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Stitched Together: What We Learn from Secret Stories in Public Media

by

Sara D. Rocks

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Sociology
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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ABSTRACT

Where do you go to divulge your deepest secrets? Some may turn to journals and diaries; some turn to family and friends; some turn to religious confessionals; some turn to Twitter; and still, some take their secrets to the grave. There is at least one other way people share their secrets that has thus far received limited scholarly attention: the crowdsourced confessional. In the new media landscape, intimate stories and personal disclosures with strangers can be (and are) produced as content for a vast pool of additional strangers to consume as media. Yet, little is known about the personal narratives shared on and by crowdsourced confessionals or how they relate to cultural norms of emotion.

This study builds on social constructionist perspectives of emotion. It is situated in interdisciplinary scholarly conversations about personal narrative, digital media, and contemporary practices of confession in the new media landscape. Using methods of document narrative analysis and drawing on data from a popular crowdsourced confessional project, *Hey Stranger*, I examine how, when stitched together, the personal narrative fragments featured on *Hey Stranger* contribute to more significant cultural understandings of emotion, of confession, and how contemporary ideals of selfhood are constructed through confessional storytelling. These findings shed light on the complexity of emotional experience and the mixed media, flexible nature of confessional storytelling. The emergent themes of this study include novel insights into what sociologists know about lived emotions and contemporary cultural practices of confession. The findings support the claim that crowdsourced confessionals can render many

invisible aspects of human experience visible, thereby creating new resources for people's cultural toolkits and creating new opportunities for innovative social research.

INTRODUCTION

Where do you go to divulge your deepest secrets? To whom might you confess your past experiences, desires, guilty pleasures, and most deeply felt emotions? Some may turn to journals and diaries, some to family and friends, some to religious confessionals, Twitter, or other social media networking sites. And still, some take their secrets with them to the grave. There is another way people share their secrets that thus far has received limited scholarly attention: crowdsourced confessionals.

Crowdsourced confessionals are media projects in which a single individual or a group of people cast a call to a broad public audience to submit personal life stories (be they visual, auditory, or textual) that reveal some aspect of their “hidden” self to the project, for them to be shared on far-reaching public platforms. Crowdsourced confessionals utilize the creative possibilities afforded by the new media landscape and innovations in digital storytelling (Barber 2016; Clarke and Adam 2010). They are created with various digital mediums such as video, audio, photo, Google Forms, animations, and analog mediums such as handwritten letters, postcards, and art. They are often created with a distinct assortment of both digital and analog mediums, stretching the conventions of autobiographical practices in society (Poletti 2020). Crowdsourced confessionals are made with a variety of mediums. They are also circulated and shared on various *platforms*, including networked social media, websites, blogs, live performances, podcasts, etc. Crowdsourced confessionals, therefore, are “projects” created by a single individual or a group, who collect autobiographical fragments from the public (often

anonymously) in a variety of formats, then re-mediate those fragmented personal narratives, stitch them together to create a new piece of media and then share that stitched together story across a diverse media landscape.

In this thesis, I investigate how crowdsourced confessionals relate to broader shifts in cultural productions of emotional meaning, such as the rise of *psy* and *psycho-medical* industries (Illouz 2017) and what has been called the confessional turn (Grobe 2017). These projects, while varying in their individual subject focus, make up a significant percentage of the confessional media genre and are situated within a broader participatory media culture. Grounded in social constructionist perspectives, this thesis uses narrative document analysis to uncover the emotional and symbolic codes embedded in the *Hey Stranger* crowdsourced confessional project.

How is confession within the bounds of a crowdsourced confessional different from talking to a therapist, confessing to a priest, doctor, interrogator, or any other means of telling a secret? What kinds of emotional meaning systems are present in the secret stories that make their way into public media? How do these crowdsourced confession projects relate to broader cultural shifts such as emotional consumerism or therapy culture (Illouz 2008; Illouz 2017)? Throughout this paper, I investigate the symbolic and emotion codes in crowdsourced confessional storytelling and pay close attention to how they relate to broader social, cultural, and emotional norms and practices. Although sociology is at the core of this thesis, I draw upon various disciplines, attempting to integrate theoretical and methodological insights from literary studies, sociology, digital and media studies. The choice to work from an interdisciplinary approach is based on an appreciation of the value offered by different ways of knowing and

researching topics that transcend disciplinary boundaries like those at the center of this study: emotion, media, and confession.

The main objective of this thesis is to uncover how, when stitched together, the personal narrative fragments featured on *Hey Stranger* contribute to more significant cultural understandings of emotion, of confession, and how contemporary ideals of selfhood are constructed through confessional storytelling. This thesis is also intended to celebrate the messiness of social life and an argument for sociologists to see value in the various forms, mediums, and emotional modes that crowdsourced confessionals operate on and within. Confession as a cultural practice specifically and personal narratives more generally bend, stretch and evolve with the development of new technologies and the creative imaginations of their creators. Sociologists should not shy away from studying crowdsourced confessionals due to rapid changes and technological developments, the uses of overlapping complex mediums or the emotional messiness of fragmented personal narratives but rather *run towards them*. In this thesis, I claim that crowdsourced confessionalism is a significant social, cultural, emotional practice worthy of critical investigation. In the following chapters, I will discuss an overview and analysis of the existing literature in this area of inquiry, including how this study addresses gaps in the current literature. I will walk through the methodological choices made in the process of conducting this research. Finally, I will analyze the emerging themes of the data and situate them within larger scholarly conversations about the sociology of emotions, personal narrative, and media studies.

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the literature review that follows, I will discuss the importance and prevalence of personal narrative in everyday contemporary life; the creation of the cyber-based generalized other and the social roots of emotion, an exploration into the culture shifts contributing to an intensification of emotional life, including the rise of *psy* and *psycho-medical* industries and therapeutic models of selfhood; a historical sketch of confession and its various functions and modes within pop culture; and lastly, an overview of confessional practices online and an introduction to crowdsourced confessionals.

The Power of Personal Narrative

Just like emotions, stories live within us all. They circulate throughout and surround our social spheres. People often share and consume stories to help organize and make sense of their lives, experiences, and emotions (Frank 1995). Stories are present in art and literature, political speeches, games, product advertisements, social media posts, podcasts, news articles, everyday conversations, and more. The narratives that surround and engage our lives are distinctly social. This means that they are grounded in particular historical, cultural, and interactional contexts, inherently influencing *how* and *who* interpret *which* stories as believable and important (Loseke 2007). Therefore, attention to these narrative constructions is crucial to understanding their role in (re)producing the social order. While there are several narrative types and forms, the present study focuses on personal narratives specifically. This is because the secrets people keep about

their lives can be considered personal narratives, despite how fragmented or brief they may seem compared to traditional or long-form personal narratives such as memoirs.

Personal narratives are autobiographical. The main character in personal narratives is the self, and the plots revolve around the activities, beliefs, emotions, plans, and reflections of the self. The term autobiography can be defined as "a cultural practice that seeks a public, an audience of imagined and unknown strangers who will interact with how a specific life has coemerged with specific media norms and practices" (Poletti 2020: 12). Yet, the intimately "personal" content of this type of storytelling does not diminish their social and cultural functions (Mishler 1995). Personal narratives sometimes referred to as self-stories (Frank 1995), life stories, or autobiographical narratives (Poletti 2020), engage the confessional and psychological constructions of the self, reflecting societal norms about the ways we view and practice love, equality, work, happiness, relationships, among others. These self-stories do not simply describe the self; "they are the self's medium of being" (Frank 1995: 53). If life is "a defiant battle against meaninglessness" (Bochner 2016), then stories can be understood as providing the tools for meaning-making.

Poletti (2020) suggests that a whole host of individuals and groups, such as artists, writers, activists, and media critics, share the belief that autobiography and personal narrative play an important role in challenging and negotiating the politics and ethical considerations of our shared existence. More broadly, Poletti (2020) argues that:

... autobiography matters—culturally, politically, historically, socially—because it puts individual lives on the record. It is a cultural and social practice that makes lives available for engagement by others and responds to the fundamental need to make our

lives legible in the social field. Once “on the record,” lives can illuminate, challenge, and enhance our understanding of our shared reality (Poletti 2020: 5).

It is important to note that social contexts affect whose stories get told and how they are told. Social norms demonstrate that personal stories with a confessional tone select for privilege at every turn (Grobe 2017). Not all personal narratives are accessible, popularized, or even put "on the record" due to mass media outlets' privileging of personal narratives that reflect prevailing socio-political biases (Loseke 2007). Additionally, stories of marginalization and stories told by marginalized people are frequently silenced (Collins 1989).

The introduction of new communication technologies and the subsequent digital storytelling practices have prompted efforts to end this silencing. Clarke and Adam (2010:159) argue that digital storytelling began with "arts practitioners committed to the democratization of culture: to empowering and giving voice to individuals and groups traditionally silenced, marginalized, or ignored by mainstream culture." New communication technologies have increased both the access to and diversification of personal stories that circulate throughout the contemporary cultural landscape. Due to the relative ease with which stories can now be created and distributed to a broad audience, the opportunities for narrative formats have also expanded (Barber 2016). These opportunities include "immersive and interactive narrative experiences; compelling, engaging, even emotional narrative formats; non-linear, multidimensional narrative opportunities; and collaborative contexts that increase the ability to create and communicate" (Barber 2016: 3).

This is one reason why Poletti (2020) calls for a fundamental reconsideration of our understanding of personal life writing and how it ebbs and flows with changes in contemporary culture and developments of technology. When we consider personal narrative and

autobiography as things that not only are written but also *portrayed and recorded* (Poletti 2020), we become aware of the various modes and mediums that these self-stories exist in and are mediated by, effectively de-centering the traditional, solely textual representations of personal narrative. Some scholars recognize and support this fundamental reconsideration of personal life narrative and acknowledge that mediation can no longer be overlooked in personal narrative and autobiography studies. For example, Smith and Watson (2010) have a chapter in their book *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* titled "The Verbal-Visual-Virtual Contexts of Life Narrative."

The stories that people tell to and about themselves are not only crucial to the study of life writing but integral to people's identity construction. It is these "internalized and evolving life stories" which help people construct a coherent sense of self by stitching together experiences that "otherwise might feel fragmented" and unrelated to their narrative (McAdams, Josselson and Lieblich 2006: 5). In this way, personal narratives also impose meanings and shape identities—for those who create them and those who consume them.

By narrativizing emotions through emotional reflexivity, people actively reify their emotions, constructing them as "objects of reflections, monitoring, interpretation, and manipulation" (Schwarz 2017: 61). When individuals talk or think about emotions, they also navigate them and shape them in culturally patterned directions. This is the work of narrative. People craft and consume personal narratives not only to express their social identity but also to act on their self and navigate it emotionally (Schwarz 2017: 74). The combination of new media technologies and storytelling has generated a range of new approaches from what radio historian

Susan Douglas calls a return to orality, "a mode of communication reliant on storytelling, listening, and group memory" (Douglas 1999: 29), all the way to new storytelling experiences that include listener participation or even the co-creation of stories (Barber 2016).

Katriel (2012) posits that storytelling, mainly, the telling of these personal narratives, is a naturally occurring activity that is dynamic and deeply ingrained in the flow of social exchange (Katriel 2012). This scholar argues that the proliferation of personal stories in the public arena not only serves as an expression of the collapse of the public/private dichotomy in late modernity but also can serve as a tool for social solidarity and activism, linking humans together through the sharing of intimate tales. Barber (2016) supports these findings by claiming potential benefits of these stories include opportunities to transcend one's frame of reference, construct new meanings, build community and connection with others, and engage in potentially transformative experiences. Katriel's (2004) ethnographic research into call-in programs on Israeli public radio (a style of media which many popular podcasts and YouTube channels now mirror) found that the depth of feeling conveyed in intimate personal stories aired on the radio defied sociology's conventional depictions of mediated interaction and its typically characterized impersonal nature. In contrast to public radio, podcasting and other intimate mediums like YouTube liberate show hosts and listeners from broadcast conventions and schedules, allowing further experimentation in form and genre, escalating the rapid growth of this intimate personal storytelling style (Lindgren 2016). Because these personal stories often pertain to topics that may appear merely trivial, domestic, or focus solely on one's inner emotional life, this is an area of research that has received limited critical attention (Lindgren 2016). The present study seeks to address this gap because when it comes to making sense of our emotions and experiences, connecting the personal to the social (and the social to the personal), stories may be the most

essential sensemaking medium available to us. They help us negotiate the relationship between self and society and between private and public thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Arthur Frank reinforces the power of personal storytelling in his statement that "When any person recovers his voice, many people begin to speak through that story" (Frank 1995: xxi). While stories are all around us, in their broad range of forms and influence, digitally created and shared personal stories are of specific and unique importance to this study, for they are used to explore new ways of perceiving and interacting with stories in spaces that would otherwise be out of reach (Barber 2016). Technology's impact on social bonding and social interaction is often painted in a rather pessimistic light (Cerulo 1997), despite its ability to make otherwise silenced stories accessible, explore new forms and mediums of life writing, or its ability to transform what people understand to be "strange" or "familiar" (Meyrowitz 1997).

Next, I will explore how personal narratives are situated within a larger scholarly conversation about the role of the cyber-based generalized other and emotion in constructing the self and, therefore, self-stories.

The Cyber-Based Generalized Other and Social Roots of Emotion

In the United States, having a self means making constant assessments of self in relation to others (Charmaz 1991). *Am I happy enough? Am I working enough? Taking good enough care of myself? Am I spending too much time with friends? Not enough? Am I too old for this? Too young? Am I alone in this lonely feeling?* The inner monologue that plagues some more than others demonstrates the various ways we make sense of and come to judge ourselves and experiences of emotion in relation to the internalized social norms and values of the group, otherwise known as Mead's (1934) concept of the generalized other. These internalized social

norms and values of which we subject ourselves to comparison effectively shape the types, depths, and authenticity of emotional experiences and displays during social interaction. The generalized other is a salient concept when it comes to questions about secret-keeping and secret sharing. It helps set the stage for understanding why someone may evaluate a self-story as “private,” as well as why anonymous platforms and projects present a desirable vehicle for sharing those stories evaluated as “private.”

According to Meyrowitz (1997), an increase in (and diversification of) new communication technologies have created the ability to shift the boundaries between “them” and “us,” thereby altering the balance between strangers and familiars, in addition to what kinds of interactions, and what types of stories feel strange, and which feel familiar. In other words, the groups and stories available to compare the self have undergone considerable expansion since the mid-20th century. Due to the development of new communication technologies, the generalized other has been extended to include the ideals, world senses, and personal stories of people we may never have met (or will never meet) face-to-face (Cerulo 1997; Meyrowitz 1997). This wide-reaching, interactive, and diversified ‘cyber-based generalized other’ (Altheide 2000) significantly impacts the collaborative (or contested) construction of emotion.

Due to new communication technologies, a digitally mediated audience (such as a YouTube community) can witness the “private” sensemaking, emotions, and confessional storytelling of strangers. The kinds of vulnerable or confessional stories that previously were not socially shared can now be shared with a public audience via a variety of visual and auditory mediums. Due to the uniquely public nature of these otherwise “private” personal stories, something of particular importance to the current project is how emotions more or less “show up” in the personal narratives shared in the *Hey Stranger* series. This section on the sociology of

emotion is crucial because emotion shines center stage in many of the secrets called into *Hey Stranger*. The theoretical underpinnings of emotion studies help contextualize other findings of this project. For example, the storyteller's understanding of what a confession is, what it does, and what emotional experiences are regarded as needing to be kept secret. These things are significantly intertwined with each storyteller's ideas about how the world should work, which feelings are acceptable to share in public versus which ones to keep secret, and what a good life "ought-to" look and *feel* like—information and concepts gathered through a process of witnessing generalized (now, cyber-based) others.

The generalized other is not only a collection of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in society that people look towards to make decisions about what to believe, how to feel, or how to act. Social pressure can encourage people to fall in line with the normative ideals governing a particular experience. People, however, are not cultural robots (Loseke 2009). Individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are *shaped* by culture but are not *determined* by culture. The present study is mainly concerned with normative ideals associated with the emotional realms of experience and their shaping of emotion in confessional self-stories. Because of this, we must discuss the sociocultural roots and shaping of emotion. Have you ever sensed the social pressure to feel a certain way in a given situation? Or felt an aching alienation from others due to an emotional experience (or emotional inexperience)? This is likely due to the nature and presence of feeling rules. Feeling rules are seen as the side of ideology that deals with emotion and feeling. Hochschild (1979: 583) states that feeling rules are the socially shared guidelines that direct how people "want to try to feel." She points to widespread language about emotion to support this concept of feeling rules, arguing that we often talk about our emotions and feelings in terms of "rights" and "duties." Her examples include common phrases such as "having the

right to feel angry at someone,” “you should feel more grateful,” and “you shouldn’t feel so guilty; it wasn’t your fault” (Hochschild 1979: 564). In other words, feeling rules essentially give us a sense of what we “should” feel in a situation. They imply what parts of ourselves (which stories and emotional experiences) are deemed acceptable to society or a violation of emotion norms. Feeling rules and logics help shape emotions. However, this works in vice versa; emotions help shape the social structure – they can act as the ties that bind us together and barriers that keep us apart (Clark 1997).

Violations of emotion norms, or what is sometimes called “emotional deviance” (Thoits 1985), occurs when we do not experience or display emotion with the appropriate intensity, express or feel an emotion for an inappropriate amount of time, inappropriately place emotions, or experience or display emotion in a uniquely premature or delayed fashion. Due to the importance of adhering to emotion norms in social interaction, deviance can seriously damage interpersonal relationships, access to resources like job opportunities, and even a sense of self. To adhere to emotion norms and avoid the social consequences associated with emotional deviance, people engage in emotion management. People engage in emotion management to alter the feelings they are experiencing and displaying to conform to emotion norms, impress an audience, or accomplish other goals (Charmaz, Harris, and Irvine 2019), such as constructing coherent identities. Emotions have a significant relationship to identity because people do not simply manage their emotions; they manage “self-in-emotion” (Hochschild 1983).

People tell stories for many reasons, and neither emotion management, nor the stories told about emotions, are individual-level phenomena. Instead, emotions and stories are guided and patterned by various social/interpersonal processes embedded in cultural expectations of feeling. Emotion management is also heavily guided by cultural understandings and

expectations of time. While every emotion may be experienced in the present, anticipated in the future, or remembered in the past, a few emotions cannot be felt without connecting the present to the past or future. Such “temporal emotions” like regret, nostalgia, hope, ambition, and anticipation play an essential role in constructing a continuous self over time (Lois 2010: 441). People construct a “self-in-emotion” (Hochschild 1983), but it is also true that people construct a “self-in-time” (Charmaz 1991).

Although the main scholarly conversation around the more hidden or invisible aspects of emotion point to people’s desire to mask and manage emotions to fit in with dominant emotion norms, Kusenbach and Loseke (2013) outline two additional vital reasons why sociologists of emotion should take seriously the invisible or “not readily observable” nature of some emotions. The first reason is that some emotions are incredibly complex and multilayered. Examples include feelings of home and belonging and temporal emotions such as regret, hope, nostalgia, and many others. This complexity means that they often get overlooked and may not be noticed or “explicitly managed in daily life” (Kusenbach and Loseke 2013: 34). The second reason is that the origins of emotions and their larger meanings often eclipse the specific situations in which they are expressed (Kusenbach and Loseke 2013). This may be especially true for the emotions present in the narrative formulation of secrets, for secrets can encompass feelings and meanings acquired over the life course and may not be explicitly noticed or managed in everyday life.

Gould (2009) argues that emotion entices, shapes, and is generated by practices of meaning-making. What may we learn about the sociology of emotion when exploring personal narratives labeled by their tellers as “secrets” as sources for meaning-making? In different periods and social contexts, people widely practice and are socialized to expect specific “modes

of emotionality” (Tudor 2003: 243) from a social collectivity. I explore this particular mode of emotionality constructed by *Hey Stranger*. It is tied tightly to the cultural shift toward therapeutic and psychological models of selfhood, one that navigates to and from virtual and physical worlds, seamlessly sliding between private and public realms. If the development of new media technologies has expanded the generalized other to include the “cyber-based generalized other.”

Emotion norms, codes, and sanctions for emotional deviance demonstrate some of the ways that emotions are products of social institutions, systems, and culture, just as much as they are “physical” or “natural” responses to situations. Instead of *demanding* a particular emotional experience or display, emotion norms and feeling rules *encourage* or discourage certain emotional experiences and displays, along with introducing various consequences (social rewards or punishments) for conforming or resisting them. The social risks associated with the nonconformity of emotion norms and the exhaustive nature of emotion management can explain the soaring interest in (and increasing prevalence of) personal/confessional stories in the public realm. However, the increase in confessional storytelling and the therapeutic view of the self perpetuated on social media did not appear overnight. In the following sections, I will explore this increase first, through the rise of specific emotion industries, then through the lens of the confessional art movement, and finally, how this increase has led to a particular social practice and genre of storytelling: crowdsourced confessionals.

Therapy Culture and the Psychological Modeling of the Self

Through personal storytelling, people engage in the process of emotional reflexivity, an active reifying of their emotions. In this process, emotions become constructed as “objects of

reflections, monitoring, interpretation, and manipulation” (Schwarz 2017: 61). Emotional reflexivity is not only a process that becomes engaged through personal storytelling; it is a cultural norm and practice that fuels economic, cultural, and social industries. This body of literature is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the present study because it provides a background on how contemporary culture, social life, and economic exchange are heavily influenced by dominant narratives of emotional conduct and selfhood.

Particular cultural ideals shape how people construct a self and come to value emotions as a centerpiece in that construction. Illouz (2017) argues that the rise of two specific industries (1) the *psy-industries*, including psychological counseling, self-help books, workshops, life coaching, etc. and (2) the *psycho-medical industries*, including psychiatric and general practitioner services, and pharmaceutical developments, can help explain how self-knowledge and self-improvement through psychological models of mental health became the cultural ideal shaping selfhood in the United States. This objectification of emotions through privileged knowledge systems played a significant role in developing therapy culture as we know and live it today. Illouz (2008) further contends that psychotherapeutic discourse, by simultaneously pathologizing everyday life and offering supposedly accessible solutions, transferred responsibility for mental well-being onto the individual. This is one of the central critiques to therapy culture, for it far too often suggests internal, individual solutions to structural inequity issues (Polsky 1991; Herman 1995; Madsen 2014). In fact, scholars argue that therapy culture and the psychological modeling of the self make unequal demands of individuals (Warikoo 2020).

Some scholars suggest that therapy culture and the psychological modeling of the self arose as solutions to the “problems” of modernity and a way to maintain power dynamics in the

face of shifting gender roles, broader social change, and an evolving relationship between public and private spheres (Giddens 1991, Illouz 2008; Wright 2011). Additionally, this shift not only enables the reformulation of social, economic, and political problems in terms of personal responsibility but also enables the reformulation of social, economic, and political problems in terms of *moods and emotions* (Shachak 2017:159). This can also be seen in reverse, where emotions are presented as political, economic, and social problems. For example, loneliness and depression can be (and have been) evaluated for their public health costs, citizen well-being, and employee productivity (Shachak 2017). Cabanas (2017) proposes that discourse around the shifts in emotion and emotional culture in Western societies should not be viewed or understood as general and nebulous ideas of emotional wellness and satisfaction. Rather, he argues this shift “should be regarded as a particular set of “ought to’s” that define and prescribe a particular “structure of feelings” (Williams 1977), a specific way of being, acting, and understanding the world, which is highly individualistic and emotionally saturated” (Cabanas 2017:182). Therapy culture engenders this particular set of “ought to’s,” which signals how people should feel and understand their feelings. These “ought to’s” are an essential piece of the puzzle of uncovering how the secrets (personal narratives) featured on *Hey Stranger* contribute to larger cultural understandings of emotion, of confession, and how contemporary ideals of selfhood are constructed through confessional storytelling.

Despite the valid critiques of this cultural shift, it remains crucial to sociological inquiry. This psychological modeling of the person shapes how people imbue meaning into their feelings, social relationships, roles, and responsibilities through constructing emotions as entities for reflection and moral evaluation. This perspective also hinges upon gathering scientific knowledge about emotions and utilizing that knowledge to classify, analyze, measure,

and empirically observe emotions (Furedi 2004; Taylor 1989). In this way, the psychological model of the person, and therapy culture more generally, offer generic yet easily personalized narratives (also called universal specificity) to aid people in their sensemaking of the connections between events, emotions, relationships, objects, and the self (Lasch 1979). They encourage individuals to continuously practice reflexivity to identify, monitor, manage and regulate their emotions (Illouz 2008), thereby centering emotion in our language and self-concept, in the secrets we keep, and in our lives.

The growing attention to emotions within the *psy*-industries and *psycho-medical* industries is not only intertwined with the rising cultural value of emotions in the realms of relationships, selfhood, and well-being (Giddens 1991; Illouz 2008) but these shifts and attentions to emotion are also significantly intertwined with emotions rising in economic value in corporations and consumer culture (Hochschild 1983; Illouz 2008). This emotional saturation in the social, cultural, economic field makes it more and more likely that individuals use emotions, emotion management strategies, and emotion aides to make sense of the stories they tell about their lives. The stories people tell about their lives and experiences are of prime interest to the present study. It must be clarified that it is not only personal narratives in the general sense that are of interest but personal narratives of which the teller labels “secret” and the presence of emotion codes within those narratives. Emotion codes are those “sets of socially circulating ideas about which emotions are appropriate to feel when, where, and toward whom or what, as well as how emotions should be outwardly expressed” (Loseke 2009: 497).

Emotions scholar Eva Illouz suggests that consumer capitalism has reshaped emotions into commodities and that it is this historical process that heavily contributed to the “intensification of emotional life” (Illouz 2017: 10). This intensification of emotional life

contextualizes the cultural moment in which crowdsourced confessionals thrive and points to a wide-reaching cultural call for emotional authenticity from individuals in the public sphere.

One of the key outcomes of this culture shift towards the therapeutic and the psychological modeling of selfhood is the increasing value attached to authenticity. Illouz (2017) asserts that the meaning of authenticity began to shift around the 19th century, where it became a tool to criticize the social order and empower individuals to shed the social roles and norms that confined them to a particular way of being in the world. Ideals of authenticity quickly became essential in identifying the symbolic value of thoughts, feelings, actions, and objects. Cabanas (2017) supports this claim in his examination of authenticity in various realms:

In the personal realm, an authentic life is synonymous with a healthy one... in the social realm, authenticity is synonymous with autonomy and independence, with individuals who are not afraid to express their true identities and lifestyles... in the organizational realm, authenticity is synonymous with high performance and work success... in the economic realm, authenticity is synonymous with utility; that is, authenticity becomes a fundamental criterion for making self-fulfilling, reflexive and strategic choices [in the marketplace] (Cabanas 2017: 187).

As a result of therapeutic culture and the psychological modeling of the self, personal life has become geared towards the realization of emotional projects (Cabanas 2017), such as overcoming negative or uncomfortable emotions such as sadness, reducing anger and anxiety, achieving inner balance, aspiring to have deeper connections with others, or gaining emotional clarity for its own sake. These emotional pursuits now become reasonable therapeutic goals, but more crucially, they become *desirable commodities* (Shachak 2017: 157). Due to this desire or demand, a whole market emerges with commodities that facilitate the expression,

communication, and experience of emotion. Emotions become more easily converted into commodities, demonstrating that emotions and commodities co-produce each other (Illouz 2017).

These cultural ideals are situated within specific narratives of emotion calling for authenticity, emotional self-transformation, emotional health, etc. c. As therapy culture booms in the digital age and as consumers are increasingly socialized to both produce and consume their own emotionality and the emotionality of others (Illouz 2017), the concept of emotional consumerism is incredibly relevant to the sociological study of widely circulating narratives of emotion, therefore it must be taken into account, as emotional consumerism may provide an understanding of the popularity of confessional content and help explain why so many turn to crowdsourced confessionals to witness the secrets of others and even share their own. Next, I will build on this subject of cultural emotion norms of authenticity, emotional health, and emotional consumerism by exploring the confessional art movement's role in constituting people's emotions and personal narratives.

The Confessional Turn

The binary line between what parts of ourselves are rendered "private" and must remain hidden and what parts are fit for the public eye can be drawn relatively early in life and result from meaning-making processes. However, there has been a significant amount of social change in recent years that has resulted in blurring public/private dichotomies, such as cultural shifts toward the therapeutic and psychological modeling of the self, indicating that how one defines a story or feeling as "private" or "public" is subject to evolve with time, experience, and social change, among other dimensions. This background on the cultural confessional turn is crucial to

the present research because it informs us on how the evolving answer to the question of whether an emotion is deemed "sharable" is primarily shaped by the social norms portrayed and enforced in pop-cultural contexts. Additionally, it provides a foundational understanding of confession and its role in society for the data from this project to build upon. According to Christopher Grobe (2017), despite their differences, The Real-World MTV series, the poetry of Robert Lowell, and stand-up comedy all have a shared function in society. They contributed to the boom of confessional content in pop culture. In *The Art of Confession*, Grobe (2017) engages in an exploration of how mid-century Americans came to share understandings of "confession" and "performance" and why they came to demand both from the public figures that permeate our lives.

Confession, however, is by no stretch of the imagination a novel concept. Our understanding of what it means to be "confessional" rests on foundations laid long ago. This history is important because it helps us understand the process and role of confession outside of its traditional context where there are clear ties between confession and power relations in society. Grobe (2017) traces back to a deep history of confession in the West, identifying the institution of the Catholic Sacrament of Penance as occurring in around the 11th century, followed by Rousseau's posthumous *Confessions* in 1782, and the recognition of Sigmund Freud's "talking cure" and other psychoanalysis treatments in 1886. The importance of confession is echoed by Foucault's (1998) argument that confession has become the sole technique for producing truth in society— "the Western man is a confessing animal" (Foucault 1998). Historically, confession has provided three main functions in society: "a legal admission of guilt," a "sacred profession of sin," and "an intimate revelation of shame" (Grobe 2017: 12).

The present study's focus is on contemporary cultural practices of confession existing today in the form of autobiographical arts, literature, social media, and even more specifically, on YouTube. The popularity of personal stories with confessional tones indicates additional, unidentified functions for engaging the intimate self in the public sphere. According to Grobe (2017), this popularity began to rise when American poetry turned towards the confessional in 1959. However, a series of sociological studies talk about a myriad of cultural, institutional, organizational, and self-changes in the post-WWII era that both made possible and encouraged this shift to confessional styles of American poetry, including the rise of emotional industries and emotional capitalism as discussed previously. He, among others, identify this art movement as a "breakthrough" past professionalism, past social restraint, and into very personal subjective life experience (Grobe 2017: 4). How the expectation of vulnerability grew from a desire to know the personal not only of public figures but the personal of *strangers* is not yet known.

Arthur Frank (1995) attributes the popularity of confessional storytelling to the narrative uncertainties plagued by postmodern times. As a result of this narrative uncertainty, self-stories have become "a recognizable genre of pop culture" (Frank 1995: 69). These "self-stories" or storied confessional accounts are typically grounded in what Frank (1995) calls narrative wreckage. The persistent uncertainty of postmodern times both produces the wreckage *and* provides the resources (i.e., storytelling) for reclaiming the self (Frank 1995: 69). If we understand confessional storytelling as a resource, we become aware that its access and impacts are contingent upon various social factors. Social factors like race, gender, ability, class, age, family culture, education (among others) all impose varying social sanctions and expectations as well as establish norms around vulnerability, authenticity, and emotion and, therefore, one's ability to engage in confessional storytelling. Grobe (2017) suggests that social privilege allows

the skillful balance between private and public, personal and social, unique and representative that is present in many popularized confessional works. When the mediating factors that allow personal stories to be told and shared include features of anonymity, however, this balance may require less privilege and less effort on the part of the storyteller.

Confessionalism is an American art movement. Like other art movements such as realism, romanticism, gothic, etc., confessionalism was firstly tied to a specific medium and genre: confessional poetry. However, just as the gothic art movement first began as an architectural style then became a genre of plays, novels, and various aesthetics, confessionalism is now also hard to pin down (Grobe 2017: ix). Understood as the art of breaking through, confessionalism is an ongoing experiment in the use of autobiography, whatever medium it may happen to inhabit at the moment (Grobe 2017: 35). Confessionalism works in many mediums or mixtures of media, including (but not limited to) photography, poetry, film, drawing, literature, sculpture, performance, and other non-traditional tools to reveal our hidden histories. New media technologies such as social media, YouTube, online communities, podcasts, and more have significantly increased the self-disclosing, confessional behavior that often occurs in contemporary culture. The characteristics of confessional media are a crucial takeaway from this body of literature; they demonstrate the flexibility and messiness of confessional behavior across mediums and disciplines. While "confessional behavior" is quite a broad category to describe a particular social action online, the final section of this literature review narrows down "confessional behavior" to the specific social practice of interest to this study: the crowdsourced confessional.

Crowdsourced Confessionals and the Role of Entrepreneurship

Developing technologies have created (and are continually creating) an expanded social environment, requiring an alteration in how we conceptualize social processes, including vulnerable, disclosive social interactions. An online audience is invisible, diverse, and widespread; YouTube, along with other new media technologies transforming a person's social network and generalized other (Mead 1934), came to include not only family and friends but also strangers, celebrities, and a host of others to whom one has not previously been exposed. This wide array of social actors "populate" the self (Gergen 1991), expanding the range of options and possibilities that shape the experience of intimately public social interactions. These new media technologies which allow (and often encourage or celebrate) a revelation of some hidden facet of the self can be viewed as Foucault's 'confessional technologies of the self.'

Friesen (2017) contends that contemporary practices of confession on social media build on technologies of the self that have been growing and evolving for centuries. Media scholars suggest that this trend of confessional storytelling is most prevalent and observable in recent social networking and broadcasting developments, where online social environments top the charts in personal and subjective approaches to storytelling. This includes a rapid increase in the development of anonymous social media applications. In an analysis of some of the top anonymous social media apps such as *Whisper* and *Secret*, researchers found that out of millions of users and tens of millions of posts, the most common type of content posted is indeed confessions (Correa, Silva, Mondal, Benevenuto, and Gummadi 2015). However, there may not be a need for new application developments to engage in the sharing of secrets. In an analysis of personal story submissions on a Facebook "secrets" page, Yeo (2021) finds that confession in

this type of online environment serves to empower and enable "silenced and isolated distressed youth to resist the denial – invisibility, discredit, and mischaracterization – of their suffering" (Yeo 2021: 1613). Studies of these specific practices of confession online suggest that they help individuals by imbuing meaning into their experiences and stories as things that are "worth telling" (Yeo 2021: 1608).

Most of the (limited) literature on secrets and anonymous confession of personal stories in the new media environment is centered around interactional online spaces like virtual communities, public discussion boards, and social media applications (Yeo 2021; Correa et al. year 2015). Very little scholarly attention has been paid to confessional media projects that do not have an interactional element but feature an assemblage of collected secrets, except for a handful of studies conducted on *PostSecret* (Poletti 2011, 2020; Motter 2011; Wood and Ward 2010). Because this format of confession lacks the anticipated interaction and is instead disclosed to an anonymous imagined audience, the motivations for sharing and the types of disclosures are opened up to include a wider variety of stories, a novel "technology of the self." This specific genre of a confessional project I call *crowdsourced confessionals*. Crowdsourced confessionals are projects created by a single individual or a group, who collect autobiographical fragments from the public in a variety of formats, then remediate those fragmented personal narratives, stitch them together to create a new piece of media and then share that stitched together story across a diverse media landscape.

Who is behind the creation of these projects? Crowdsourced confessionals are imagined, created, and sustained by a particular social actor, someone Poletti (2020) calls the "confessional entrepreneur." The confessional entrepreneur designs the limitations and possibilities of the crowdsourced confessional, making it an important role to consider in any investigation of a

crowdsourced confessional. Poletti's (2020) conception of the confessional entrepreneurship model includes an individual or group that coaxes "life narration for the financial or symbolic benefit" (Poletti 2020: 81). The call for confessions in the "generic sense" opens the model of confessional entrepreneurship to be flexible, apply to multiple projects, and have them geared towards different topics.

The function of the confessional entrepreneur has significant overlap with what Clark (1997) calls sympathy entrepreneurs, who are those social actors who "actively seek to convince the public to empathize with and feel for others, intimates or strangers, who find themselves in particular plights" (Clark 1997: 84). Clark uses examples for sympathy entrepreneurs, including greeting card companies, the *New York Times* Neediest Cases Appeal, journalists, psychologists, activists, songwriters, filmmakers, television producers, politicians, and more. The sympathy entrepreneur's goal for seeking to convince the public to feel for others has shown to have much larger impacts on society. This is because sympathy is linked to morality in many ways. Therefore, expanding what the public believes constitutes valid grounds for sympathy effectively increases society's "fund" of moral worth. This social role and logic of personal narrative coaxing are important to note, for the creator of the crowdsourced confessional of interest to the present study, Thoraya Maronesy, aligns with these characteristics of a confessional entrepreneur and has heavily influenced the personal narratives which comprise the data for this study.

These two concepts for social actors (confessional entrepreneurs and sympathy entrepreneurs) who coax, remediate, and circulate personal narratives have yet to be put into conversation with one another, even though they act on similar opportunities and are centered around emotion. Additionally, I suggest that a more comprehensive model of *emotional*

entrepreneurship is required to better understand the role as it may apply to many emotions, not only sympathy. Overall, both confessional entrepreneurs (Poletti 2020) and sympathy entrepreneurs (Clark 1997) seek to convince the public to empathize with and feel for others, intimates or strangers, engage in the coaxing of personal narratives, utilize a variety of mediums and emotional modes to express their message, and involve organized, concerted efforts to evoke emotional responses in their audience-consumers.

One example of both the confessional (Poletti 2020) and sympathy (Clark 1997) entrepreneur at work is in *PostSecret*, the only crowdsourced confessional that has been the subject of any social science empirical analysis to date. *PostSecret* is a popular mail art project and blog in which anonymous users are encouraged to engage the confessional, emotional self by sending in secrets written on postcards to be publicly posted on the site. Scholars Wood and Ward (2010) find that the anonymity and culture of vulnerability within the project allow participants to get relief and experience release from the negative emotions associated with the act of secret-keeping. According to Motter (2011), *PostSecret* also offers global connections and perspectives around socio-cultural and economic issues in addition to its attractive user-centered approach to community engagement. This finding supports Poletti's claims that *PostSecret* creates an "intimate public" (Berlant 2008) for its participants and audience that fosters lighter forms of community and belonging (Poletti 2011). *PostSecret* is just one project that demonstrates how a global demand to bring the private public has found its place within the genre of crowdsourced confessionals. While they may vary in their individual subject focus, these projects make up a significant percentage of the confessional media genre and are situated within a broader participatory media culture.

This thesis investigates how crowdsourced confessionals can contribute to cultural productions of emotional meaning and contribute to what we understand about secrets and the various roles and forms of confession in society. In this literature review, I have begun to set the stage for this investigation by discussing the importance and prevalence of personal narrative in everyday life, the creation of the cyber-based generalized other and the social roots of emotion, an exploration into the culture shifts contributing to an intensification of emotional life, including the rise of *psy* and *psycho-medical* industries and therapeutic models of selfhood, a historical sketch of confession including confessional practices online and an introduction to crowdsourced confessionals. Grounded in social constructionist perspectives, this thesis uses narrative document analysis to uncover the emotion and symbolic codes embedded in the *Hey Stranger* project.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

I approach the present research from a symbolic interactionist framework because “interactionists emphasize how people acquire and employ social resources (e.g., identities, perspectives) as well as how they navigate, challenge, or circumvent constraints such as cultural norms” (Charmaz, Harris, and Irvine 2019: 254). This framework supports my quest to uncover how emotion norms are visible in crowdsourced confessional projects. Stories, which are all around us, are powerful due to their embedded symbolic messages and ability to reflect the complexities of social life. Loseke (2022) suggests that stories achieve their power by creating “cognitive, emotional, and moral meanings” (pg. 60).

Study Design

My research question focuses on the construction of narratives around emotion by the participants in this series. Unlike interviews or other forms of qualitative methods, which are more suited for questions about individual meaning, narrative document analysis is an appropriate method for this research question because my focus is on the social and emotional work of stories in public life (Loseke 2022).

Document analysis is a nonreactive research method in which the data being analyzed existed before the researcher’s interest or involvement (Loseke 2017). Although the researcher’s presence will not influence data generation or alter the constructed narratives, their disciplinary positionalities and personal experiences will shape the choices made during

data collection and analysis processes (Charmaz 2006). I employ established analytic strategies such as *literal* and *close reading* and thematic *data categorization* (Loseke 2022) in my analysis. While I analyze how emotion norms and expectations are constructed through the stories featured on *Hey Stranger*, I cannot speak to how individuals perceive or act upon these narrative constructions. Further, the psychological motivations for telling personal stories in public media are not only out of bounds for the method of document analysis, but researchers also suggest that this information may not be essential to understanding the social nature of story production and consumption (Loseke 2022).

Narratives do not appear out of thin air, nor do the meanings we make from them. I focus my analysis on the verbal (word) data only. Narrative construction requires social actors, and the social actors of interest in this particular project are those who call into Thoraya's show via anonymous phone call to share a secret. Document analysis also allows for an increased sample size that is often prohibitive for other qualitative methods, such as participant observation or interviews.

Data Source

There is a large pool of crowdsourced confessional projects which engage in the personal storytelling genre. I decided to conduct my research on Thoraya Maronesy's *Hey Stranger* project. Thoraya Maronesy is an independent filmmaker, interviewer, and confessional entrepreneur whose work is dedicated to creating and sharing the stories of strangers from various backgrounds. Her interviews featuring strangers' stories and secrets are available on Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok, and Podcast apps but most prominently, on YouTube (all free, publicly accessible platforms that are not protected by membership or password barriers).

The *Hey Stranger* series includes voicemail episodes, where people anonymously call into *Hey Stranger* and leave a secret over the voicemail recording. These submitted secrets (which can also be understood as autobiographical fragments) are stitched together to create the episodes in *the Hey Stranger* series. These episodes are then shared on YouTube and podcast streaming services, such as Apple Podcasts and Spotify. They are also shared (both as whole episodes and in clips) on various social media networking sites like Instagram, Tik Tok, Twitter, and Facebook. It is the anonymous voicemail episodes of particular interest to this study.

This series represents a microcosm of a larger social phenomenon: crowdsourced anonymous confessional stories for an online public audience. The public nature of this content presents no concerns about protection, risk, or harm for others (Loseke 2017). Despite the data's minimal risk and public nature, I obtained an IRB-exempt status for this project.

The goal of Thoraya's content is to "make films with strangers, about strangers, for strangers." The confessional nature of each captured encounter appears to pull at the heartstrings of many who are living in a world increasingly enchanted by the vulnerable unraveling of the persona's in the here and now. This enchantment is reflected by Thoraya's 1.69 million subscribers on YouTube and wide popularity across various new media platforms. The intended audience for this series is expressed as "strangers," indicating that content created is targeted towards no particular group or dimension of identity but instead created with the hopes of reaching a mass and diverse public audience. All participants who share a secret over voicemail know that their message will be made publicly available for consumption.

Sampling

My data are three secret voicemail episodes in the *Hey Stranger* project, including 41 different people and their stories. These episodes feature people who anonymously call into the show and share a secret on Thoraya's voicemail. Upon calling into the show, participants are met with a message detailing that they must call using *67¹, refrain from leaving their name and phone number, and share their secret within three minutes. However, there are limitations to this data: the audience and researcher do not know how many stories were received and left out of these episodes. Likely, some voicemails were not included, yet we cannot know how many or why they were excluded from this confessional project. Due to the length and depth of the stories featured in my samples, I posit that these episodes are of sufficient magnitude to warrant the conclusions made from the emerging themes (Loseke 2022). The episodes can be accessed in their entirety on both podcast applications and on YouTube (and clips of each episode can be found across social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Tik Tok). Despite all of these different access points, I have decided to access the episodes and interact with the data solely on YouTube. This is because YouTube is the platform where the episodes have the most views, comments, and audience engagement, indicating that YouTube is the "home platform" for the transmedial project.

Each of the three secret voicemail episodes begins the same. The audience hears Thoraya's voice-over visuals of her preparing the recordings and can read across the screen: "I gave my phone number out to strangers...and asked them to leave me a voicemail sharing their deepest secret." Following this, the audience reads and hears Thoraya say, "Trigger

¹ Using "*67" before dialing a phone number prevents the call's receiver from seeing the phone number of the caller. This is an additional measure to ensure anonymity of each caller who leaves a secret on Thoraya's voicemail.

Warning: Many of the secrets shared deal with very sensitive topics.” After this message, the audio recording of the secrets plays over a video of Thoraya listening to them, and the transcription for each secret is played in synch with each secret.

Data Analysis

After listening to all data, I transcribed the episodes into textual form. Upon transcription of this verbal data, I engaged in two established analytic strategies; close reading and data categorization.

Close Reading

I first approached data analysis with a literal close reading of the stories. Literal close reading is the slow and careful reading of data in a way that focuses attention on what is actually said, which words are present, and their literal meanings. It is an essential process to understand how stories achieve their cognitive, emotional, and/or moral meanings (Loseke 2022). The smallest of details, made visible through the process of close reading, provides insights into how the story is put together. By first doing a literal reading, I was able to stick closely to what is actually said in the stories and not follow lines of questioning about the biases and motivations of the storyteller. This process helped me familiarize myself with the data and set the stage for my exploration into the cultural contexts embedded within the stories. After literal close readings, I began to revisit the data repeatedly, helping me see the various worldviews reflected in what the story perpetuates or challenges (Loseke 2022). For example, how using particular words can either prompt or discourage certain emotional responses and how the attention is given to describing one event over another structures the story (Loseke 2022).

The present research is being pursued from a constructionist framework, in which the researcher is “*creating* story meaning rather than *finding* it” (Loseke 2022: 68). This means that meanings I attribute to the stories in my sample from *Hey Stranger* depend partly on my stance directed in my close reading. As opposed to an oppositional stance, I pursue close reading of the stories from firstly, a literal stance and then an imposture reading stance. By using a literal stance first and then an imposture stance, I will go beyond the story's surface to take into account the embedded cultural, political, and emotional structures of the story, attentive to the background meanings within them. After doing a close reading of my data, I began initial categorization by going through the data line-by-line, condensing and organizing it by phrases, and sections to add labels that depict what the data are portraying. By repeatedly exposing myself to and interacting with the data, I made a note of emergent themes and preliminary connections provided by categorization (Charmaz 2014).

Data Categorization

After repeated readings of the data, I began more in-depth, focused categorization, constructing and applying categories that emerged through initial categorization. This process of organizing the data allowed me to take specific story elements gathered from the data and systematically organize them into types and sub-types (Loseke 2022). Because everything about stories is contextualized, the analytic task of data categorization consequentially inscribes the perceived emotional, moral, and cognitive meanings into stories (Loseke 2022). Even though categorization focuses on commonalities, Loseke (2022) states that researcher attention must also be paid towards variations, which often demonstrate the “messiness of social life.” This is especially resonant for confessional stories, which may contain sentiments or experiences of

emotion that contradict social expectations. In my data categorization, I did not seek to erase this messiness but rather have a keen eye for these variations.

Categorization was informed by asking each story a series of questions: “What knowledge about the world does this statement assume?” “What would I need to believe about the world for this statement to be believable and important?” “What specific values are reflected/transmitted?” (Loseke 2011). As well as questions like: “To what extent are the storied data *offered* as “true,” regardless of any perceived relationship to truth as objectively or scientifically measured?”, “Who are the main story characters?”, “What cultural codes (symbolic, emotion) are central in shaping the story?” (Loseke 2022: 75). Though I have a general interest in the utilization of emotion norms and expectations in confessional narratives, I did not actively seek out these themes in my analysis.

Reflexivity as Process and Praxis

Reflexivity is a crucial part of any research endeavor. This is especially true for social research and is an integral part of inductive qualitative investigations. Reflexivity can be understood as “the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of a researcher’s positionality, as well as active acknowledgment and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome” (Berger 2015:220). Incredibly on the theme for this project, Wanda Pillow (2003) argues that reflexivity can sometimes help absolve the researcher of any feelings of guilt because they have “confessed” to the decisions they made in the research process or the ways their identities influence their research. That is not the purpose of this section, but rather to provide insights into the evolution of this project and to be transparent about the choices made in the analysis.

This project, at its conception, began with a research question about how emotion norms or feeling rules are constructed or resisted in secret stories in public media. The data presented challenges that led me to reflect on how I might work with and appreciate the expertise of other disciplines. In other words, the more time I spent with the secrets that make up my data, the more I realized how valuable an interdisciplinary perspective is to make sense of my findings and situate this research into the right scholarly conversations. The preliminary results from the analysis, combined with the challenges presented by data that resists conventional categorization methods, led me to seek out theories and methods from various other disciplines, including communications, media/digital studies, and literary studies. This is partly because the main areas of interest to this project: emotion, narrative, digital media, and confession, are all quite interdisciplinary inquiries.

This led me to reflect on my positionality as a researcher and how my identities shape how I can produce knowledge. One aspect of my positionality that is important to mention here is my citizenship as an American. American theories of emotion are somewhat different from those in other countries. As the literature review section on “therapy culture” demonstrates, cultural norms, economic systems, and professional emotion industries (such as the *psy*-industries and *psycho-medical* industries) heavily influence both popular and academic understanding of emotion. I am also autistic. It is a common stereotype that autistic individuals are emotionally stunted, struggle with emotional communication, and lack empathy. As an autistic scholar studying emotions, with a specific interest in cultural narratives of emotion, I not only bring a unique and underrepresented perspective to this field of study, but that part of my identity affects the way I perceive and process information. Because I have been interested and committed to understanding emotion from a very young age, my search for emotion codes in the

data took primacy in analysis at first. However, through my continued interaction with the secrets, it became clear that I needed to broaden my scope to focus on emotion codes in the data and all possible findings. By returning to my analysis with more open eyes, I was able to identify other key insights about crowdsourced confessionals that my analytical focus on emotion would have otherwise lost.

In the chapters that follow, I discuss the emergent themes from data categorization, which are divided into two main chapters (or theme groups): first, what we learn about lived emotions as reported from this data, and second, what we learn about secrets (and thus confession) from this data. Within each of these Chapters are sub-themes, highlighting the various insights revealed in the analysis. Without access to the participants, this research process relied heavily on direct textual data and researcher interpretation. I like to think of the following chapters in this thesis as arranged spatially. I recommend the reader visualize each chapter as its own room in an art gallery and each subsection as an art installation that reveals something about social life, about what it means to be human in a mediated world.

CHAPTER THREE: WHAT WE LEARN ABOUT EMOTIONS

Scholars have discussed how personal stories receive limited critical attention because they at first glance appear to focus solely on one's "inner emotional life" (Lindgren 2016). However, it is the inner emotional life that is of specific interest to this study. Qualitative analysis of the secrets revealed three key themes with emotion at the center of the storyteller's narratives. These themes include the complexity and multiple layers of emotional experience and expression in confessional narratives, which is a repeated finding throughout analysis; the reformulation of emotional meaning over time; sharp tensions can be produced by feelings of emotional inauthenticity; and finally, that many secrets feature an identity-emotional experience conflict.

Emotional Meaning Can Be Reformulated Over Time

Temporal emotions are important tools that tie our experiences and feelings together to construct a continuous and stable sense of self (Lois 2010). Looking into the past can generate feelings such as rumination, regret, and nostalgia, which allow us to engage in both emotion work and time work simultaneously. Lois (2010) argues that temporal emotions help people establish an enduring sense of self by assuring our subjective experiences and giving our feelings continuity and durability. In the case below, we witness the secret of a caller who has engaged in temporal emotion work at various points in their life to make sense of their possible childhood abuse. In reading this secret, pay close attention to the caller's self-evaluations.

EP 1 #4 Umm so, my secret is that I think, my mom, my mom told me once years ago that she thinks that my, my neighbor abused me when I was a kid, like three, four years old, and I never thought anything of it because I didn't remember it, so I just I never, it wasn't a blip on my radar, it wouldn't, I didn't let it bother me. Um, and then the older I got, the more you learn about yourself, and you start to look about like, "oh, what are these feelings and emotions, and why do I react this way" and you try to dig deeper as you get older, and um, the more. And more... I basically think that I remember it, but I feel stupid for, I feel stupid for, even thinking to acknowledge it because like what if it's just in my own head? You know? Like... and does it even matter? Because what if it didn't even happen, and I'm just like placing those thoughts there because like someone planted that there? And I um, yeah, I haven't told anybody about that.

The caller questions their account of the abuse and the meanings they "should" make from it: "I feel stupid for even thinking to acknowledge it... does it even matter?" without remembering the initial abuse, the speaker goes on with life until they engage in temporal emotion work and question their emotional experiences and reactions, which they identify as aligned with childhood abuse survivors' emotional experiences and reactions. It is impossible to know the extent to which the temporal emotion work assures their subjective experience and gives their feelings continuity and durability, or if it is causing further emotional distress and destabilizes their concept of self.

Other secrets demonstrate how an experience associated with negative emotions in the past (and morally evaluated as negative by the storyteller) can take on new meanings over time. Notice how the storyteller's past inner monologue and present commentary of her secret.

EP 1 #14 Um, okay, so I'm gonna preface this with an eating disorder trigger warning, I don't talk about it directly, but it is kinda mentioned in like the whole secret part. But I was very much struggling with eating, and I wasn't really eating at all, and I just remember never shitting, which makes sense because I wasn't, but I would just sit in the bathroom, to make it seem like I was shitting, but I just didn't, it happened so often like that's definitely not normal, but it just came to mind, it's not funny, but it's funny now. Because I remember sitting there and going, "oh my god, I am sick in the head," which is true, but I'm... getting better. I'm looking into the help that I need, which is good. Um,

I hope you get a giggle out of that sorry if it was too much, u thank you, you're doing the best work. I'm excited to see what you put out next. Alright, bye.

In the secret above, the caller refers to struggling with an eating disorder and, as a result, not being able to defecate. In the experience, this secret was quite painful, yet in its telling, the caller laughs and says, “it’s not funny, but it’s funny now.” The temporal distance between the experience and the reporting of the experience creates opportunities for reformulating the emotional meaning tied to the story. Charmaz (1991) has illustrated that thinking about the “self in time” is an important part of identity. Her research shows that people anchor and define their “real selves” in different time frames, such as the person they were before their illness, the ill person they are in the present, or the person they will become in their next cycle of remission. The self-in-time perspective is clear in this secret, where the caller states, “oh my god, I am sick in the head,” which is true, but I’m getting better, I’m looking into the help that I need, which is good.”

Emotions Can be Experienced and Evaluated as Inauthentic

Communicating different emotions involves personal and social risks, the “how-to’s,” “when-to’s,” and possible reactions of emotional communication are often uncertain (West 2017). People look to the world around them for emotional guidance; a world saturated with ideals and expectations of authenticity. Additionally, other emotion scholars posit that we lack the language to communicate emotion effectively (Clark 1997). It may be enticing to always act in alignment with what one evaluates as their innermost authentic feelings. In practice, however, people often look outside of themselves (or to the generalized others) and utilize the symbolic resources existing in the public sphere to decide how to connect emotionally with others and which sentiments are or are not socially acceptable. Callers sharing their secrets evaluated (in

one way or another) that the emotions they experienced as “authentic” do not meet the socially acceptable requirements to be shared or expressed to the people in their lives. For example, one caller reports “acting” in ways that do not align with her emotionally.

EP 1 #15 Um, hi, my biggest secret is I act like I am okay and happy all the time. I have two autistic children, one is five, and the other is about to be three, and neither one of them speak, and I'm always embarrassed to go have playdates, and I go home and cry sometimes when I see kids the same age as mine and that speak regularly or know so much or know, just know a lot, and it hurts my heart sometimes, it makes me feel like it's my fault even though they were born that way, sometimes I beat myself up about it and act like I'm completely fine, that I'm just incredibly happy and that it doesn't phase me, and it's not selfish. I do it because I want them to be able to speak. Sometimes, again, I act like I'm so happy with my personal life, being single because I'm so happy that I'm not in the relationship I was in for seven years, but I do long for someone who would accept me and my kids who don't speak or do have a learning disability and just hope that one day they will love me for me and love my kids for them that's my secret. Sorry I got emotional. It's a big one.

In this secret, the caller states that she acts like she is “okay and happy all the time” despite the many challenges that she experiences as a mother and caregiver of her two young, non-verbal, autistic children. She situates her displays of happiness as inauthentic and not as a “selfish” act, but because she “wants them to be able to speak.” This is closely tied with Lois’s (2010) analysis of the emotion management practices of mothers. The research revealed that mothers often engage in a process called *sequencing* where the mother compartmentalizes her life, emotions, and needs to align with the child's needs at different milestone moments of their development. Later in her disclosure, she also discusses acting happy with her personal life being single, but still very much longs for a partner who accepts her and her children for who they are. Even in the anonymous environment and privacy of a phone call, the caller still apologizes for “getting emotional” a state that contradicts the message she sends to children and her social world: I am okay. I am happy. The major takeaway here is that the caller’s secret is that her emotional expressions are complex and are experienced by her as inauthentic. In the

following, the caller provides an additional perspective into why people label their experiences of emotional inauthenticity a “secret:” To protect others from worry or take on undesirable emotions:

EP 1 #17 Um, recently, my grandma, or recently my mom, had a stroke in the middle of June. And then, my grandma passed away, and then right after that, my dog passed away. And I know there's other people going through other stuff, but I feel like I haven't had the chance to really sit down and gather what happened this year because I'm so busy taking care of my mom and helping her get better, and you know, I tried so hard not to cry at my grandmas funeral so my mom wouldn't have to worry about me, because I know she gets really worried when I start crying. And I'm not doing the best in school right now, and it's really hard, and I don't know what to do anymore. And you know, I just, I don't know why I'm trying so hard not to cry, um but yeah, I feel like the world is just moving so fast, and I haven't had the chance to just sit down and gather what has happened to me recently and yeah, that's all.

The above secret clearly illustrates one of the main ways that norms govern the experience and expression of emotion and how those norms are constructed and resisted: through interpersonal relationship interactions. The caller reports multiple recent losses, such as her grandma and dog, and the stresses of recently becoming a caretaker for her mom and the challenges of keeping up with schoolwork. She identifies the root of her issue as not having enough time to process the emotions associated with her recent adversities adequately, but also talks about not being able to cry in the presence of her mom so as not to worry her because “she gets really worried when I start crying.” Even in telling the secret, the caller tears up and says, “I don't know why I'm trying so hard not to cry.” This shows how powerful and pervasive emotion norms can be. In both secrets from episode 1, callers #15 and #17 express emotion in the telling of their secret in the form of vocal inflections, pauses, and audible crying, and comment on those expressions as “I'm sorry I got emotional” and “I'm trying so hard not to cry.”

It is a significant finding that callers often directly say how they “act” or perform certain feeling states that are in direct opposition to how they truly feel, and evaluate both “how they

truly feel” and their emotional inauthenticity (acting in opposition to how they truly feel) as secrets. In the final quote below, we can see an additional example of this evaluation and framing of emotional inauthenticity as a problem.

EP 3 #6 Hi, so last year, I found out that I had a tumor. I had the surgery to remove it, but they had to take my jaw with it, like half of my lower jaw, and it's been a couple of months now post-recovery, and I've been acting like everything's okay with my family and all. But I'm just. I'm just not happy. And I'm kinda like mad at the universe, I guess. Saying you know like, why. So a side effect of the surgery was I'd have numbness in my face, and it's just so uncomfortable, like when I tried to kiss somebody it, it hurt. I felt robbed because I just know, you know, going forward, that this is just my new reality and that's just something that I have to get used to. Um, yeah.

This caller is similar to previous callers in that he believes he “acts” emotionally in ways that are out of alignment with what he authentically truly feels. While we, the audience, are not privy to *why* he is acting in ways he believes are inauthentic, we do gain insight into why he states he is unhappy: He feels “robbed” because “going forward,” this is his “new reality.” The “self-in-time” concept (Charmaz 1991) helps us understand the complicated emotions associated with how a person makes sense of their “real self,” including the one before their illness and after, in this case, the callers “new reality” where things are different than what he imagined them to be. A new reality where kissing someone he loves is painful, a new reality where possible future experiences have been “stolen” from him, a new reality that will take some time getting used to.

Conventionally unacceptable feelings are termed outlaw emotions (Jaggar 1989) which can be a useful concept to help grasp the possible consequences of shared secrets such as this one. Feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar (1989) suggests that they can help us conceive of the world differently, and they can lead us to make observations that challenge and unravel hegemonic ideologies. For example, the idea that once cancer patients are in remission and have recovered, individuals will be happier than they were when they were ill. The caller’s secret is

guided by the fact that he acts happy for his family, but in reality, his authentic emotional experience is not that of happiness but that of pain. This outlaw emotion of sadness, disappointment, anger, etc., when happiness is socially expected, may allow us to turn a critical eye towards the emotional expectation of people in recovery from various illness experiences.

Emotions Can be Experienced and Evaluated as Conflicting with One's Identity

Emotion and Identity are inseparably linked. Identity theorists posit that individuals seek to construct and maintain interaction environments and situations that confirm their identities or meanings attached to selfhood (Burke and Cast 1997), producing emotions that affirm people. The secret below exposes what happens when individuals do not or possibly cannot construct and maintain interaction environments and situations that confirm their identities.

EP 2 #8 My secret is that I am a middle school teacher, and I hate the kids. I hate them. I want to scream and quit every single day, but I can't. I just go to work every single day, hating my life.

This storyteller experiences her identity as a middle school teacher as conflicting with her emotional experience of “hating kids.” She states how she desires to quit every single day but *cannot*. She cannot construct or maintain an interactional work environment that confirms her identity and self-meanings. We, the audience, are not informed of why she cannot quit, or even why she hates kids— but what we can take away from this story is that the storyteller suggests they believe that “teachers should not hate kids,” and therefore, this identity-experience conflict of being a teacher (who is “ought to” not hate kids) that hates kids must be kept secret. The following secret exposes how stories rooted in identity-experience can involve multiple emotions and multiple dimensions, which contribute to them being kept as secrets, further emphasizing the complexity of emotions reported in this data.

EP 1 #6 Hi Thoraya, um, oh, I feel so nervous. So, my secret is that about two years ago, I had an abortion, and I regret it every single day because I wonder what my life would have been like if I had chosen to go a different way. At the time, I was in a really toxic and abusive relationship, and I just got out of it may be a year ago. And I'm the type of person who doesn't regret anything, but that is one of my biggest regrets, and none of my family knows, none of my friends know, nobody knows, and it just weighs on me every single day, and I can't even talk about it, and I feel ashamed of myself. And I hate myself for making that decision. Though I am prochoice... I just sometimes, I feel like I can't live with myself. Um, thank you. Have a nice day.

Here we have multiple identity statements conflicting with multiple emotional/cognitive experiences. The storyteller positions herself as (a) the type of person who doesn't regret anything and (b) pro-choice (in regard to women's right to choose legal abortion). However, the storyteller, who has had an abortion herself, states that it weighs on her every day, causing intense feelings of shame and regret. This helps understand how important emotions are as links to identity and reveals four significant findings. First, that secret-keeping may act as a sort of emotion management when the ideas about one's self conflict with their experiences and/or choices; second, the act of keeping a secret appears to produce its own unique set of emotions and moral evaluations about the story (such as shame or loneliness); third, secret *telling* (confession) may also be a way for people to manage the emotions that occur when ideas about their self conflict with their experiences and/or choices; fourth and finally, secret *telling* (confession) may be a way for people to manage the emotions associated with secret-keeping. In conclusion, the secrets submitted to *Hey Stranger* indicate that emotional meaning is reformulated over time, that emotions can be experienced as inauthentic, and those "true" or "authentic" feelings become labeled as a "secret," and finally that many secrets contain identity-emotion conflicts. Through the passing of time, acquiring of new experiences, and the telling of personal stories, emotional meanings change. While research on temporal emotions such as regret, nostalgia, hope, and anticipation suggests they help people establish an enduring sense of

self by assuring our subjective experiences and giving our feelings continuity and durability, the data from the present study suggest that some temporal emotion work may contribute to increased emotional distress and a destabilizing of one's concept of self.

When cultural ideals and expectations for authenticity abound, it makes sense that many secrets reported in *Hey Stranger* feature stories about “acting” or performing in ways that are out of alignment with what they truly feel. We must notice that these are not simply “stories” about inauthentic emotional experiences. These are stories that have been evaluated and labeled as “secrets” by their tellers, indicating they may perceive some social risk or consequence to expressing their authentic emotions. As Cabanas (2017: 187) notes, in various realms of life, authenticity is frequently synonymous with ideals such as health, independence, high performance and success, utility, self-fulfillment, and an attitude of fearlessness.

Not aligning with a particular cultural ideal or expectation of feeling is a finding present in the last section of this chapter as well; however, this last section is specifically on identity expectations and emotional conflicts, as opposed to emotional expectations and emotional conflicts. The stories reported here demonstrate how a person's identity plays an essential role in their moral evaluations of their emotional experiences and that conflicting identities and emotions create barriers to constructing a stable concept of self. In this way, all three sections found in Chapter Three support two main claims. First, lived emotions, as reported from this data, are experienced as complex and expressed in multiple layers, containing multiple emotion codes. This complexity runs throughout the individual experience of emotion, and the researcher's interpretation process defies traditional categorizations into clean “types” of emotions. The second is that confession, which according to Poletti (2020), significantly

contributes to a model of the self that can be structured and expressed, aids the process of managing one's "self-in-emotion" (Hochschild 1983).

CHAPTER FOUR: WHAT WE LEARN ABOUT SECRETS

What is a "secret?" This project on the *Hey Stranger* series helps build an understanding of what secrets are and how people morally evaluate these self-stories. The things people keep secret also highlight the power of social and emotional norms and how people come to make sense out of their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences by situating them into conversation with dominant narratives about what one "ought-to" be thinking, feeling, or acting. Analyzing anonymously disclosed verbal secrets then help in understanding how individuals define "secret," how secrets assist in the construction of a sense of a continuous, stable self, and how the normative concepts people desire (or are told to desire) come into a powerful tension when they become unattainable for one reason or another, leading to their fate as being labeled a secret.

Secrets Reveal "Something" About One's Hidden Self

One of the findings of this project is that people keep secret things they evaluate as negative. We may not tell others the positive things we experience in private or without others' knowledge, yet we don't label these as "secrets." It is also possible that the material limits of the project, such as limiting participant voicemail lengths to three minutes, work to highlight secrets with negative connotations. These brief narratives then tend to privilege statements that represent key emotions associated with secret-keeping— "Shame, pain, disappointment, and regret"

(Poletti 2020: 90). The data segment below demonstrates these key emotions within the secret.

EP 1 #10 When I was five years old, I was sexually assaulted by my two older cousins. One of them didn't stop till I was at the end of my eighth-grade year. I never told anybody until I was about 17 years old, and I told my cousin, who was also one of my best friends, come to find out, she was sexually assaulted by the same two people. When we came out to the family, nobody believed us. They shunned us. They would talk about us behind our backs, telling other people that they didn't believe us. We currently have a case open against them. Still, no one believes us. My dad, who killed himself about three years ago, was also a victim of sexual assault in that family. His brother was a victim. His cousin was also a victim. And when they came out and told the family, they told them it wasn't true and kept the molesters around the family. They still talk to those sexual assaulters. They still do not believe any of us and... it's still an ongoing battle, and sometimes I struggle with my identity and trust and... knowing the word family and what it truly means. And that's a secret that I've held onto for a while, and I'm not sure how much more of it I can take. It's honestly heartbreaking, and if this story does get out, I hope that whoever is going through the same thing knows that they're not alone. And to say something.

This caller tells of what they evaluate as multigenerational sexual abuse within their family and speaks about not only the impacts of the abuse but the impacts of *not being believed* about the abuse. Stories and reports of abuse were mentioned in six of the secrets from these episodes and are closely aligned with Poletti's (2020: 90) key emotions associated with secret-keeping: "Shame, pain, disappointment, and regret." There also are other forms of secrets that are still evaluated as negative on some level but provide a crucial countering to the heaviness of other secrets submitted to the project containing themes of betrayal, abuse, and trauma. It is the confessions of relatively small everyday secrets, such as:

EP 1 #7 Hi, so my secret is that one time I went over to my best friend's house, I really, really had to use the bathroom. So, I went into her bathroom, you know, took a number two, and her toilet got clogged. So, I didn't want to tell her cause I was very, very embarrassed. So, they had a cat. So, I took the poop out from the toilet, and I put it in the cat litter box, and she smelled it. She said, "oh my goodness, what is that smell?" So, she went and changed out the cat litters box, and she didn't know that it was my poop.

Secrets of this form confirm that an understanding of confession is not dependent on experiences of trauma or emotions like regret, disappointment, shame, or pain. It is the

possession of *any* secret, the willingness to tell it and hear others is what counts (Poletti 2020). It is this complex dynamic between secrets that demonstrate how emotions are a core intent of this project, which isn't about capturing or representing the various and diverse secrets people have, but rather about providing a structure of feeling (Williams 1977) around anonymous collective confession. These findings seem to align with Foucault suggestion that Western society is comprised of confessing animals. This secret also supports the reformulation of emotional meaning over time. In the above secret, caller #7 (episode 1) is telling the story in which she was "very, very embarrassed" during the *experience* of the story, but in the *telling* of the story, she laughs, and the embarrassing experience becomes translated into a funny story. This secret emphasizes the complexity of this data and the perils of trying to place them into individual categories, many of the secrets shared on this platform can fit into multiple analytical categories or themes.

Secrets Are Things Thought, Felt, and Done

In repeated interaction with the data, it became clear that the term "secret" can refer to a whole host of things that people evaluate about their lives and experiences as "private." While the secrets in *Hey Stranger* are each unique in their own way, from the story content to the storytelling style, to the level of secret-ness a secret has, the majority of secrets reported feature stories about things thought, felt, and done (to or by) the storyteller. The first category includes things thought both by and about the storyteller. In the example below, caller #4 (episode 2) talks about the things they think, and fear others think and judge about their stutter.

EP 2 #4 Hey, so I had to call back again to yeah, so I have stuttered for about 12 years now, and sometimes I really hate myself for that. I know that my friends and family don't care if I do stutter or not, but sometimes I just, I just think that I can't keep a job because I am afraid that people will judge me because I stutter. So, um, um, I just sometimes

don't want to be here because people don't understand how... sometimes it is so depressing to see someone just look at you and judge you because you happen to talk differently. Um, and it has gotten better, but I do wanna say that I had I learned that a person should not give up. So, I am trying to live by that every day, so thank you, bye.

In the next secret, the storyteller tells the audience about a "confession" that is told to him by his boss and is about him. This caller is made aware of what another person thinks about him and their judgments of his abilities and his work.

EP 1 #3 My secret is, I went to a work conference with my boss, where he got drunk and confessed to me that the city manager wanted to kick me off my job as a lineman because his words were 'we don't need a cripple out on the line.' And he's been coming up with excuses, why I keep getting in trouble, the others don't get in trouble for, and I don't know what to do about it. I love my job, but the city manager says, "we need to get the cripple out of there." That's it.

In both secrets above, the storytellers disclose that they experience being judged for their abilities and the related struggle of sustaining stable employment. While these secrets are placed in this section because they convey that secrets are things thought by and about the storyteller, these secrets may also support Wood and Ward's (2010) finding that people share their secrets to help remedy the emotional impacts of stigma. In this case, both callers reported the judgment of others due to their stigmatized experiences of impairment— in the first secret, "having a stutter," and in the second, "being crippled."

Secrets also include things felt both by and about the storyteller. The body of literature on the sociology of emotions indicates that whether or not a person's feelings are expressed in their full authentic nature or managed and acted to comply with broader social expectations is largely shaped by the presence of feeling rules. These feeling rules may, in turn, influence individuals to keep their true or authentic emotions secret from the public and those in their everyday lives.

Caller #12 (episode 1) shares a secret that represents secrets as things that can be "felt:"

EP 1 #12 Um, I don't even think ya'll are doing this anymore. I don't even think this is a secret, but I really have no one to tell. Like I'm really lonely. And I'm super, super sad like, there's been days where I just don't wanna be here anymore, but I don't want to leave that behind, and I'm just super sad. I don't even know how- it's just a lot, and I really have no one to tell. I'm super, super sad. And yeah, that's really it.

It is important to note that there may be differences between not wanting to tell someone your secret and not having anyone to tell your secret to. Caller #12 (episode 1) reports feeling quite lonely and emphasizes her experience of sadness throughout the disclosure. It appears, however, that this sadness is only part of the secret. The other part is that they have no one to talk about these emotions with. There are other secrets where the storyteller indicates that they do indeed have people in their life to talk about their feelings with; however, they choose not to for one reason or another. In the secret found below, caller #2 (episode 2) talks about her attempts to confide in others with her secret and the consequences that have resulted from that.

EP 2 #2 Hi, um, so, my biggest secret is that my dad passed away a couple of years ago; according to everyone else, he passed away. He was hit by a car. But um, I still talk to him, and he still talks with me, and he is right by my side all the time, and I don't know if it's, what's going on, but people think that he's dead and I don't think he is. He's really my best friend in this whole world and the only person I ever really talked to. Nobody else ever sees him, but I do. So, when I first told somebody about it, they just thought I was crazy, and I had to go to a therapist, but nobody else believes me when I tell them he's not dead, he's like in the room with us, or he's right next to me. Um, so, really, I don't know how to ever tell anybody, so I don't tell anybody when I'm talking to him, and sometimes I feel bad cause sometimes I wanna be out in public when I talk to him the most, or I have questions for him. I'm like, "okay, what toothpaste should I get" or maybe I ask him how I should approach a certain situation, but I can't because people will just think I'm crazy. And uh, yeah, that's my secret.

Here, it is evident in the secret that the storyteller "feels bad" because she wants to be able to talk with her recently deceased father in public; however, she "can't" because other people will think she is "crazy." This shows us that having no one to tell your secrets to may not be the necessitating condition for one to share a secret to a project like *Hey Stranger*. For

example, it can be the fear of judgment, which labels a particular feeling (by or about the storyteller) as a "secret."

Lastly, the secrets that callers have shared over the three episodes include things that have been *done to* the storyteller and things *done by* the storyteller. These secrets refer to specific behaviors or actions taken by people or done to them. Caller #2 (episode 1) discloses a secret about something they have personally done, an act that they themselves committed.

EPI #2 My biggest secret is when I was 22 years old, I got into a fight with my dad while he was holding my son, and I caused my son major brain damage by missing my dad and striking my son in the head. I spent four years in prison for this, and I consider killing myself every single day because of this.

This form of secret (secrets about something the storyteller did) may be closest to traditional forms of confession in which one is asked to confess their sins to an authority figure such as a priest. It must be noted that while I am categorizing this secret as "something done by a storyteller," this secret is also about the consequences of this action and how the storyteller *feels* about what they have done. This is yet another example of the perils in organizing secrets into neat and rigid categories. As mentioned above, secrets can be something the storyteller has done, but they can also be about something done to them, as seen in caller #4 (episode 3) 's secret below.

EP 3 #4 Hi, I wanted to share a secret that I've never told anybody before. When I was five years old, I was molested by my father. And I just don't wanna ever pass away without ever saying that out loud. And it's, been hard when you love them regardless of the terrible things that they do to you. And change is possible for people, and I do love my dad. But it's just something that I wanted to get off my chest. And if this ever goes out, I just want people to know that they're not alone and that you should not be ashamed for anything terrible that ever happens to you. And everything happens for a reason, and it's unfair, but just know that you're stronger than the situations that you're in and just keep going. Thank you.

While this disclosure is about something done to the storyteller, it holds within it multiple layers. She speaks about the difficulty of loving people who harm you. With the

knowledge that this is a secret sharing platform that reaches a public audience, she communicates to a sea of strangers a directive: that "you should not be ashamed for anything terrible that ever happens to you." In this way, the above secret is not only about something that was done to the storyteller but also constructed a narrative about what one "should" or "should not" feel when something "terrible... happens to you."

In conclusion, we learn from the lived experiences reported in this data that secrets can be things thought, felt, and done (to, by, and about) the storyteller. This section, however, also demonstrates that placing secrets neatly into one of these three categories is a difficult endeavor. This is because the secrets called into *Hey Stranger* are fragmented personal narratives, the storyteller has a limited amount of time to share their secret (three minutes), and we lack vocabulary and practice in communicating our emotions (West 2017). These explanations help us understand that secrets can be things thought, felt, and done, but they can also be about how someone feels about what they've done or what someone thinks about what they are feeling. All this reinforces the idea that secrets collected by crowdsourced confessionals, and the emotions within them, are very complex. This complexity is explored further in the next section.

Secrets Are Complex and Resist Categorization

In addition to the overlapping of thoughts, feelings, and actions in secrets, it is sometimes difficult for the audience to determine what parts of the story are the central focus or the "secret" part of the secret, contributing a layer of complexity. In the secret below, notice how caller #11 (episode 1) reports multiple thoughts, feelings, and actions, leaving the audience wondering what meanings the storyteller makes of her experiences and which elements of the secret are most important to her or have impacted her the most.

EP 1 #11 My biggest secret is that when I was very young, I was both sex trafficked and sexually exploited, and from there, it only got worse. My situation of being sex trafficked never quite stopped, and even though I'm currently out of those situations, I never know when I'm gonna be in those situations again, and it really hurts because I feel like one day I might die in them. At the same time, being a sex addict from such a young age has been my biggest burden as someone who appreciates god and religion. My biggest problem is I never knew how I got into those situations. I always thought, everyone, my parents and family died before that, and that's how I got into those situations; however, the truth is I really don't know if my biological family sold me, and I don't know exactly every part of it, and it kind of scares me a little bit that I might not ever actually know the truth about my life.

As seen in the disclosure above, it is difficult to discern what parts of the story are valued as most important to the storyteller. They state: "My biggest secret is that when I was very young, I was both sex trafficked and sexually exploited" However, later on, they state: "My biggest problem is I never knew how I got into those situations," implying that the narrative is not only about something that happened to the storyteller, but about not knowing the origins of their adverse circumstances and the fear that accompanies not being able to make sense of one's past to construct a stable, continuous self. In addition to the emotion of fear, related to feeling "like one day [she] might die in [these situations]" and the burden of an identity-experience conflict such as being a religious person who is also a sex addict: "being a sex addict from such a young age has been my biggest burden as someone who appreciates god and religion." Within this single secret, we, the audience, are made aware of the storyteller's "biggest secret," "biggest burden," and "biggest problem." Because the audience is left wondering about the "why's" of each disclosure and the meanings the storyteller makes from them, the complexity of the secrets becomes amplified.

This is because secrets shared in this crowdsourced confessional do not neatly fit into categories of secret things thought, felt, or done by to or about the storyteller—they often include elements from each of those categories to describe how certain actions generated

particular feelings (or an absence of feeling), how certain feelings lead to particular actions, how the thoughts and feelings overlap and intersect to dynamic constructions of identity and so on. This supports the argument that "one cannot separate emotion from action; they flow together, one leading into the other" (Corbin and Strauss 2015: 23). Not only are the structures or forms of the secrets difficult to categorize due to their diverse intersections of thoughts, feelings, and actions, but also to the topics featured, characters discussed, and moral and emotion codes depicted are multilayered.

Secrets Are Defined by Their Tellers and Directed Towards Others

When attention is focused on the beginning of each recorded disclosure, the different aspects of secrets such as: how people define secrets, ascribe meaning into secrets, qualify their secrets, and to whom they address their disclosure become revealed.

First, people who submit their secrets to *Hey Stranger* use different language to talk about or define the stories they are calling to tell. Some callers refer to their story explicitly as a confession, while others use the term secret to label their story, and one caller referred to their story as both a secret and confession. This is important because the words we use to talk about social practices and how we define or label our stories speak to the symbolic meaning associated with those social practices and stories. In the examples below, callers use the beginning of their disclosures to label their stories.

EP 1 #5 "Hi, um, this is my confession..."

EP 2 #1 "My secret and confession is..."

EP 2 #9 "My secret is that I..."

This is important because it indicates that the terms "secret" and "confession" are used relatively interchangeably. We have established that historically, confession has provided three main functions in society: "a legal admission of guilt," a "sacred profession of sin," and "an intimate revelation of shame" (Grobe 2017: 12), whereas the term "secret" is far broader and is used to describe something hidden from knowledge or view. In one sense, it is an interpretive scholar's job to pay attention to the ways that people use language in ways that are meaningful to them, as opposed to adhering to strict definitions provided by dictionaries. This data suggests that although confession and secret have different histories and technical definitions, they are used by people to describe the same things. Second, people often provide descriptive information about how they personally evaluate or characterize the secret at the beginning of their disclosure. Examples of this descriptive work can be found below:

EP 2 #7 "Okay, so my funny, kind of weird secret is...."

EP 3 #5 "My deepest secret...."

EP 1 #8 "Hi, my big secret is...."

EP 1 #11 "My biggest secret is...."

These pre-secret descriptors give the audience insight into the meanings that the storyteller ascribes to their secret. Some describe their secret as "big" or "deep," and others, such as caller #7 (episode 2), describe their secret as "funny" and "kind of weird"— these prefaces to disclosures prime what the caller is about to say and create a lens through which to understand their story. Further, because these descriptive words are different, they pose an additional layer of complexity to organizing and categorizing the data into "types" of stories. Third, callers often use relative qualifiers in their early statements. Relative qualifiers are typically understood as

signals of uncertainty or a desire to please. A few examples of the use of relative qualifiers from each episode are seen below.

EP 1 #12 "I don't even think this is a secret, but...."

EP 2 #3 "It's not really a secret, but...."

EP 3 #1 "I guess this is my secret...."

It is statements such as "I don't think it's a secret, but..." or "I guess" which support a signaling of feelings of uncertainty. This uncertainty appears to be rooted in whether or not the story they wish to share qualifies as a secret or whether or not they have a right to tell their story in this specific space and project (as if to say, "I'm not sure if I or my story belong here"). In this way, the use of relative qualifiers may be less of a desire to please and more of a desire to belong. Fourth and lastly, the callers frequently address Thoraya, the confessional entrepreneur and creator of the project, at the beginning of their disclosure as if they are confessing directly to her. A multitude of examples from the data are pictured below:

EP 3 #9 "Hi Thoraya, my secret is that...."

EP 1 #6 "Hi Thoraya, um oh, I feel so nervous...."

EP 2 #5 "Hi Thoraya, my secret is that when I was...."

EP 2 #10 "Hey, Thoraya, I already left a voicemail...."

EP 2 #11 "Hi Thoraya, this is not a secret that I wanna share; I simply wanna say thank you."

EP 3 #11 "Hi Thoraya, um, this is my secret...."

The direct referencing to the confessional entrepreneur in the above cases suggests that the callers use their literacy and understanding of confession and apply it to the project, painting Thoraya as the authority of which to confess. Indeed, the form of crowdsourced confession is

distinct from religious, historical, and conventional practices of confession where the authority figures to which people confess include priests, doctors, and interrogators. In this crowdsourced confessional project, Thoraya distances herself from professional or expert status markers/claims and encourages her followership to view her as an average person who simply wishes to provide others a platform to tell their stories and to make strangers not so strange anymore. In fact, her Instagram bio states: "I make films with strangers, about strangers, for strangers!" This is a valuable finding because it reveals how even when confession is anonymous and not tied to any traditional site or position of power, those who wish to confess via the project cast the creator of the project as an authority figure of which to confess on their own accord.

In sum, there are four key findings from this section. First, we learn about the ways that people define, understand, and use the terms "confession" and "secret." Second, we learn about the various descriptions and meanings given to stories by their tellers, which add an additional layer of complexity to the categorization of this data into "types" of stories. Third, we learn that many people use relative qualifiers to situate their disclosure and express a level of uncertainty to their disclosure and a desire to belong. Fourth and lastly, we learn that people utilize their existing understandings of confession to address their disclosures toward a particular social actor, in this case, Thoraya Maronesy, the confessional entrepreneur and creator of *Hey Stranger*.

Secrets Include Comparisons Between "My Life" and "The Good Life"

One of the most prevalent themes that emerged through analysis was that the callers often evaluated themselves and their lives in the perspective of failure and disappointment

compared to normative concepts of what a good life "ought to" look and *feel* like. Things like a biological family, safety, financial stability, fulfilling career, ability, general well-being, and secure social attachments such as those in friendship and love—are all examples of normative concepts which traditionally anchor a life and a life narrative (Poletti 2020). The secret below illustrates how powerful these concepts and expectations are to people's emotions.

EP 2 #1 My secret and confession is that I'm a man that has reached his breaking point. Ever since I was a little boy, I've always wondered, what is it that I have said, or what is it that I have done that meant I would not matter as much as those around me why can't we all have someone? Why can't we all have a true friend? I... I never was afforded the gift of having a bond with my brothers. I had a father who chose drugs over me. I had a mother who was so consumed in her depression. It's like every relationship I was ever in hasn't lasted. God, how pathetic is that? I'm 36 years old, and I have nothing to show for my life. My presence and absence in this world, I don't think, even matters. And I'm afraid that one day I'll be alone, dried up and sick in some nursing home, taking my last breath in some dark empty room. And I don't think that there's gonna be anything that's gonna change my mind. So, I'll just live on, wondering what's next.

This caller specifically identifies the normative concepts/institutions/experiences that have caused this disappointment and fear of dying alone: never having a true friend, failed nuclear family relationships (compounded by parental drug use and mental illness), and failed romantic relationships, all of which the storyteller believes make him "pathetic" and cause him to feel that his life does not matter. The narrative also draws upon socially constructed expectations of time and aging, such as "I'm 36 years old, and I have nothing to show for my life." Here the "nothing" he refers to is defined by the normative ideas about what "something's" a person "ought-to" have accomplished and experienced by the time they reach their mid-thirties. It is the failure to accomplish and experience those socially defined and enforced "something's" (friendship, love, and family) at the center of this story. Indicating how powerful the social forces are that shape our lives. Caller #11 (episode 3) reports similar failures of attaining and sustaining normative concepts in their life and structures their story in a similar

format, such as listing out the various normative concepts missing from their lives. Caller #11 (episode 3) 's secret is featured below.

EP 3 #11 Hi Thoraya, um, this is my secret. Um, my whole life, I've just been lost. I've lost my brother. I've lost my grandma. I've lost my uncle the year after I lost my brother, in the same trauma room, in the same hospital. Recently in the last two years, I've lost four friends that meant a lot to me, and I don't have a platform to speak on. My therapist, you know I talk to her, but we go on so many different things cause there's so many things going on in my brain I've got severe OCD, I've got PTSD, I've got major depressive disorder, and even earlier this year I've been threatened to get shot. Like someone actually threatened me, and I thought I was going to get shot. I've been bullied my whole life. I've been abused. I've barely had anyone on my side to protect me. So right now, all I got is my parents. And my secret is basically if I lose them, once I lose them, I'll probably lose myself because I'm 27 years old and have not lived a life where I felt happy. It's been pain. It's been struggle. It's been war. And I'm just numb to everything. And I guess this is the only platform I can really speak on, and I appreciate, what you do, so... thank you.

Something compelling about the above two secrets is that they do not refer to a specific flashpoint moment in a life (a specific thought, feeling, or action) but rather feature a stitched together account of multiple moments: traumas, disappointments, and mental health struggle to make a moral evaluation about their life *as a whole*. "I have nothing to show for my life. My presence and absence in this world I don't think even matters" and "I have not lived a life where I felt happy. It's been pain. It's been struggle. It's been war." This supports the earlier finding that people label negative experiences as secrets. This second secret (EP 3 #11) is different from the first (EP 2 #1) because it refers more to the *loss* of normative concepts and structures (such as family) than to the struggle to create them in their life. This storyteller, however, also draws upon socially constructed ideals about time and aging to measure his experiences against those society says he "ought-to" have had by his late twenties: "because I'm 27 years old and have not lived a life, where I felt happy." This points to a separate (although intertwined) set of normative concepts which contextualize these self-evaluations and the emotional ideals of selfhood. An example secret of this can be seen below in caller #9 (episode 2) 's disclosure:

EP 2 #9 My secret is that I don't think I have emotions. Like I'm really good at faking emotions. I'm really good at like crying on cue or seeming like I'm happy or seeming like I'm sad, but deep down, I don't really feel... anything. I don't really know if that's normal. I just thought I'd share. Yeah, thank you.

In addition to these normative concepts of what a good life "ought-to" look and feel like, there also exists the caller's self-evaluation as a failure or disappointment in relation to the cultural and emotional ideals for selfhood outlined by Illouz (2017): "(a) emotional authenticity and liberation; (b) intimacy, friendship, collegiality, and emotional expressivity; and (c) emotional self-knowledge, self-control, and self-improvement conducive to mental health" (Illouz 2017: 17). We live in an emotionally saturated world, which has grown more and more saturated with the psychological modeling of the self and processes of emotional capitalism. Many of the secrets in this data set allude to the inability (or fear) to express the emotions they authentically experience, for example, not being able to or not wanting to express their sadness or their unrequited love. Caller #9 (episode 3), however, speaks about not wanting to express their *inexperience* of emotion and the tensions which result from this emotional inauthenticity. This is important because many emotions scholars focus on emotion norms as the social pressure to feel a particular emotion, in a particular situation, for a particular duration of time. What is maybe looked over too often is the most basic and foundational emotion norm in contemporary society: humans feel emotions. It, therefore, makes sense that an individual who finds themselves in a society saturated with emotion and who reports not experiencing emotion would make the decision to keep that a secret and to share it on an anonymous platform, where the social risks are limited.

Secrets Can Have a Temporal Orientation to The Future

Despite the self-evaluations of failure in creating and maintaining normative structures in their lives (such as intimacy and secure relationships), *and* the self-evaluations of failure in meeting the cultural/emotional template of selfhood (such as emotional authenticity and mental health), many secrets reveal an attachment to life itself, and a temporal orientation toward the future no matter how damaging or disappointing life experiences have been in the past.

The following secrets seen below don't necessarily reject or resist dominant ideas about what a good life "ought to" look and feel like, but they do hold within them a sentiment that failure to attain or sustain these goals is okay and that they are no reason to "give up" on life. In the reading of these secret segments, direct, special attention to the theme of resilience within them.

EP 3 #2 "... to anybody out there struggling try to make it to the next day, keep fighting, don't ever give up, we're all in this together."

Ep 3 #4 "... everything happens for a reason, and it's unfair but just know that you're stronger than the situations that you're in and just keep going. Thank you."

EP 2 #4 "... I do wanna say that if had I learned that a person should not give up. So, I am trying to live by that every day, so thank you, bye."

EP 3 #12 "... I used to be really depressed and really anxious, but I've recently gained an understanding of how beautiful life is and... I just encourage anyone that's struggling with mental health to hold on because it really, really gets better."

These narratives are structured in a way that puts emotions such as hope anticipation center stage. This temporal orientation to the future in the face of adversity appear to either directly or indirectly express the sentiment: "hang in there" or "I hung in there, so you can too," or "we have all been there, and we are hanging in there *together*." These narratives, which resemble the resiliency narratives common in other crowdsourced confessional projects like *PostSecret* (Poletti 2011), convey an attachment to life, an attachment to living no matter how

hard life is or has been. This is emphasized in the *Hey Stranger* project through its sponsorship of the National Crisis Line and links to other international crisis resources. It is critical to note that the very first secret voicemail episode created by Thoraya did not include these resources but began sponsoring them in the second episode.

This attachment to life that is featured in many secrets combined with the framing work done by the confessional entrepreneur (Thoraya) that secrets are life or death helps us understand how the project seeks to construct a particular knowledge and feeling about confession: that we all have secrets. Some secrets (specifically the ones about the failure to attain or maintain normative concepts and structures in one's life) have the power and potential to kill us if we let them. This sentiment also works in turn to support the idea explored in the next section of this chapter, that it is inherently "good" to release a secret and that the opportunity to do so warrants gratitude.

Releasing A Secret is “Good” and Warrants Gratitude

Across the three episodes reviewed in this project, which included 41 secrets, the word "thank you" was said a total of 19 times. Some storytellers simply closed off their disclosure with a "thank you," similar to how a keynote speaker would say thank you after their speech—to signify the end of the story and to thank the audience for listening. The data cannot tell us *why* storytellers used "thank you" at the end of their disclosure or *who* it was directed towards. An example of how callers include a "thank you" to conclude their secret can be seen in caller #13 (episode 1) 's disclosure.

EP 1 #13 My secret is that I had a boy in my gym class and I thought he had a really nice behind and I told someone I didn't fully trust, and she told him with me standing in front of him and the way he looked at me made me feel like no one would ever love me in my whole entire life. Thank you

In the above secret, it is not clear what or for whom the caller is thankful. There are, however, other storytellers such as caller #14 (episode 1) and caller #2 (episode 3) that directly state who they are thankful for, as seen below.

EP 1 #14 "...Thank you, you're doing the best work. I'm excited to see what you put out next. Alright, bye."

EP 3 #2 "...I just wanna tell you that I've been watching your YouTube videos for a very long time, and I love your work, and I love what you're doing, and you're helping a lot of people. More than you know...."

The above secrets and subsequent thank you's suggest that the storytellers are thanking Thoraya for creating the project and that the project performs a sort of cultural "work." Not only that it performs a kind of cultural work, but this work *helps people* in some way. This could be because the *Hey Stranger* project generates a mode of emotional expression that would otherwise be unavailable to many. I suggest two possible explanations for these types of thank you's: (a) the public nature of people's disclosures may bring a sense of recognition and authorization to their feelings. And the anonymous nature of people's disclosures may bring people peace of mind knowing that they can continue to live on with their lives, secrets intact, receiving the benefits of confession, without the fallout of going public with their secret to the people in their lives. This is not the only type of "thank you" present in the secrets, however. In the example below, we find additional reasons *why* people may be thankful for this project.

EP 3 #11 Hi Thoraya, um, this is my secret. Um, my whole life, I've just been lost..., and I don't have a platform to speak on... And I'm just numb to everything. And I guess this is the only platform I can really speak on, and I appreciate, what you do, so, thank you.

Here, caller #11 (episode 3) directly thanks Thoraya not because veiled disclosure on platforms like this provides risk-free opportunities for emotional expression but because they provide a platform. This finding brings us back to the basics—indeed, people seek out

environments where they can engage in emotionally authentic expression with little to no perceived social risk, but people also (and more fundamentally) seek out environments where they can *express themselves, period*.

Lastly, there is one storyteller from my sample whose entire motivation for calling was not to leave a secret but to explicitly thank Thoraya for this project, to state how it impacted her, and to communicate to the other storytellers apart of the project that they have been heard, and that she hopes they overcome the things they are privately struggling with.

EP 2 #11 Hi Thoraya, this is not a secret that I wanna share; I simply wanna say thank you. Just recently, I was scrolling and ran across your Instagram post. I wanna say thank you for what you are doing. I'm not a doctor, I'm not a therapist, but in my heart, as I heard those people speak, what came to me is that sometimes, when you release a secret out verbally, it helps. So it's really powerful, what you are doing in my eyes, and so I simply wanna say thank you, thank you, thank you so much, and thank you for your detailed message in terms of the legalities in terms of what everything that you are doing. I accept everything you say. That's why I've chosen to leave a message. So, on behalf of the world and those who are calling, I really hope they overcome their difficulties and their inner demons, if you will, and become absolutely happy, and I say thank you, thank you, thank you.

While the data and method for this paper cannot attest to questions about motivation or how these secrets are perceived by their audience, the above caller illustrates at least one audience member's perceptions of the project. This message shows just how powerful secrets can be when they are collected, remediated, and stitched together. The above message also indicates that releasing a secret out verbally is inherently good and can provide benefits to the secret teller.

The narratives identified in the secrets suggest broader implications for crowdsourced confessionals as a whole and support the claims that digital storytelling holds within it the ability to empower voices of individuals and groups (also personal experiences) that have been traditionally silenced or ignored by mainstream culture. The themes that emerged around the

nature of secrets open up possibilities of examining the influence that confession can have on different autobiographical/personal narrativizing practices. When we pull Foucault's knowledge/power form of confession into view, we can see how practices of confession have undergone a sort of decentralization in the crowdsourced confessional model. Instead of individuals confessing to an authority figure which had the power to 'heal' them in some way by hearing their truth and constituting it as the production of truth, individuals can now confess anonymously to a mass-mediated audience, and the secrets shared to these crowdsourced confessionals contribute to sociological understandings of both secrets and of confessing. However, one of the findings in this chapter demonstrates that callers utilize their preexisting understandings of confession and address their secrets specifically to the creator of the project, Thoraya.

Additionally, this chapter has discussed the various dimensions of secrets, including how they overlap and intertwine, contributing to the complexity of attempting to categorize secrets as qualitative data. For example, secrets can be things thought, felt, or done to, by, and about the storyteller, yet many secrets include some combination of thoughts, feelings, and actions. Another key finding discovered in this chapter shows that secrets are often rooted in the storyteller's comparison between their own life and "the good life," or a life that aligns with normative concepts and dominant standards of achievement, conduct, intimacy, and selfhood. It became clear in the data that despite people's conceptualizing of their inability to attain or sustain normative concepts in their lives as individual failures as opposed to social issues, there was an abundance of hope and words of encouragement embedded in people's disclosures. This temporal orientation toward the future and indication that secrets have the power to kill us by the inclusion of the National Crisis Line in the project all contribute to the construction of Hey

Stranger as a platform that warrants gratitude from its participants and that it is inherently "good" to release one's secrets.

CHAPTER FIVE: STITCHING IT TOGETHER

The present research study on *Hey Stranger* revealed a variety of findings I divided into two chapters, representing two separate theme groups: what we learn about emotions from this data and what we learn about secrets. On the topic of emotions, this research study finds that emotional meaning is reformulated over time and that ideals of authenticity quickly become an essential role in a storyteller's identification of the symbolic value and moral evaluations of their thoughts, feelings, actions, and how these relate to constructions of identity.

When focusing on the topic of secrets, this study finds that the core characteristic of a secret is that it reveals something about the teller. These secrets can be thought, felt, done (by, to, and about the storyteller), or any combination thereof. Their tellers also describe secrets and often are directed towards a particular individual. Many of the secrets shared on the *Hey Stranger* project feature the storyteller's comparison of their own life to "the good life" or the normative ideologies and dominant ways of being that "the good life" upholds. Despite these comparisons and self-evaluated "failures" to attain and sustain "the good life," the secrets have a particular temporal orientation toward the future, which centers sentiments of hope and resilience. Lastly, this study finds that the crowdsourced confessional model champions the idea that releasing one's secrets is inherently "good," and the opportunity to do so warrants feelings and expressions of gratitude. These findings, both on the topic of emotions and the topic of secrets, are significantly intertwined with each storyteller's ideas about how the world should

work, which feelings are acceptable to share in public versus which ones to keep secret, and what a good life “ought-to” look and *feel* like.

The findings from this project clearly illustrate how much there is to learn about crowdsourced confessional projects in the contemporary media moment. These projects, which can exist in various mediums, across various platforms, and have different focuses, provide unique insights into the sociology of emotion specifically. This research project opens crowdsourced confessional media as a new research agenda for the sociology of emotions. Because crowdsourced confessionalism is a relatively new practice and requires multidisciplinary theoretical and methodological considerations, the gap in this research has only just begun to be filled. Additionally, the present study highlights how three social science/humanities areas that have been historically dominated by research on their *individual* components (emotion, confession, personal narrative, and autobiography) can be analyzed and understood for their *social* components.

As the opportunities for narrative formats continue to expand (Barber 2016), emotional, non-linear, and multidimensional narrative formats should be considered for their ability to create collaborative stories, accessible pathways for communication, and as sources for meaning-making. The findings from this project advance scholarly discussions about the power of personal narrative by directing them toward a particular mode or type of personal narrative, that of confessions and secrets. This thesis supports Poletti’s (2020) argument for a fundamental reconsideration of autobiography as life stories that are not only written but also portrayed and recorded. There are many ways of knowing about a life, as well as the emotions and moral evaluations a person has *about* their life. The present research demonstrates that publicly shared, anonymous secrets are indeed an additional way of learning about these things.

What We Learn About the Construction of Emotions and Secrets in *Hey Stranger*

An Overall Character of Complexity

Across both chapters, there was an overall character of complexity. The complexity that runs throughout the individual experience and interpretation of emotions within secrets defies traditional categorization techniques. The complex and co-occurring nature of emotion poses two significant insights: first, it reveals something about the reported experience of emotion: that lived emotions are complex and co-occurring, and second, it illuminates the problems in social research methodologies. There are entire books on fear, anger, sympathy, love, yet few which center the multitude of emotions that function together to produce a feeling experience. Additionally, when emotions are melted together in narrative analysis or particular emotions in a story given analytical priority, the complexity and nuance of the story may be lost altogether.

Although academic observers typically examine one emotion at a time, emotions often are reported as experienced in complex constellations. The stories that make up this project's data are in the form of autobiographical fragments, intentionally brief due to the time limits of three minutes. They also have been evaluated as “secrets” by the individuals who possess and share them. Even in the short time frame that callers have to tell their story, multiple emotions are present not only in the content of the story but in the storyteller’s experience of telling the story. Kusenbach and Loseke suggest that certain complex emotions often get unnoticed because they may not be “explicitly managed in daily life” (2013: 34). The complexity throughout the data builds on this concept by finding that these complex emotions may indeed be managed in everyday life but done so *in secret*.

Rendering the Invisible Visible

Hey Stranger contains multiple reflections of emotion codes that encourage audience members to feel in particular ways about confession and about strangers. Confessions, when standing alone, do not provide the same effect as when they are stitched together to create a larger project by a confessional entrepreneur who remediates their autobiographical fragments. Crowdsourced confessionals are in some ways cultural forms that have yet to be fully articulated, which may explain why they have received so little scholarly attention. This new cultural form creates a structure of feeling around the idea that “we all have secrets.” When social boundaries are washed away, and you are left with a cacophony of anonymous voices sharing a story that reveals something about themselves, a structure of feeling is created, one that enforces the commonalities between people as opposed to their differences. Certainly, the secrets shared on *Hey Stranger* range from deep, dark, and heavy to surface level, light, and fun—it is not the content or the quality (however one defines “quality”) of a secret, but rather the central notion that all humans have something to say that reveals something about them, and that when they are stitched together a powerful feeling of empathy emerges. As if to confirm the notion that “yes, I am a part of something bigger in life, something undeniably *human*.” There were, however, still many feeling rules present in these narratives.

Hochschild points to popular uses of language about emotion to support the concept of feeling rules, arguing that we often talk about our emotions and feelings in terms of “rights” and “duties” as “having the right to feel angry at someone,” or “you should feel more grateful” (1979: 564). There was an abundant presence of feeling rules (or rather, perceived feeling rules) in the secrets. For example, in episode 3, caller four states: “you should not be ashamed for anything terrible that ever happens to you.”

Hey Stranger and crowdsourced confessionals more broadly also perpetuate an “emotional mode of reflexivity,” or “a way of attending to one’s psyche and interpreting the self and others by focusing on moods and feelings, attitudes towards emotions and emotional dispositions, their causes, and effects” (Shachak 2017: 159-160). By situating *Hey Stranger* as operating with a specific emotional mode, we can begin to make sense of each secret as a part of a collective, a whole that prioritizes and asks for each of its pieces to engage in emotional reflection. However, it has been argued that “we lack both a vocabulary for and practice in conversing about emotions” (Clark 1997: 30), meaning that this reflection may become difficult once one needs to articulate those reflections to the outside world.

Talking about emotions disclosing intimately personal narratives are not only difficult because we lack both vocabulary and practice in doing so, but because sharing one’s emotions involves some level of social risk. Due to the personal risks involved, many people’s stories are left out of human history. These risks could manifest as a lost relationship, a lost job, a lost sense of self, and more. The cultural ideals of authenticity may have us believe that people look inward, deep down, to decide how to experience, express, and understand their emotions. However, in reality, when deciding how to experience, express, and understand their emotions, “people look outside themselves, to the symbolic resources of the public sphere” (West 2017:124).

Certain narratives of emotion, or “emotives” (Gould 2009), are elevated to a status as “meaningful” because they are repeatedly named and experienced, and others remain obscure because they fail to be brought into language, into our stories. In this way, crowdsourced confessionals like *Hey Stranger* help bring new narratives of emotion into the public sphere, adding to people’s “cultural tool-kits” (Swidler 1986), which help them make sense of their

lives and of others. Additionally, scholars Kusenbach and Loseke (2013) suggest that emotion codes help people feel and make sense of their feelings in the same way grammar and words help people communicate. In other words, without emotion codes, it is likely that people would not know how to feel (Kusenbach and Loseke 2013). From this perspective, crowdsourced confessionals make emotion codes that otherwise would not exist in the public sphere to help people make sense of the experiences, feelings, and beliefs they evaluate as “private.” The more widely shared, the more emotion codes are added to this “cultural tool-kit” (Swidler 1986) and the increased production of truth about life itself and about lived emotional experience.

These projects present rich, multidimensional data, including visual, auditory, and textual representations of people’s innermost thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. They expand the narrative blueprints for cognitive and emotional evaluations of self and others. For them to be overlooked is a disservice to the possibilities of sociology. Crowdsourced confessional projects have many limitations, as we have established, but they make visible much of the invisible nuances of human experience. The simple fact that an individual evaluates their story as a “secret” is a finding in itself, for it reflects social systems of meaning that suggest the story is meant to be kept private. Crowdsourced confessionalism offers sociologists various ways to understand other people’s experiences through their own unique storytelling in a way that may not be observable or even revealed in other forms of qualitative research such as interviewing or participant observation for those still pose varying levels of social risk.

Secret Sharing and the Creation of a Common Identity

Meyrowitz (1997) argues that an increase in (and diversification of) new communication technologies have created not only an expansion of narrative formats but also the ability to shift

the boundaries between “them” and “us.” He states that this shift alters the balance between strangers and familiars, in addition to what kinds of interactions, what types of stories feel strange, and which feel familiar. *Hey Stranger*, however, can be seen as contributing to an effort of making the strange feel familiar but does less to make the familiar feel strange.

The *Hey Stranger* project appears to create a blurring of social boundaries and highlight the commonalities between people. Even though the secrets that make up the episodes are all very unique to one another and speak to the diversity and complexity of human experience when situated together to create a whole finished product, they highlight the major unifying force: we all have secrets. As mentioned earlier in this analysis, it is the possession of a secret and one’s willingness to share it and hear others that counts. In effect, this, combined with the project’s anonymity, blurs social boundaries that traditionally divide human beings in society. How does this boundary-blurring occur? How can this project attract and engage such a diverse audience? Research in this realm of inquiry points to three possible explanations.

The first is the employment of multifaceted emotion codes. In her research on emotion discourse and presidential speeches, Loseke (2009) argues that one way to successfully engage a large and heterogeneous group of citizens is to “cast a wide net” of emotion codes that are numerous and appeal to many different emotions. If all goes according to plan, it will increase the likelihood that the messaging will have resonance among the audience members, even if it is for different reasons. People will all make sense of the message by using the emotional repertoires available to them. The second is universal specificity. This term, introduced by West (2008), is a guiding term in the greeting card industry. It encourages the use of language that has applicability to all different kinds of people at all kinds of life stages, yet has a profound personal and emotional resonance among each individual person, such as the sentiment of “feeling alone”

or “keeping a secret,” which were abundant in the data. And finally, the third is an ambiance of homogeneity and togetherness. Studies have demonstrated that when generating an inclusive atmosphere with little to no social boundaries, an ambiance of homogeneity and togetherness emerges. Since socioeconomic competition, status, and roles are core causes of stress (Pearlin 1989), all-inclusive environments that blur the socioeconomic distinctions between people ideally should remove stress and produce relaxation (Benger-Alaluf 2017), such as anonymous media environments.

In a way, *Hey Stranger* creates an atmosphere of togetherness by centering their audience’s common identity, that of “human” and “secret keeper.” By centering the humanness, the project blurs the sympathy margins (Clark 1997) of the players along with their socioeconomic status, making it easier for people to build social bridges between each other through the process of empathizing, sympathizing, and using the sociological imagination.

What We Learn About Sharing Secrets in a Crowdsourced Confessional

Hey Stranger can serve as an example of what some media scholars have characterized as the “rise of participation and free labor in networked culture” (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). Others suggest that this networked culture helped create models of collective autobiography that exist across multiple mediums and are driven by emotion (Poletti 2020). Crowdsourced confessionals would not be able to exist without the participatory culture they survive and thrive in. Confessing one’s secrets in an anonymous, collective fashion protects storytellers from the social risks traditionally associated with sharing a secret. Not only are participants protected

from the possible fallout of disclosure, but their secrets get to remain secrets in their everyday lives. People utilize their pre-existing understandings of confession to participate in the project and ultimately alter the role that confession plays in society as a result of their participation.

The Mode and the Matter, Matter

There is a widely cited and classic communication saying, “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 1964). In part, this saying serves as a caution to interpreters of media—that the *content* of a medium (in this case, secrets) can blind us to the *character* of the medium (in this case, the technologies used to create the message: mobile smartphones, which in them hold capacity for calling and audio recording, and the technologies used to circulate the message: social media sites such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter and streaming services such as Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify and Audible. The subtle, often unnoticed changes in the ways new mediums become entangled in the everyday happenings of people’s lives must be accounted for, especially in research so heavily influenced by the ebbs and flows of contemporary media practices.

McLuhan (1964) stresses how the problem is not only that the content of a medium too frequently distracts people from the character of the medium but also that the character of a medium directly influences the content of the media. Additionally, Katherine Hayles (2004) argues that any attention to the process of mediation entails attention to materiality and attention to matter. Suppose confessional works are always on the move, as Grobe (2017) suggests, sparking from one medium to the next. In that case, this project requires special consideration for the materiality of the *Hey Stranger* project, for it has heavily influenced the secrets and stories that were generated by it. Essentially, throughout the analysis, it became my goal to not

focus too narrowly on the content of the secrets but also to consider the mediums they were created with, the mediums they are circulated on, and the material limits and possibilities of crowdsourced confession (both physical and symbolic) that work together to generate the *Hey Stranger* project as it exists in present time.

This position that materiality has the power to shape the kinds of narratives called into the project is enforced further by Poletti's (2020) claim that "to ignore media materialities in the process of autobiography is to underestimate the role of media forms in shaping the veracity of the claims that underpin autobiography as a cultural and social practice that purports to speak a truth about lived experience." (Poletti 2020: 6) The particular mode and matter associated with this confessional project influence quite a bit, including what types of stories people are inclined to call in and tell, how those stories are told, and how they may be perceived. One element to be considered is the briefness of each secret. Callers are told they have a maximum of three minutes to leave their secret, which creates a material and symbolic boundary around what types of stories contribute to the project. By establishing this boundary, *Hey Stranger* becomes a library of sorts, full of autobiographical fragments, and pushes back against ways of knowing about life narratives that privilege depth, stability, completeness, and "the singular voice of autobiography" (Poletti 2020: 93).

Additionally, the mattering of the oral medium in this project is both physical and symbolic. The physical presence of a voice attached to a body (somewhere out there) allows the listener to be co-present with the story being told. The symbolic value of orality verifies the authenticity of the secret, further signaling to the listener that the secrets are indeed truthful accounts. The orality of each secret helps establish their authenticity as individual autobiographical fragments by presenting physical traces (sounds, cries, cadence, etc.) of their

authors. This is an interesting finding because one would assume that the anonymity of the storyteller may present barriers to the audience acknowledging the stories told as genuine, as anonymity has shown to do within traditional models of autobiography (Poletti 2020). However, the anonymity of the storytellers in this context (crowdsourced confessionals) may actually help audiences identify their stories as genuine rather than hurt it. The various digital materialities of this project help ensure anonymity for the storytellers (for example, the requirement of dialing *67 to have your secret played) while also allowing their own voice to tell the story with the intimacy of the orality. This is a delicate balance of both anonymity and intimacy that the medium and the matter help reach.

Future Directions

While this project is valuable standing on its own, it is my hope that these findings will lead to future research that begins to fill the existing gaps in knowledge of crowdsourced confession projects. There is much that the method of document analysis cannot answer. The data in this project and my methodological choices contribute to understanding the secret stories people tell and the kinds of assumptions about the world these tellings make visible.

Some of the secrets shared in the *Hey Stranger* project are humorous, some are hopeful, some are sad. *Why* do people turn themselves inside out and display their most petty, humiliating, sincere, depressing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors on display? *Why* are audience consumers so drawn to these projects? *How* do these projects transform or reaffirm people's understandings of various topics and emotions? *How* do these projects impact their audience consumers? *What* conditions are necessary for these projects to sustain themselves over long periods of time and through new technological developments? These questions of motivation,

audience interpretation, and audience impact are all directions for future research in this realm of inquiry. In addition to questions about why people contribute to crowdsourced confessionals and how they impact their audiences, there exist remaining questions about how and who creates and sustains these projects the role of the confessional entrepreneur.

It is critical that future research in this area consider the multiple layers involved in the creating and sustaining of crowdsourced confessional projects. Confessional projects of this sort exist in a variety of media modes and forms (many of them exist in multiple modes and forms of media), such as photographs, voice recordings, video, postcards, digital art, independent print publication. In this way, more must be learned about the materiality, the physical and symbolic impacts of different mediums on the secrets submitted, and the audiences they reach. This is especially true because different mediums have different abilities and purposes for fostering a participatory culture.

Final Thoughts

This project captures the pitfalls and the triumphs of the human heart. Crowdsourced confessionals are alike in this way. Whether *Hey Stranger* provides the place you turn to disclose your secrets, an intriguing source of entertainment, a platform to speak on, or reassurance that you are not alone, one thing is certain: crowdsourced confessionals can no longer be overlooked in sociological research. Even though these projects effectively blur social boundaries due to their anonymous environment and centering of commonalities, when examining crowdsourced confessionals, we must never lose sight of “how (emotions) are woven into the political and economic fabric, and thus how emotions are used to politically mobilize gender, sexuality, race, and class” (Bargetz 2015: 584).

The childhood saying “secrets, secrets are no fun, unless you share with everyone” may hold some significant truth in the contemporary media moment. This is because *Hey Stranger* is held together by the sentiment that “we all have secrets” and that these secrets, no matter how diverse or unique, when stitched together side by side, create a new story that highlights the commonalities between them: they all are secrets that reveal something about their teller. This is a sentiment present in the larger cultural shift toward confessionalism (Grobe 2017).

Critics of this shift, such as Christopher Lasch (1979), warned that this behavior would cause Americans to assent into a “culture of narcissism” in which, driven by their desire to *know* each other, they had settled for “mere self-disclosure.” Crowdsourced confessionals, however, which often takes a more conversational approach to the self-storying of anonymous strangers, challenge this critique. Often by skillfully intertwining the social to the personal, encouraging the collaborative co-creation of stories, combined with the intimacy of orality that this medium affords (Douglas 1999), YouTube may be a medium that challenges or circumvents this criticism of contemporary confessional content. Regardless of what medium(s) confessional works thrive in, Poletti (2020) urges us to recognize the growing diversity of new media environments and how this creates unprecedented options for confessional autobiographical stories. Christopher Grobe provides a description of confessionalism that is aligned with “a breakdown in boundaries: between voluntary and involuntary acts, between objective and subjective states, between private experience and public life” (Grobe 2017: 20).

Confessionalism makes up a significant portion of postmodern, participatory media culture, this portion being even larger when looking specifically at the medium of new media broadcasting.

Human beings spend a great deal of energy hiding and coping with their stigmatized (or assumed to be stigmatized) feelings. People are “constantly creating strategies to avoid incurring

the antagonistic, reductive, or judgmental gaze of the other” (Dolezal, 2015:46). One of these strategies is concealment, hiding away the socially or culturally ‘undesirable’ or ‘deviant’ aspects of ourselves and guarding the gates daily. Another way of coping is to challenge the beliefs and claims of undesirableness altogether. This strategy opens those gates and encourages our deepest feelings and secrets to crawl out. Whether the stories people tell about personal parts of their lives can be seen as a deliberate attempt to redefine their experiences and emotions in more positive terms (for themselves or others) may not be the necessitating condition for their impact. The sheer resonance of a confessional emotion narrative may be enough to effectively reconstruct cultural norms to align with the experiences and values of the public.

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