. Chapter four will draw conclusions from the analysis as well discuss limitations and avenues for future research.
This thesis analyzes eight survivor stories from *Project Unbreakable’s* tumblr page. The analysis seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What are common rhetorical strategies employed by survivors of rape and sexual assault when explicating experiences? and (2) What ideologies of sexual assault emerge in *Project Unbreakable*?

The critical problem of this study is to show how postmodern visual images function to illuminate social injustices. The main reason for examining the images is to discover similarities in experiences of sexual assault, draw connections between lived experiences of sexual assault survivors, and discover ideologies of sexual assault. This thesis reviewed literature on rhetorical criticism, cultural studies, and feminist studies to explicate critical approaches in examining visual rhetoric. Literature pertaining to the foundations of visual rhetoric also highlighted various theoretical perspectives for analyzing visual images. Eight images were analyzed utilizing Rice’s (2004) omnaphistic visual schema. This thesis will conclude by discussing findings discovered in the analysis, limitations of the analysis, and recommendations for future research.

**Discussion**

The analysis generated conclusions applicable to sexual assault and visual rhetoric. First, rhetorical strategies utilized by sexual assault survivors include (1) appropriation of spoken language and public spaces and (2) co-cultural communication practices. Sexual assault survivors participating in *Project Unbreakable* use appropriation
to take back words that have been utilized to devalue their experiences. This technique, according to Shugart (1997),

[Is the] claiming, by an individual or group, of another’s meaning, ideas, or experiences to advance the individuals’ or group’s beliefs, ideas or agenda. Consequently, the original meaning, which may pose a threat to the appropriator, is deconstructed, distorted or destroyed so that the perceived threat is undermined and the agendas of the appropriator is advanced instead” (p. 221).

Through the use of handwriting text from their oppressors, individuals participating in Project Unbreakable are able to challenge dominant views of sexual assault. Appropriation serves the purpose of advancing social change by highlighting the absurdity and offensiveness of statements made by sexual assault perpetrators and family members, friends, and significant others of sexual assault survivors. In drawing attention to the statements in public discourse, rhetoric becomes an effective way to challenge social injustices. Furthermore, this text becomes counter-hegemonic as it advances ideas that oppose the dominant view of sexual assault.

Appropriation also occurs through Project Unbreakable coming into public discourse and renegotiating oppressive spaces. Typically, women and sexual assault survivors have been silenced and confined to private spaces (Alcoff & Gray, 1993; Johnson, 1986). Survivors have been able to appropriate public spaces as empowering instead of oppressive. In allowing marginalized individuals to reclaim power, their lived experiences are a “site of radical possibility, a space of resistance…a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse” (hooks, 1990, p. 149). Due to their marginalization, survivors have learned the techniques utilized against them and have
combined their unique experiences with these techniques to effectively participate in public discourse. A sexual assault narrative coming into public discourse, via mediated images, challenges traditional and historical discourses of sexual assault.

The second rhetorical strategy utilized by sexual assault survivors via *Project Unbreakable* is the use of co-cultural communication practices. As outlined by Orbe (1998), co-cultural communication practices are techniques that oppressed groups utilize to communicate with the dominant group. The analysis suggests that individuals explicate their sexual assault experiences via “communicating self”, increased visibility, and confrontation (Orbe, 1998). Communicating self allows sexual assault survivors to interact with the dominant group in an authentic and open way (Orbe, 1998). The images are equally significant in considering what is written on the poster board and viewing the writer as an individual. Survivors explicating their experiences, which are often veiled behind statistics and secrecy, assist the dominant group in better understanding individual experiences of sexual assault. Participating in *Project Unbreakable* has captured them as a survivor forever, as digital images have longevity. Furthermore, in communicating self, survivors have increased visibility while maintaining a presence in dominant cultural structures. Through communicating self and increased visibility, survivors are able to confront not only their attackers, but also a social system that has silenced them for far too long.

The second conclusion this analysis generates highlights ideologies of survivor blaming, silence, and hierarchies of power in images from *Project Unbreakable* using
Rice’s (2004) omnaphistic visual schema. In participating in *Project Unbreakable* and displaying their experiences, we see survivors challenge dominant ideologies of silence, shame, and survivor blaming in sexual assault and rape experiences. The first ideology of blaming the survivor occurs through words from perpetrators of sexual assault and people who were close to the survivors at the time of the attack. All of the attacks were framed as insignificant or as the result of something the survivor did. This ideology furthers the notion that sexual assault is only a problem for people who have been assaulted. In adhering to this ideology, dominant cultural practices support rape through arming survivors with techniques to avoid rape, instead of teaching individuals not to rape. If this ideology continues to be dominant, rape and sexual assault will continue to occur in large numbers. This is due to the fact that individuals can never be fully protected from rape and sexual assault.

The ideology of silence appears frequently in the images. Discourses have typically blamed individuals who have been assaulted; as a result, survivors remain silent about their experiences. This silence further contributes to the stigmatization of survivors and lack of knowledge about the effects of sexual assault. Public and private spaces of culture are opposing and are directly related to ideological struggles of power; thus, more survivor stories are needed to combat the dominant standpoint of silence. Whether these stories occur through *Project Unbreakable*, reporting of rape or sexual assault to authorities, via YouTube videos, a personal blog, or any other public avenue, they serve the purpose of advancing the body of knowledge on sexual assault. Discourse no longer controls the survivors, but they actively participate in it.
The third ideology that emerges in the analysis is one that highlights hierarchies of power. Each image displays power struggles between the survivor and the attacker(s). The attackers use violence to gain power over the survivor, and the survivor uses rhetoric to gain power over their experience. As a result, power can function as oppressive or emancipatory; therefore, it serves to devalue people and experiences or to leave behind a subordinate position. Words utilized by the survivor’s attacker, friends, family, and significant others appearing in these images serve an oppressive function; as to control the discourse is to have power; to be controlled by the discourse is to be powerless. These words were once owned by the oppressor; yet, once conveyed through public discourse in emancipatory ways, the oppressed own them. In the survivor’s appropriating these words, they emancipate themselves from their subordinate position.

Lastly, this analysis discovers that images from Project Unbreakable carry epistemological implications for visual rhetoric. The schema set forth by Rice (2004) is relatively new and has been used by very few studies. Rice’s (2004) indicators illustrate how we come to be affected by the visual, and thus, how images can be taken together as a whole or utilized separately when looking at postmodern visual images. This study utilizes all of Rice’s indicators to discover their effectiveness in deriving meaning in visual images of sexual assault survivors. The indicators oppositional elements, co-constructed elements, contextual elements, and ideological elements, have foundations in postmodern verbal communication; however, co-constructed elements are specifically valuable to visual communication. Co-constructed elements posit an interactive relation between the text and the audience. While this element can appear in verbal or written
communication, its power becomes amplified by the visual. In the analysis, co-construction primarily occurs through kinesics and artifacts that related to the survivor. This element allows the survivor and the audience to have an intersection of gazes. An intersection of gazes in photographs, as posited by Lutz & Collins (1991), encompasses the multiple perspectives that are unique to each viewer when looking at images. In the case of Project Unbreakable, co-constructed elements allow the audience to share the subject’s gaze. Project Unbreakable encompasses multiple gazes, yet of particular importance is the fact that the photographer’s gaze is as a sexual assault survivor (subject) and Brown.

This thesis uncovered (1) that an omnaphistic visual schema for analyzing images from Project Unbreakable is beneficial to understanding how visual images create meaning of sexual assault experiences, (2) that narratives in Project Unbreakable can be constructed by a critic as empowering for survivor’s of sexual assault and (3) that sexual assault is more than statistics and laws but also encompasses multiple and unique lived experiences. Often times, sexual assault survivors do not feel safe to speak out about their experiences. Furthermore, these experiences contribute to the social construction of sexual assault and rape in current society. The analysis of these survivor narratives highlighted gang rape, childhood sexual assault, incest, acquaintance rape, and male sexual assault. Through enacting agency and coming into public discourse, sexual assault survivors have created an ideology of empowerment. These experiences have usually gone unspoken and undocumented, yet with Project Unbreakable bringing these narratives into public discourse, these experiences shed light on the shame, pain, and
humiliation of sexual assault and rape, especially for individuals who have not experienced rape of sexual assault. *Project Unbreakable* highlights multiple viewpoints of sexual assault through recognizing differences in experiences and using those differences to unite survivors worldwide.

Displayed by the omnaphistic visual schema, the visual is particularly suited for marginalized individuals to shed light on social injustices and to reclaim power from his or her oppressors. The specific practice of individuals being photographed holding a poster board with written text is capable of creating social change that will affect individuals for a lifetime. *Project Unbreakable* saw a need to give support, help survivors find their voice and realize they are not to blame for their attack. Survivors speak out about their experiences on their own terms, and the audience, through the viewing of the images can no longer ignore the implications of a society that has devalued rape and sexual assault survivor experiences. This devaluing has created a culture where someone is sexual assaulted every two minutes (Rape, Incest, & National Network, 2014). In entering public discourse, survivor narratives in *Project Unbreakable* are now cultural codes that contribute to the language, perception, value, and practices that govern how current society discusses sexual assault.

As a cultural code, *Project Unbreakable* has created a discourse of empowerment for sexual assault survivors. This contribution unites survivors worldwide with the common goal of healing together. *Project Unbreakable*’s focus on survivors has a huge impact on their individual lives and the way society views sexual assault. This thesis has
not only shown the ability of each image to influence the audience, but has also shown the necessity for survivor’s discourse. Sexual assault discourse, with a focus on survivors, privileges what they have been through by honoring their voice. *Project Unbreakable* has created a legacy that values survivor’s discourse, a legacy that will live on with each image taken. Through explicating their experiences, survivors have contributed to discourses in an extraordinary way. Their voices, working together, halt stigma surrounding sexual assault and create a community of survivors and allies. No longer statistics, but instead survivors, these individuals regained the dignity that was taken from them and highlighted their strength to the word.

**Limitations**

The first limit of this study is the time period from when the survivor stories were chosen. The data was collected from the months of October 2012 to March 2013. *Project Unbreakable* was founded in October 2012 and is ongoing; thus, the time period chosen yielded a limited number of survivor stories in which to analyze. The second limitation of this study was that only eight survivor stories were analyzed. To date, *Project Unbreakable* has brought over 2,000 survivor stories into public discourse (Patel, 2013), yet this study considered less than 1 % of those experiences. Visual aspects categorized the images and eight survivor stories were chosen for analysis. These images are representative of sexual assault experiences and fall into six categories. The first three images were included in the category of typical photographs. These photographs, taken by Grace Brown, include images in which survivors decide to show their faces. The fourth image analyzed a photograph taken by Brown that does not show the survivor’s
face. The fifth image included multiple photographs of the same survivor where she shared several experiences of sexual assault. This image was a collage of four separate images. The sixth image featured a woman who was significantly older than the majority of college-aged individuals that Brown photographs. The seventh image was a submission from a female survivor that was sent to Project Unbreakable via email. The last image analyzed, taken by Brown, was of a male survivor of sexual assault. As findings from the analysis are based on these eight survivor stories only, conclusions derived pertain to these specific images. Images chosen from a different time period and different images chosen from the data collection could have yielded different conclusions.

**Future Research**

The results of this study allow avenues for future research to be explored with relevance to visual rhetoric, Project Unbreakable, and rhetorical strategies employed by marginalized individuals. The results of the study provided support for Rice’s (2004) omnaphistic visual schema by looking at images of sexual assault survivors. Further research using the omaiphistic visual schema would benefit from looking at other visual avenues such as television, film, artwork, or public performances. These studies could potentially serve to improve the schema. Furthermore, Rice (2004) situates the four indicators in a way which allows them to be utilized together or as separate parts. Further research looking at one indicator at a time could serve to strengthen theoretical and methodological understandings of how these indicators function separately in the visual world.
The second topic for future study that emerges from this analysis pertains to the specific artistic format of an individual holding a poster board with written text. This format has recently become widespread, focusing on rape, race, adoption, and stereotypes (Kahn, 2014; Kelly-Wagner, 2014). It would be significant to visual rhetoric to see if the omnaphistic visual schema could explicate meanings in these topics as well. Of equal importance, would be to see how this type of visual presentation benefits marginalized communities, since it is being used to discuss taboo or controversial topics. Studies should consider how this format plays a role in discourse on these subjects and how audiences respond to messages presented in this particular format.

Another potential approach for research should consider research on specific categories of survivor stories in Project Unbreakable. This study identified six categories that occur frequently in Project Unbreakable, yet images in the peripheral are also important to understanding sexual assault experiences. For example, images submitted have a great number of artistic avenues available to them. Some submissions are typed text only or appear to look like postcards (Appendix D); therefore, the techniques utilized are vastly different from Brown’s sampling from the photography days that she held. The restrictions that Brown put on the survivor’s narratives are of particular importance to the stories that are shared. Her restrictions may very well constrain the survivors even further. A study that considers the submissions could focus on specifics rhetorical strategies utilized by individuals who completely design his or her survivor narrative.

Although the focus of this study was on survivor narratives Grace Brown presents
a particularly significant avenue for further study. Brown has a crucial role in survivor’s discourse because she is the photographer and founder of *Project Unbreakable*. Further studies should focus on her motives and her personal background. These studies have the potential to explain the restrictions on the survivor narratives, her purpose in starting the project, as well as what she wishes to accomplish through her photography. With the evolution of the project since its inception, these questions are particularly important to understanding the impact the project will have on sexual assault and rape discourses.

Another avenue for future research focuses on the range of survivor stories shared in the images. The analysis of eight survivor stories yielded experiences that included acquaintance rape, incest, childhood sexual abuse, and gang rape. These experiences could benefit from a separate analysis that considers rhetorical strategies and ideologies that emerge when discussing a specific type of experience. In looking at a specific type of sexual assault individually, an analysis could determine which type of sexual assault is most frequently discussed in *Project Unbreakable* or which type of sexual assault is discussed the least in *Project Unbreakable*. Separating the specific types of rape and sexual assault allows for a more comprehensible discussion on sexual assault discourses.

One avenue that specific types of sexual assault attacks should cover is the concept of “corrective rape”. A relatively new term, “corrective rape” was brought into public discourse describing an epidemic of rapes that have occurred in South African against lesbians (Mieses, 2009). *Project Unbreakable* has featured several narratives of corrective rape (See Appendix B) that should be furthered explored due to the fact that
corrective rape in public discourses are predominantly discussed as occurring in countries other than the United States. In bringing corrective rape narratives into United States public discourse, these studies have the potential to define a new category of hate crimes and sexual assault.

Another interesting topic of study could include those individuals who are minorities that are participating in Project Unbreakable, as the majority of their experiences have traditionally been devalued. People of color carry multiple oppressions and have a particular standpoint that emerges from their voice being devalued for so long. It would be interesting to discover the rhetorical strategies they utilize to explicate their experiences and how they compare to co-communication practices that were outlined by Orbe (1998). Do people of color effectively utilize these strategies? This research could potentially benefit critical race theory, critical/cultural studies, and feminist studies.

The last area of future research could explore concerns the goal of Project Unbreakable. Brown’s slogan is “The Art of Healing”, hopes to provide an avenue for survivors to heal through submitting images or being photographed. It would be beneficial for studies to consider if Project Unbreakable achieves this goal. As many of these images feature no names, it could prove difficult to collect this data. Yet, Brown has re-photographed some survivors displaying how Project Unbreakable affected their lives as well as accepting emails from survivors who wish to share in writing the affects of participating in Project Unbreakable. Studies considering individuals who have participated in Project Unbreakable could highlight how coming into public discourse
affected their lives. In bringing these individuals into public discourse, more questions have been raised. Were they helped? Were they hurt? Did they heal? What will change? These are questions that cannot be answered by visual rhetorical studies alone. Thus, other avenues pertaining to feminist studies and cultural studies are needed to examine the epidemic of sexual assault. The research into rhetorical strategies of rape and sexual assault survivors is in its beginning stages, and it is important for communication scholars to be at the forefront of that research.
APPENDIX A

Secondary Image: Prosecution Narrative

June 28, 2012. The image was taken in New York City, NY on June 3, 2012 (Brown, 2012e).

“Our family is blessed. You could be pregnant and I could be in jail. God had mercy,” my ex step father after the court downgraded 7 years of childhood sexual abuse to battery... even though I testified and he confessed.
December 25, 2012. The image was taken in Boston, MA on October 4, 2012 and is one of two images featuring this particular survivor (Brown, 2012f).
APPENDIX C

Secondary Image: Group Submission Narrative

January 1, 2013. These images were taken by Klaire McGraw at the University of Rio Grande and submitted to Project Unbreakable (McGraw, 2013).
APPENDIX D

Secondary Image: Postcard Background Narrative

"It's ok it will be fun"
I was so drunk I couldn't even walk
But I still said no

But it wasn't over...
His friend came next...
"You did something for him,
now you're gonna do something for me."

June 28, 2012. This image is an email submission posted as one of ten images grouped together (Project Unbreakable, 2013a).
March 29, 2013. This image is an email submission posted as one of ten images grouped together (Project Unbreakable, 2013d).
January 29, 2013. This image is an email submission posted as one of ten images grouped together (Project Unbreakable, 2013b).

English Translation: “I like to do you when you come home from school; I get horny from your sweaty uniform.” (At 10 years old I did not know what horny meant).  

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1 Sonya R. Stinson translated Appendix F from Portuguese to English.
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