# HOW DO SEXUAL VIOLENCE SURVIVORS WHO MUST SHARE COMMON SOCIAL SPACES AND MUTUAL SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR PERPETRATORS REPRESENT THEIR NAVIGATION OF A SECONDARY VICTIMSATION?

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## ***Dedication***

This dissertation is dedicated to myself, my lovely interview participants, and to all the victims of sexual violence at the hands of somebody they know – somebody they need to share spaces with, somebody they risk encounters with daily. Though we are often invalidated, I want this dissertation to serve as a reminder to you. Your experience is valid. Your experience is real. You are not alone. We are in this together. I wish you the utmost love and kindness on your healing journey. Remember: it is not linear. It is fluid. Heal on your timeline. Your experience is your own. Your healing is your own. Your timeline is your own.

*So, should I consider myself*

*one of the* ***lucky*** *ones?*

*For he may have taken my body,*

*but not my* life*?*

*But what about the* ***wounds****,*

*both figurative and* literal*?*

*And the* ***scars***

*that are healing* still*?*

\- Jahaan Israel

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***Abstract***

This research explores the way sexual violence survivors navigate their experiences of secondary victimisation when they have to share social spaces with their perpetrator(s). Existing literature on secondary victimisation primarily focuses on court processes and psychological impacts, highlighting the ways survivors of sexual violence face re-traumatisation in institutional settings. However, there remains limited research on the daily social realities of survivors, specifically their interactions and shared environments with perpetrators, outside of familial contexts. This dissertation addresses this gap by exploring how survivors of sexual violence experience and make sense of these social dynamics, particularly within the context of secondary victimisation. Using qualitative methods, data were collected through in-depth interviews with seven participants who shared their lived experiences.

Key findings include the significant impact re-encountering perpetrators has on the emotional wellbeing of victims, social relationships, and how they perform academically; the non-linear nature of the 'aftermath'; and the manner in which victims find solidarity in survivors that have been through something similar. My interviewees shed light on the way e-spaces can be platforms of empowerment (by giving survivors the chance to find community and a place for them to practice their activism) and/or secondary traumatisation (as there is potential for them to be exposed to perpetrators).

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the lived realities of survivors, emphasising the urgent need for supportive interventions that account for the ongoing risks of shared social spaces.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Violence against women remains pervasive in South Africa, despite the transition to democracy (Mgoqi-Mbalo, Zhang & Ntuli, 2017: 301; van der Merwe, 2013: 66). Sexual violence, as a critical aspect of this broader epidemic, is a growing crisis. Alarming statistics underscore the gravity of the situation: nearly 53 500 South Africans reported being victims of sexual violence (Statista, n.d.). This is worsened by the estimate that "more than 95% of sexual offences are not reported" (Women For Change, n.d.).

The World Health Organization (WHO) has classified sexual violence against women as a global health crisis (WHO, 2013)【Wyatt et al., 2017: 310】. South Africa is not exempt from this crisis, ranking among the countries with the highest rates of sexual violence worldwide (Naidoo, 2013). As Wyatt et al. (2017) emphasise, 'the rate of rape in South Africa continues to be one of the highest in the world,' underscoring the need for more research. Sexual violence against women is, indeed, a "global health crisis, with alarmingly high rates in South Africa" (Wyatt et al., 2017: 309).

Although most perpetrators are known (Naidoo, 2013), little research exists on how survivors navigate these relationships, particularly regarding how such encounters may constitute a form of secondary victimisation. Secondary victimisation has been widely studied in terms of what happens to a survivor who goes through a criminal justice system as a "witness," and the impact of the assault itself has been the focus of a very wide-ranging psychological, sociological and feminist literature. "There is a large body of literature which suggests that the experience of laying a charge, making a statement and then going through the legal process is a second ordeal, often described as 'secondary victimisation' for rape survivors" (Artz & Smythe, 2008: 129). Despite this – experiences of being forced to re-encounter assailants within social and digital spaces, however, are under-researched: Wyatt et al. (2017) observe, "we know very little about the circumstances and the aftermath of these experiences". Existing literature addresses re-encounters in courts, workplaces, or families; this study focuses on social – especially digital – spaces: how are these survivors compelled to encounter perpetrators? How do they respond, and what are the implications for their well-being and relationships? How does a re-encounter with a perpetrator in a social or social media space intersect, for them, with the impact of the original assault? What do such encounters reveal about the meaning of 'secondary victimisation'?

The research is grounded in a conceptual framework informed by theorizations of rape culture in South Africa. Rape culture, as defined by Susan Brownmiller as far back as 1975, describes a societal context where “male sexual violence is normalized and victims are consequently blamed for their own assault” (Orth, Van Wyk & Andipatin, 2020: 192). More contemporary work, located in the same context as my study acutely inspects the omnipresent nature of rape culture in South Africa, challenging the portrayal that frames the prevalence of rape as a post-apartheid problem. It creates historical connections to colonialism, slavery, and apartheid, showcasing the role they played in making certain people be seen as "unrapable." Gqola makes use of "unrapable" when speaking about people that were viewed as people that men are allowed to rape, as a result of their dehumanisation – historically, these women were Black (2015:4–5). Through addressing this myth, Gqola aligns with her argument that rape is “not a moment but a language” (2015:22), a concept she uses to explore how it shapes societal perceptions and public imagination. I use ‘survivor’ and ‘victim’ interchangeably, acknowledging the complexity and validity of both terms.

**Research Questions**

*This study asks:*

**How do sexual violence survivors who must share common social spaces and mutual social relationships with their perpetrators represent their navigation of secondary victimisation?**

*This is explored through three sub-questions:*

**A. How do survivors describe their encounters with perpetrators in shared social environments?**

**B. How do these encounters impact the survivor's social relationships and emotional well-being?**

**C. How do survivors describe the aftermath of their assaults and the meaning-making processes that emerge from ongoing contact with perpetrators?**

A long-rooted dominant narrative in feminist research positions focus on gender-based violence as being primarily for, by, and about women often contrasting mainstream and feminist scholarship (Stacey, 1988: 21). More contemporary, and African-centred, work insists on the de-homogenization of “women,” and includes issues of context, race, class and history, in understanding how and where survivorship after sexual violence is understood.

This dissertation is organized into six chapters, each contributing to the overarching aim of understanding how survivors of sexual violence navigate shared spaces with their perpetrators.

Chapter 2 is a *Literature Review* that critically examines two theoretical areas to build the conceptual framework for this dissertation. The first area explores the theorisation of rape culture, positioning sexual violence as an act of control and power – rather than as an individual crime of lust, passion, or depravity. This section draws on Brownmiller (1975) and other feminist work framing rape as a patriarchal tool. This discussion expands to include intersectional commentary that underscores the role of class, race, and sexuality in the moulding of rape culture, with notable contributions from scholars such as Gqola (2015), who conceptualizes rape as a "language" immersed in South Africa's historical and structural inequalities.

It then tackles the way rape myths influence rape culture. It criticises socially constructed beliefs that conceal systemic oppression by moving the blame to the victim, highlighting the need to challenge these myths in understanding sexual violence. This section includes concepts from feminist scholarship on the "female fear factory," toxic masculinity, and the intersectional aspects of oppression that make certain groups more vulnerable to sexual violence, such as South African lesbians facing "corrective rape."

The second section of Chapter 2 explores scholarship on the relationships between survivors of sexual violence and their perpetrators, highlighting the prevalence and ramifications of non-stranger sexual violence. This section criticises the widespread myth that the majority of survivors have been victim to strangers, demonstrating that most sexual violence survivors know their perpetrators. Tuerkheimer's (2015) studies underscore the historical invisibility and societal lack of conviction when it comes to non-stranger sexual assault, worsened by ingrained rape myths and the way society blames the victim.

The scholarship reviewed in this section examines the way survivors navigate shared spaces with perpetrators, including social and digital environments. Moor and Anderson (2019) and Henry and Powell (2018) underscore the mental impact of these encounters, including isolating themselves and becoming hypervigilant. Research on institutional responses, such as that by O'Neil and Morgan's (2021) scholarship on the responses of institutions underscores the lack of policies surrounding these dynamics, highlighting the need for systemic change to support survivors.

The third subsection of this chapter tackles the way rape culture is shown in certain spaces,

impacting the healing journey of survivors. Omar (2019) and Zapp et al. (2021) emphasise the high rate of sexual violence on South African campuses and the failure of universities to provide sufficient support to survivors. Thornhill and Thornhill (1990) explore the relational impacts of sharing social circles with perpetrators. This section tackles how e-spaces makes survivors' experiences more complex, drawing on Gunderson and Zaleski (2021) and Vitis and Gilmour (2017) to examine the intersection of trauma and online harassment. These studies underscore the unique struggles survivors face in digital spaces, such as encountering perpetrators through public discourse or mutual connections.

This section underscores the lack of frameworks addressing the ongoing impact of survivors sharing social and digital spaces with perpetrators. It highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of secondary victimisation, beyond the understandings generated by experiences of being a witness in a criminal case, that considers the complicated realities of survivors' ongoing lives.

In Chapter 3, *Research Methodology*, I outline the methodological framework and research process used in this dissertation. The chapter starts with contextualising the study within feminist research debates, underscoring the significance of methodologies that challenge exploitative and hierarchical research dynamics. Feminist approaches prioritize participants lived experiences, attempting to produce a research process characterised by reflexivity, and reciprocity (Stacey, 1988). This chapter also unpacks the ethics of researching with survivors.

This dissertation made use of qualitative research methods. Seven participants were interviewed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews, intended to explore their lived experiences in social and e-spaces that they share with perpetrators.

Positionality is central to the methodology, as my identity as a survivor of sexual violence and lower-class queer woman of colour informs my approach to the research. Whilst I may be in a position of power with my status as a researcher, my own survivorship has also rendered me with vulnerabilities in this research process. Many of my participants asked questions that resulted in me opening up about my own experiences, which was triggering at times – leaving me feeling as if I was "losing" power. However, ultimately, I believe it was a point that allowed for more open and honest interviews. Reflexivity was practised throughout the research process, establishing an awareness of possible biases and power dynamics.

Ethical considerations are discussed, making the challenges of working with vulnerable populations, such as survivors of sexual violence, the focal point. Issues of consent, confidentiality, and the emotional safety of participants were prioritized. The ethical complexity of discussing participants' initial encounters with perpetrators as a predecessor to discussing re-encounters that may have followed is also addressed.

The methods section details the process of finding my interviewees, participant demographics, and the design of the interviews. Limitations of the study are acknowledged, especially the small sample size. The study is situated as an introductory exploration into a relatively under-researched area, adding to the broader understanding of a secondary victimisation that is outside the legal framework.

This chapter links to the scholarship looked at in Chapter 2 by grounding the theoretical insights in a strong methodological approach, ensuring that the findings presented in the following chapter are relevant to the context, whilst still being meaningful. It creates the foundation for analysing survivors' representations of their lived experiences in relation to existing feminist theories on sexual violence.

In Chapter 4, *Findings*, themes from the interviews were identified as most relevant to my research focus. These include the struggles with disclosure, complex ties to perpetrators, the impact of re-encounters with perpetrators in social and social media spaces on participants' sense of self, and the solidarity they find with others.

In Chapter 5, *Discussion*, the findings and literature reviewed in Chapter 2 – as well as the theoretical framework, are brought into dialogue. It re-theorises secondary victimisation, as a term arising from research on survivors' experiences in criminal cases, underscoring how the 'aftermath' of sexual violence is embedded in the initial violence experienced and further impacted by continuous encounters with their perpetrators – challenging the idea of the 'aftermath' being seen as linear, and rather presenting it as a non-linear, continuous process shaped by environmental, institutional societal, and cultural, contexts. The discussion highlights how secondary victimisation goes beyond the legal understanding of the term. By conceptualising disclosure as a therapeutic act, as well as a form of resistance – this section deepens the understanding of the way survivors reclaim agency in a society that wants them to keep quiet.
Chapter 6, *Conclusion*, collates the study's key contributions, emphasising that the aftermath of sexual violence is ongoing when the perpetrator is known. It examines the theoretical, practical, and

methodological ramifications of the research, seeks institutional reforms to better support survivors, and points out directions for potential studies in the future.

The combination of these chapters provides a comprehensive and cohesive exploration of the way survivors navigate the complicated nature of sharing spaces with their perpetrators, contributing to a deeper understanding of sexual violence and its aftermath.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing this review was challenging yet enriching. While I focused on South African research to ensure contextual relevance, gaps in scholarship required me to incorporate Western studies to bridge key conceptual spaces. By synthesizing insights from both global and South African sources, I aim to root my work more deeply in the South African context while engaging with broader theoretical frameworks.

This literature review begins by examining the theorization of rape culture, which forms the basis of my conceptual framework. It then delves into research on the relationships between survivors and perpetrators. Finally, it explores the experiences of survivors who know their perpetrators – focusing on survivors who share academic spaces, social circles, and digital spaces with their attackers.

### 1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Sexual violence was once considered an act of sex, as opposed to an act of violence (McPhail, 2016: 315). However, shifts in thinking have occurred as feminist theory on sexual violence developed further and rape now functions as a means of reinforcing gender norms and upholding the position of power that men have in society (McPhail, 2016: 315). *Against our will*, Brownmiller's 1975 book, was "considered a turning point in academic history as it was one of the first books that described rape as a political and social problem, rather than an individual crime of passion" (Orth, Van Wyk & Andipatin, 2020: 193). This shift in thinking is an improvement from Sigmund Freud and Kraft-Ebing's understanding of rape as an "act of depravity" (Orth, Van Wyk & Andipatin, 2020: 193). Freud and Kraft-Ebing's conceptualisation of rape entirely ignores the oppressive and intersectional histories that shape rape culture. Brownmiller argues that rape is a tactic used to maintain patriarchal dominance by keeping women in a state of fear (Orth, Van Wyk & Andipatin, 2020: 193). Despite the fact that this argument has useful analytic power, it does not unpack the 'other' histories of oppression – through an intersectional lens – by choosing to only speak about the sexism of rape, and therefore the gendered oppressions.

Brownmiller, as far back as fifty years ago, argued that rape serves as a tactic used by men to instil fear and assert dominance over women within patriarchal structures (Orth, Van Wyk & Andipatin, 2020: 193). While this analysis introduced critical perspectives on the gendered nature of rape, it

falls short in addressing other intersecting forms of oppression, such as race, class, and migration status, which also shape experiences of sexual violence. Contemporary scholars like Gill and Harrison (2019) expand upon this by examining how intersecting identities complicate survivors' agency and access to support systems. Their work shows how marginalised women, especially refugees, face unique vulnerabilities that limit legal recourse and autonomy. This underscores the need to understand rape culture through multiple, overlapping oppressions, as feminist scholars such as Crenshaw (1989) emphasise, moving beyond solely gendered perspectives to a more nuanced, intersectional framework.

Pumla Dineo Gqola's 2015 book, *Rape*, conceptualises rape as a language, within South African culture – a framework I extend to all forms of sexual violence in this dissertation. Gqola theorises sexual violence as an act of violence within a widely accepted culture of violence perpetuated by toxic masculinities in post-apartheid South Africa (Gqola, 2015). She speaks of rape as a language and tries to make "sense of rape's hold on society and to interrogate the histories of rape in South Africa" (Gqola, 2015: 36). By theorising rape as a "language," Gqola does not mean it in a literal linguistic sense, but instead as a system of power, communication, and meaning. She proposes that rape, like language, consists of structure and repetition, and it brings across messages—regarding dominance, control, and the positioning of women's bodies in society. In this framework, rape becomes a method through which patriarchy communicates who is control and who is given the privilege to claim autonomy over their bodies, to access freedom and to take up space. This theorisation enables rape to be comprehended as part of a broader cultural discourse – a "grammar" of violence that is deeply ingrained in institutional behaviours, societal norms and public consciousness – instead of only being seen as isolated incidents. Theorising rape as a language allows us to foreground rape as a discourse so that we can "point to the invention of knowledge (through language) about rape" – furthermore, it considers "the statements, vocabulary, social, violent imagery and the language of truth used to talk about rape" (Kgalemang & Setume, 2016: 312). Theorising rape as a language better equips us to unpack rape myths.

I believe that this theorisation is deeply relevant within its South African context as it considers the colonial history of South Africa, as well as the history of Apartheid in the country, and Gqola shows how this impacts sexual violence and the perpetration of sexual violence by South Africans – in South Africa. Gqola seeks to destroy the idea that rape is problem that has come

about as a result of the 'new', post-Apartheid South Africa by acknowledging how its roots go back the "architecture of slave-ordered Cape Colony" and discussing how the history of rape is also "the history of slavery, colonialism and race science" (Gqola, 2015: 40). South Africa is a country that was founded on "trauma of slavery and sexual subjection" (Gqola, 2015: 42-43). As such, legacies like racism and rape culture are not simply something that the country can 'shake off'.

Furthermore, these legacies are reinforced by the 'female fear factory'. The female fear factory regulates women's movement, sexuality, and behaviour by reminding them their bodies are not entirely theirs (Gqola, 2015: 79). After *Rape*, Gqola published *Female Fear Factory* which discusses the way patriarchal societies make women scared to act freely and reinforce gender hierarchies. She argues that the "Female Fear Factory threatens women, mostly to remind us that nothing belongs to us – not even our bodies, neither in private nor public spaces" (Gqola, 2021: 79). This system operates by "relying on quick effective transfer of meaning," producing terror in women to regulate their movements and actions (Gqola, 2021: 80). Gqola highlights that "patriarchy does not respect national boundaries. It is unabashedly promiscuous in its influences and tethers" (Gqola, 2021: 102), highlighting the pervasive nature of these control mechanisms across different cultures and societies. It is "performed regularly in public spaces" and is "a factory that can also be called "the manufacture of female fear" as its function is to produce terror in women" – it works by "relying on quick effective transfer of meaning" (Kgalemang & Setume, 2016: 314). Survivors that navigate shared spaces with perpetrators may have an added element to 'fear'.

Gqola "critically enquires her society's relationship with rape and how deeply rape is embedded in the psyche of South Africans" (Kgalemang & Setume, 2016: 312). I agree with Gqola's theorization of rape as an act of power—it is not a moment, but a language (Gqola, 2015: 22). Theorising rape as a language allows us to foreground rape as a discourse so that we can "point to the invention of knowledge (through language) about rape" – furthermore, it considers "the statements, vocabulary, social, violent imagery and the language of truth used to talk about rape" (Kgalemang & Setume, 2016: 312). In this sense, the repetition of rape narratives – in daily life and in the media – normalises it as part of the national consciousness, speaking to the unspoken power dynamics that shape the daily experiences of women's lives. Theorising rape as a language better equips us to unpack rape myths.

Recent scholarship further supports Gqola's conceptualisation of rape as a “language” and a persistent societal issue rooted in South Africa's violent history. For instance, Rasool (2021) connects gender-based violence with structural violence, illustrating how economic, racial, and social inequalities uphold the prevalence of sexual violence and the “female fear factory” in South Africa, underscoring that these are not isolated phenomena but part of a broader systemic issue. Kessi and Boonzaier (2022) work explicitly within Black feminist approach, emphasising how post-apartheid gendered violence is further compounded by colonial legacies and racial inequalities, reinforcing Gqola’s perspective on the lasting impact of historical oppression.

Moolman (2020) explores the role of toxic masculinity as a sustaining force in rape culture, portraying it as deeply embedded in societal norms that dictate and uphold certain behaviours and expectations around male aggression and female submission. This aligns with Gqola’s argument about the pervasiveness of toxic masculinity and the way it communicates control and domination within South African society. Moolman’s work, like Gqola's, suggests that rape is not an isolated act, but a recurring pattern of aggression reinforced by societal norms that condone male dominance.

Digital feminist activism, explored by Krause and Van Zyl (2021), has created new avenues for challenging rape myths and raising awareness, providing survivors and allies with platforms to contest the entrenched narratives that often support rape culture. These online spaces echo Gqola's critique of rape myths, demonstrating how activism continues to deconstruct harmful stereotypes that persist within both public and academic discourse. Krause and Van Zyl’s research suggests that digital activism can amplify survivor narratives, helping to dismantle myths around “stranger danger” and highlight that most cases of sexual violence involve acquaintances, aligning with the broader effort to reveal and counteract the deeply embedded assumptions that sustain rape culture.

Additionally, Van Zyl and Uny (2022) discuss how narratives around gender-based violence are influenced by postcolonial legacies, challenging notions of victimhood and giving voice to survivors’ experiences within oppressive structures. This reframes sexual violence not just as a symptom of individual actions but as a reflection of societal frameworks that control and silence women. Together, these recent studies contribute to Gqola's framework, affirming that rape culture in South Africa is an enduring issue shaped by historical, structural, and intersectional factors, all of which require critical examination to effectively address and dismantle.

With the growth of digital feminist activism and social media movements, discussions surrounding rape culture have become more common in recent years – in both the academic and public sphere (Orth, Van Wyk & Andipatin, 2020: 192). Gqola has an entire chapter, chapter 7, in her book – *Rape* – that deconstructs myths surrounding rape. "Rape myths are socially constructed, fabricated beliefs, extensively and obstinately held about rape. Gqola asserts that rape myths exist in various forms. Rape myths often remain either unchallenged or defended" (Kgalemang & Setume, 2016: 314). Whilst they are frequently referred to as rape myths, they often apply to all forms of sexual violence. "Sexual abuse has always borne the stigma of scepticism, and the fallacies regarding rape mean it is frequently hidden or obscured" (Gastón-Lorente and Gómez-Baceiredo, 2022: 3). Rape myth acceptance (abbreviated as RMA) perpetuates rape culture. RMA is "strongly associated with hostile attitudes and behaviours toward women, thus supporting feminist premise that sexism perpetuates" (Suarez and Gadalla, 2010). Therefore, in order to address RMA (and subsequently rape as a whole) – we need to address sexism. "RMA was also found to be correlated with other "isms," such as racism, heterosexism, classism, and ageism" (Suarez and Gadalla, F2010). With that being said, one form of oppression that Suarez and Gadalla failed to mention is homophobia. This is a form of oppression embedded within South African context because of the high rates of "corrective rape". Corrective rape refers to the assault of lesbians by men attempting to 'cure' their homosexuality (Doan-Minh, 2019) It is a violent expression of homophobia, a way of punishing women for being gay – and thus, breaking the norm of what is expected of them. "This motive is usually made clear through verbal abuse during the rape, which focuses on "teaching a lesson" to the victim and "doing a favour" by showing her how to be a "real woman"" (Doan-Minh, 2019: 167). It is especially common in South African townships (Brown & Mayeza, 2025). This underscores rape's use as a tool to further oppress marginalised groups.

Rape myths extend to all forms of sexual violence, contributing to societal stigmas that obscure survivors' experiences (Gastón-Lorente & Gómez-Baceiredo, 2022: 3).

Kgalemang and Setume (2016: 314) speak about how women are taught "to not walk alone at night for fear of violent and rape attacks, and not to wear certain clothes since we risked being attacked or raped" – speaking to the daily reality of street harassment, "like catcalling". These things that women are taught all add to the way rape is seen as a string of unrelated, disconcerting atrocious events that children and women (occasionally men) fall prey to. This manner of thinking shifts the

blame from the actual perpetrators of the crime – and individuals that put forward ideologies that reinforce rape culture (by blaming victims, perpetuating rape myths, and/or excusing/justifying the actions of rapists) – to the victims of the crime.

The literature reviewed in the next theme seeks to disprove this myth and prove that – on the contrary – most rapes are committed by 'familiar' people and/or in familiar spaces. The following literature disputes the myth that stranger-perpetrated sexual violence is most common.

## 2. RESEARCH ON RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND PERPETRATORS

This research uses various terms under the umbrella of 'sexual violence,' with a focus on studies exploring 'rape' and applying them to the broader term. Tuerkheimer (2015: 2) highlights the increasing visibility of rape, particularly the "centrality of non-stranger rape", which is both the most common and historically the most hidden form of sexual violence. While non-stranger rape is discussed more today, it still faces greater doubt than stranger rape. Survivors of sexual violence by known perpetrators often experience similar scepticism.

As mentioned above, Gqola conceptualises rape as a weapon. There is a common belief that sexual violence can only be a weapon if the perpetrator and the victim fit a certain description. This ties into the myth that most sexual violence is committed by strangers. This is often perpetuated by the "most believable rape" story of a stranger that jumps out of the bushes and rapes you. Kgalemang and Setume (2016: 314) speak of the "hard truths" that chapter four of Gqola's *Rape* speaks to: "It brings to memory the lessons of safety we were taught in our formative years. One of the important truths was in learning that a man (**then especially a stranger**) was more dangerous than any animal". Even in the cases of stranger-rape – it is the word of the victim against the word of the perpetrator (Mathiasen, 1974: 37).

Previous research shows that strangers commit one in every three offences of sexual violence, in the United States. "In contrast, one third of sexual assaults are committed by strangers (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003)" (Ullman, Filipas, Townsend & Starzynski, 2006: 798-799). This means that two thirds of sexual violence offenses are committed by perpetrators known to the victims. However, recent statistics provided by the United States of America's National Sexual Violence Resource Centre state that this figure has moved to 80% of rape victims knowing the perpetrator

(Puckett, 2018b). This means victims are likely to encounter their abuser again, whether in court or everyday settings like school or work (Puckett, 2018b). However, little research explores how survivors navigate shared non- familial spaces with perpetrators.

Adding to this perspective, Henry and Powell (2018) argue that society's broader cultural attitudes tend to invalidate survivors' experiences in cases involving acquaintances or intimate partners due to entrenched rape myths about "real rape", where a stranger perpetrator is often assumed. These myths perpetuate secondary victimisation – a concept I engage with in the next section – by casting doubt on survivors, further complicating their ability to report or seek justice. This aligns with Gqola's theorization of rape as a weapon, challenging the belief that sexual violence as a weapon can only occur if the perpetrator and victim meet a specific profile—often a stranger/stranger dynamic. Grubb and Turner (2019) build on this notion, exploring how "rape myth acceptance" disproportionately impacts cases involving familiar perpetrators, as rape myths often shape societal and institutional responses that lean toward victim-blaming rather than accountability for perpetrators. Moor and Anderson (2019) underscore that survivors who share spaces with known perpetrators, such as workplaces and educational institutions, experience an amplified psychological toll. Regular encounters with perpetrators can cause hyper-vigilance, social isolation, and significant mental health effects.
O'Neil and Morgan (2021) expand on this, examining the institutional responses to these situations, which can either support or harm survivors. They argue that insufficient policies, or a lack of enforcement concerning known perpetrators in shared spaces, often lead survivors to feel dismissed or retraumatized, further complicating their recovery and reinforcing their sense of vulnerability. While there is extensive research on familial abuse survivors navigating spaces with perpetrators, Hlavka (2020) points out that less attention has been given to survivors who navigate spaces like schools, workplaces, or social gatherings with non-familial perpetrators. Hlavka's study found that survivors often resort to coping mechanisms, such as avoidance or desensitization, to manage these encounters, but these tactics may also result in isolation or hindered performance in academic or professional settings.

These studies highlight the need for institutional awareness and nuanced support for survivors, challenging the belief that violence by familiar individuals is less traumatic.

## 3. EXPERIENCES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE SURVIVORS THAT KNOW PERPETRATORS

I will not be looking at the vast amount of literature on the impact of being sexually violated by a sibling, parent, or other kinship-based perpetrator as there is already extensive literature on this. I will seek to focus on the experiences of young adults who have endured sexual violence and must now share academic, social, and e-spaces with the individual(s) who assaulted them.

Rape culture has been discussed in the previous theme. Rape culture is something that that is prevalent in all the spaces listed above – it does not only directly influence thoughts of toxic masculinity in the men that occupy these spaces, but in individuals of other genders as well. A 2017 study stated that "17% of the South African women agreed that rape usually results from what a woman says or does" (Wyatt et al., 2017: 310). However, this already high percentage has only increased since then – with recent findings indicating that a staggering 25% of South African women believe that rape can often be attributed to a woman's behaviour (Zuma & Vawda, 2022), a statistic that suggests many survivors may internalize guilt and blame themselves for their assault.

The "epidemiology of rape remains an issue of considerable importance and a key health risk for South African women" (Mgoqi-Mbalo, Zhang & Ntuli, 2017: 301). It is a risk to both their physical and their mental health. "Previous research has identified numerous psychological effects of sexual assault on women (e.g., depression, anxiety) including posttraumatic stress disorder" (Mgoqi-Mbalo, Zhang & Ntuli, 2017: 301). Victims of sexual violence display high rates of PTSD (Mgoqi-Mbalo, Zhang & Ntuli, 2017: 301). The experiences of survivors who know their perpetrators challenge the notion of PTSD as a linear progression, with "aftermath" often overlapping daily life.

Mgoqi-Mbalo, Zhang and Ntuli (2017: 301) state that: "previous findings suggest that PTSD status and depression are related to factors that occur to the individual before, during, and after a traumatic event" – this follows the notion of some sort of steady linear progression. This is reflected in their terms: "pre-assault", "assault-related factors", and "post assault". One of the assault related factors used is victim– perpetrator relationships (Mgoqi-Mbalo, Zhang & Ntuli, 2017: 301). They had 100 research participants, all South African females in their late 20s. 65% of these participants had been assaulted by a non-stranger (Mgoqi-Mbalo, Zhang & Ntuli, 2017: 304).

However, instances of re-encountering perpetrators were not looked at as a potential factor that could increase the risk of developing PTSD. This is one of many examples where the "aftermath" impacted by re-encounters in daily life (for example: taking the bus, going to university) is insufficiently discussed.

It is, however, somewhat discussed within conversations surrounding "secondary victimisation" – in the legal sense. "Secondary victimization is a key concept in research into the experiences of victims of crime, related policies and legislation, and practices of support and care" (Pemberton & Mulder, 2023). Those discussions focus on seeing one's perpetrator in court, which is vastly different to the experience of seeing one's perpetrator in 'casual', everyday scenarios. "Research addressing the secondary victimisation of sexual offence survivors (particularly within a societal context) does, however, remain sparse and a particular dearth in knowledge currently exists within the South African body of knowledge" (Castro da Silva and Faria, 2023).

Some studies believe there is a connection between the involvement of hospitals, police and other agencies and difficulties in overall adjustment. "Koss found that low rape conviction rates and the failure of the legal system to adequately deter perpetrators can exacerbate the rape victim's levels of self-blame, resulting in secondary victimisation" (Artz & Smythe, 2008: 129). Similarly, Campbell et al's findings propose that rape survivors that have encountered victim-blaming behaviour from medical or legal personnel had increasingly higher levels PTSD in comparison to survivors that did not look for assistance from their community after being raped (Artz & Smythe, 2008: 129). This showcases the significant impact institutional processing may have on survivor's mental health.

Artz and Smythe (2008: 138) propose that one of the reasons survivors might not immediately report being raped is because of the "social stigma of rape itself and fear of secondary victimisation rather than to the complainant's credibility". This secondary victimisation can occur across numerous stages of the criminal justice process, including: "being aggressively cross-examined by the defence; and, in many cases, hearing the presiding judge acquit the accused, thereby questioning the victim's traumatic experience and evoking feelings of humiliation and shame" (Artz & Smythe, 2008: 146)

"In addition to the experience of a violent sexual assault, victims may also be subject to interpersonal, social and legal responses that may contribute to what is commonly known as

'secondary trauma'" (Artz & Smythe, 2008: 198). Survivors could feel compelled to avoid reporting their rape, out of fear that the police may be antagonistic and apathetic. Alongside this, "traditional policing methods are often not effective in obtaining adequate information from rape complainants, nor are they able to provide adequate support and protection for traumatised victims" (Artz & Smythe, 2008: 198).

"There are many personal and interpersonal characteristics that may heighten the negative aftermath of rape" (Wyatt et al., 2017: 310). This is one example of many research papers that reinforce the idea of a "rape aftermath". Everyday life is "impossible to avoid when you're deciding what to do in the aftermath of a sexual assault" (Puckett, 2018a). Puckett's discussion on the "aftermath" shows us that even teen magazines reinforce this notion.

A recent study by Fourie et al. (2023) highlights that the relational dynamics between victim and perpetrator significantly affect psychological outcomes, yet the implications of post-assault encounters with perpetrators have not been adequately addressed.

A very generic understanding of "secondary victimisation" is it being understood as a term that "refers to criminal proceedings as a whole causing mental harm to the victim" (Schünemann, 2009: 388). However, secondary victimisation is not just something that happens throughout court cases. "… speaking about her rape led to secondary victimisation by various people who were supposed to assist her in her recovery" (Gqola, 2015: 93). Nevertheless, survivors can also experience some form of secondary – or primary – (re)victimisation when encountering perpetrators in spaces. They may end up feeling triggered. Feeling "triggered" can be defined as an emotional response to a traumatising situation that results in the survivor of said traumatising situation feeling "a paralyzing, overwhelming cascade of emotional and physiological responses commensurate not with the anticipation of danger but with the experience of the danger itself" (Carter, 2015: 3). This triggering feeling is a form of secondary victimisation, from (re)encounters with the perpetrator themselves.

Abrahams, Jewkes, and Mathews conducted a study in 2013 that looked at depressive symptoms after an incident of sexual violence among women so that they could understand victim-perpetrator relationships and the role of social perceptions. They recruited 140 participants from public hospital services in the Eastern and Western Cape (Abrahams, Jewkes & Mathews, 2013: 288). Abrahams, Jewkes, and Mathews (2013: 290) found that 59.3% of participants knew the

perpetrator, with lower depressive symptoms reported in stranger-rape cases. “84.3% of women were found to have high levels of depressive symptoms, but lower levels were found among women raped in circumstances in which there was a lesser likelihood of blame such as those raped by strangers rather than intimate partners” (Abrahams, Jewkes & Mathews, 2013: 288).

Research has been done into the self-blame that often comes with non-stranger rape. “Today, it is acquaintance rape that is in the zeitgeist; no longer does the weapon-wielding stranger dominate television portrayals, captivate the news media, or saturate political discourse” (Tuerkheimer, 2015: 2). Despite this, survivors of non-stranger sexual violence still report greater guilt than survivors of stranger assaults.

“The emergence of non-stranger rape as an issue of national importance has generated a range of critiques, focused particularly on the military, on college campuses, and on a "rape culture" that surrounds and sustains faulty institutional responses” (Tuerkheimer, 2015: 2). Perpetrators of sexual violence, by both known and unknown perpetrators, are “anywhere and everywhere” (Gqola, 2015: 4). Sexual violence can occur in any context. However, I will be looking at research from zones which may carry particularly important implications for survivors, such as social and social media spaces.

### 3.1. EXPERIENCES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE SURVIVORS WHO SHARE SOCIAL SPACES WITH PERPETRATORS

Survivors who share a social circle with their perpetrator often experience significant impacts on their other relationships. As Thornhill & Thornhill (1990: 183) note, a victim's relationship with her partner is more negatively affected when the perpetrator is a friend. This demonstrates that survivors who share social circles with perpetrators face different consequences than those who do not.

Due to the lack of academic literature on this topic, I will use ‘grey’ literature to explore this theme. In a ‘Teen Vogue’ article, Puckett (2018a) advises, “Talking to friends and family is possible, but in cases where someone in your circle is the abuser, it can feel inevitable that you’ll run into them again.” Puckett suggests the best action is to “remove yourself from the situation entirely,” though this may not be feasible in academic or social settings where survivors cannot avoid all spaces.

Additionally, therapist Rachel O'Neill, cited in Puckett (2018a), advises survivors to remind themselves that "you're safe, your abuser can't hurt you, and you have control over yourself" when encountering the abuser in normal settings. However, this advice overlooks the fact that being triggered allows the abuser to **continue** hurting the survivor psychologically. Even 'grey' literature often focuses on the legal rather than the social aspects.

Another setting that could be argued to fall under the heading of "social spaces" is academic spaces, as social circles often become intertwined with academic spaces. There is some relevant research which examines the experiences of sexual violence survivors that share academic spaces with perpetrators – essentially, the college campuses discussed in the Tuerkheimer quote. "Acquaintance rape is the most common type of rape perpetrated against college women, but little information exists on later encounters with the perpetrator, lifestyle changes, and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)" (Bell, Wolff & Skolnick, 2021b). This shows us that despite non-stranger sexual assault being the most common type of rape in academic spaces, there is *very little research* into the "aftermath" of how re-encounters impact survivors. A 2021 study by Bell, Wolff and Skolnick revealed that "84% of the women who indicated they had experienced a rape since attending college knew their perpetrator, and 65.5% encountered their perpetrator after the attack". These encounters resulted in "more lifestyle changes and higher PTSD symptom severity on the PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5)" (Bell, Wolff & Skolnic, 2021b).

Rape culture in academic spaces remains significant, with high rates of harassment and assault reported on South African campuses (Omar, 2019). According to a recent study by Zapp et al. (2021), many universities have failed to implement effective measures to support survivors, leading to negative academic outcomes and psychological distress.

"Campus sexual assault is a long-standing challenge and continues to be a severe problem" (Zapp, Buelow, Soutiea, Berkowitz & DeJong, 2021: NP2324). South African universities have been under scrutiny for sexual violence controversies in recent years. "The pervasiveness of sexual harassment at South African universities has been identified as a significant challenge to women students in higher education" (Omar, 2019: 123). It challenges them on various levels, and thus – needs to be addressed. "The need for institutional reform to address the problem of sexual assault,

particularly on college campuses, is widely acknowledged" (Tuerkheimer, 2015: 1). Many believe South African universities have not done enough to make academic spaces safer for survivors, particularly those who share spaces with their perpetrators. "While sexual violence is not just a higher education issue, colleges and universities have a unique opportunity to provide prevention education to young people who attend their institutions" (Zapp, Buelow, Soutiea, Berkowitz & DeJong, 2021: NP2325). Prevention education needs to be coupled with creating a safer environment for survivors that have already experienced sexual violence.

Feminists have been claiming, for the last few decades, that the high rates of sexual violence on campuses are linked to the "institutional culture of the university, which is described as reinforcing a rape culture" (Orth, Van Wyk & Andipatin, 2020: 192). Over 60% of women avoided perpetrators, with some changing universities, degrees, jobs, or residences (Bell, Wolff, & Skolnick, 2021b). Correspondingly, the Department of Justice (DOJ) civil rights investigation that was done at the University of New Mexico stated that students who were sexual violence victims "avoided certain parts of the school's campus, dropped classes, lost scholarships, expressed a variety of negative health effects including PTSD, and some withdrew from the university entirely" (Bell, Wolff, & Skolnick, 2021a). The phrase "lost scholarships" refers to cases in which victims of sexual assault fail to achieve academic performance requirements and/or are forced to withdraw from courses – due to this, their bursary funding or financial aid gets revoked (Khonou, Phaswana & Ngqila, 2019: 133). Whilst this is not in a South African context, it can be argued that South African sexual assault survivors experience similar struggles – especially those who are funded by NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme) and similar bursary programmes, which require continued academic performance for the financial aid to continue (Khonou, Phaswana & Ngqila, 2019: 132–133). For many of these students, they may be the first member of their family at a tertiary institution and the education they are receiving may be compromised because they have fallen victim to someone's horrendous actions. The phenomenon of "rape culture" perpetuated by institutional practices further complicates the situation, with survivors often feeling unsafe and unsupported (Omar, 2019). "The current research suggests that the effects of acquaintance rape in college is a complicated area needing further research. There is evidence to support negative effects on victims based on interactions with perpetrators" (Bell, Wolff & Skolnick, 2021b). As indicated by Bell, Wolff & Skolnick, further research is needed on this topic – however, the little research that there is tells

us that survivors are negatively impacted by this shared space.

## 3.2. HOW SEXUAL VIOLENCE SURVIVORS NEGOTIATE ENCOUNTERING PERPETRATORS WITHIN THE E-SPACE

Literature on survivors navigating e-space encounters with perpetrators is also limited, especially in South Africa. The little bit of literature that I could find often looked at specific cases of women that accused well-known/famous men of rape, which is slightly different to the context of most 'normal' people – that have been raped by people that are in their social circle. Much of the literature focuses on anti-rape social media activism, which I will attempt to relate to the context of my research participants. Furthermore, I have had to make use of some 'grey' literature in discussions below.

For survivors familiar with their perpetrators, the e-space can be triggering, as they may encounter shared posts from mutual friends. Kathryn Mayorga accused football star Cristiano Ronaldo of rape in 2009. Hers is perhaps a slightly more unique case – in the sense that there is a constant discourse about Ronaldo and her case online, with hundreds of thousands of people using various social media platforms to discuss the case. However, Ronaldo is merely one example of many public figures accused of sexual assault who continue to be supported by the general public. A noteworthy example from a South African context is former president Jacob Zuma. He was on trial for rape in 2006. The trial was highly publicised and politically charged. Despite these serious allegations, he still received support from the public – with many of his supporters claiming that the allegations were politically motivated, they even went as far as rallying around him during court appearances (Suttner, 2016). These cases, both locally and internationally, showcase how survivors are often made out to be villains online while perpetrators – especially those in positions of power – receive public support.

Der Spiegel conducted an interview with Mayorga in 2018 that revealed the existence of a "confidentiality agreement between her and the Portuguese football star involving the payment of 375 thousand dollars" – this interview "was met in Portugal mostly with disbelief, prompting a strong wave of support for the football player and national icon" (Garraio, Santos, Amaral & Carvalho, 2020). If Mayorga were to do a quick search of her name, she would come across a plethora of tweets from different users attacking her and discrediting the accusations she has

made against Ronaldo. “I fucking hate kathryn mayorga kkr bitch” (@RenStackTel, 2022) is one example out of thousands of aggressive hate tweets towards Mayorga. In order to discuss how this has impacted Mayorga, I have had to make use of grey literature. The actual event of the rape, as well as the ‘aftermath’ – including these tweets of hatred that she has received – have negatively impacted her mental health. “She told Der Spiegel she has suffered clinical depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder following the alleged rape” (Christodoulou, 2022). This is an article that was written just a few months prior to my time of writing this proposal, and it showcases the fact that Mayorga’s trauma – that began in 2009 – follows her many years later.

While limited literature exists on South African survivors navigating e-space encounters, some covers online sexual harassment. “Since the advent of the Internet, women and girls’ participation in online spaces has been marked by concerns for their safety” (Vitis & Gilmour, 2017: 336). These concerns initially centred on the online harassment of children, particularly girls, vulnerable to predators online (Vitis & Gilmour, 2017: 336). These concerns shifted as the Internet and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) grew entangled “with work, social life and communication, concerns around online safety have expanded to include a broad and differentiated range of online sexual harassments (OSH) visited upon women by strangers and intimate partners alike” (Vitis & Gilmour, 2017: 336). Being sexually harassed online can be a horrible experience for anybody, but it could potentially trigger memories of physical sexual violence for survivors.

Literature also exists on survivors whose sexual violence experiences are disclosed online, either personally or by others. “Silence and shame often surround incidents of sexual violence” (Gundersen, & Zaleski, 2021). This has been the case for many, many years. Social media has enabled survivors to share their experiences, as seen in movements like #MeToo (Gundersen & Zaleski, 2021).

The experiences of survivors familiar with their perpetrators are complex, requiring further exploration to understand their implications in digital and social contexts.

**Significance of the Study**

This research is important in that it seeks to broaden present understandings of secondary victimisation beyond legal and institutional contexts. It underscores a penetrating, albeit under-researched, source of trauma through highlighting digital and social re-encounters victims have with perpetrators. This thesis contributes through making South African voices and experiences

the focal point – specifically the voices of those that are living in a digitally saturated, post-apartheid South Africa. It builds upon the feminist literature on survival and victimisation, presenting a more intersectional approach to the comprehension of continuous trauma.

## SUMMARY

This chapter explored key practical and theoretical contributions to understanding sexual violence, making its intersections with the narratives of survivors, historical knowledge, rape culture, and patriarchy a focal point. The literature showcased the importance of the perpetrator in the lives of the survivor's post-rape; the meanings of "secondary victimisation", and the influence of diverse issues on alleviating or deepening trauma.

## KEY ARGUMENTS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The understanding of sexual violence has experienced immense change over the years. Earlier perspectives, such as Freud's view of rape as an act of depravity, failed to account for the broader power structures. Brownmiller's pioneering literature introduced the idea of rape as a tool of patriarchal control. However, it lacked an engagement with the role of intersectionality in shaping experiences of sexual violence. Crenshaw (1989) introduced intersectionality, which allowed Gqola (2015) to look at rape as a "language" entrenched in colonial and societal violence, especially in the context of post-apartheid South Africa.

The *Female Fear Factory* by Gqola underscores the way the patriarchy uses scare tactics to police the way women behave (Gqola, 2021). Rape culture is reinforced by the concealment of the systemic nature of sexual violence and the preservation of norms that take power away from women.

### Rape Myths and Social Perceptions

Rape myths, such as the idea that perpetrators are typically not known to the survivor, add to the secondary victimisation that survivors experience. Myths invalidate the narratives of victims (Henry & Powell, 2018). Higher rates of self-blame and a lack of conviction from society occur when the perpetrator is known to the victim (Bell, Wolff and Skolnick, 2021b).

Rape myth acceptance is connected to broader systems of oppression, including homophobia, racism, and sexism (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Corrective rape in South Africa is an example of

the way in which marginalised groups, such as LGBTQ+ women, and intersecting oppressions result in specific forms of sexual violence (Doan-Minh, 2019).

**Survivor-Perpetrator Dynamics**

When victims know their perpetrators, there is a greater chance they will re-encounter them – which results in isolating themselves and becoming increasingly paranoid (Moor & Anderson, 2019).

**Secondary Victimisation and Institutional Responses**

Secondary victimisation is typically understood in a legal context, but I have used Artz and Smythe (2008) to discuss an alternate understanding of secondary victimisation – one that views re-encounters with perpetrators as a form of secondary victimisation.

**Survivors in Academic, Social, and Digital Spaces**

I have used Bell, Wolff and Skolnick (2021b) to underscore how common sexual violence by known perpetrators is in institutions, as well as the negative impact re-encountering their perpetrators has on survivors. Thornhill & Thornhill (1990) speak to a similar negative impact when victims share social circles with their perpetrator(s).

Online spaces complicate this navigation even further, as they may exacerbate trauma by exposing survivors to their perpetrators. Despite this, they also give victims the chance to find solidarity – and to be involved in activism, such as the #MeToo movement (Krause & Van Zyl, 2021).

**Interweaving Insights into the Research Question**

The scholarship I have reviewed underscores the need for more research in certain areas, which has shaped the focus of my dissertation. When the perpetrator is known to the victim, secondary victimisation is not limited to the courtroom – rather, it is an aspect of their daily life.

My exploration of the way survivors navigate shared spaces – academic, social, and online – seeks to contributes to a nuanced understanding of rape culture's omnipresent effects. This is the foundation upon which my findings will build on to theorise the way survivors navigate the "aftermath", offering insights for institutional reform and feminist literature.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

Methodology refers to the "theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed" (Webb, 1993: 416). There is no "uniform canon of feminist research principles, and many lively debates about whether there should be, and, if so, what one should contain" (Stacey, 1988: 21). Discussions about whether research methodologies can be feminist have been ongoing (McCormick, 2012: 23). According to Bennett and Pereira (2013: 10), "issues of research methodology in the field of sexuality and gender studies are as challenging and interesting as the findings and new theorisations themselves".

On one side of the debate, scholars argue that research methodologies can be feminist if they meet certain criteria. Feminist scholars reject "dualism, abstraction, and detachment" associated with positivism, instead advocating for "an integrative, trans-disciplinary approach" that grounds theory in women's everyday lives (Stacey, 1988: 21). Central to feminist social science is the "actual experience and language of women" (Du Bois, 1983: 108). If this agenda is met, many would consider the research to be feminist.

Feminist methodologies generally challenge the hierarchical, exploitative relations of conventional research, urging researchers to seek egalitarian research processes characterized by "authenticity, reciprocity, and intersubjectivity between the researcher and her 'subjects'" (Stacey, 1988: 22).

Feminist methodologies reject traditional positivist ideals of neutrality and objectivity. As Whittingdale (2021: S13) notes, feminist methodologies challenge these ideals, framing them as "constructed and partial". This challenge to dominant frameworks forms the foundation of feminist research, which attempts to create a new type of relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

Similarly, early feminist methodologies highlighted how important it was for researchers to place themselves on the "the same critical plane as the overt subject matter" – acknowledging that their societal and personal positioning shapes the research process. Early feminist methodologies urge researchers to "locate themselves within the frame" (Whittingdale, 2021: S16).

Feminist standpoint methodology expands on these commitments by proposing that marginalised

groups (especially women) hold epistemic privilege in comprehending societal hierarchies of oppression and power. Standpoint theory is rooted in the works of scholars like Sandra Harding and Patricia Hill Collins; it asserts that the production of knowledge starts with the lived experiences of the oppressed and socially situated knowers (Harding, 2004; Collins, 2000). Objectivity in feminist research stems from engaging with one's standpoint – not detachment (Harding, 1993).

Feminist methodologies make the co-production of knowledge a focal point, advocating against traditional hierarchies that place the researcher in a position of authority. They recognise interviewer and interviewee as co-creators of knowledge. The notion of "co-authorship" of data highlights the intersubjective nature of feminist research and its goal to "dissolve hierarchy in favour of reciprocity" – resulting in a more equitable and collaborative research process (Whittingdale, 2021: S18).

Standpoint methodology assists in making it clear why this kind of knowledge is needed. It focuses on the perspectives of individuals most impacted by systemic violence, such as the victims of sexual violence that my research is centred on. It contends that these perspectives offer crucial insights that dominant knowledge frameworks commonly overlook or erase (Collins, 2000; Smith, 1987). My participants' experiences – and my own, as a victim, are regarded as epistemologically important positions that offer situated, accountable knowledge. These perspectives challenge mainstream assumptions, instead of being treated as biases to be bracketed out (Harding, 1993).

> Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.

The above quote, (Cixous, 1976: 875), resonates profoundly with feminist research methodologies. It captures how critical it is for women to reclaim a spot in the history that they have been historically excluded from – telling us to foreground the voices, points of view, and lived experiences of women.

It highlights survivors as active agents in knowledge production. Feminist research methodologies ensure that my work makes the voices of the participants a focal point by not

looking at my participants as objects that hold knowledge and instead prioritising co-creation of knowledge. I have tried to reclaim the agency of women, articulating their realities and fighting against the patriarchy that has historically silenced them, by writing "her self" as women.

Furthermore, the quote underscores that the act of writing – and by extension, narrating or storytelling – serves as a transformative process. It is about actively inserting women's histories and bodies into discussion, instead of only documenting their experiences. This reflects my approach. My interviewees' experiences are not just data, but contributions to rethinking rape culture and secondary victimisation.

"The desecration of the earth is the result of a specific masculine consciousness that devalues women's experiences" (Oakley, 2002: 152). My methodology aligns with the feminist ethos of disrupting dominant (masculine) narratives that conserve silence and invisibility, devaluing women's experiences – reinforcing my role as a researcher that does not direct but facilitates the knowledge-making process. This allows my interviewees to "write themselves" into discourse. Feminism in the academic sphere is meant to "to question and disturb the status quo. It drives those who believe in the feminist project to look at their immediate world and to ask what certain phenomena say about women's lives" (Karimakwenda, 2018: 153-154). The phenomenon in question, for my dissertation, is non-stranger sexual violence. Feminist theory is concerned with the "agency of women and fostering a more gender equal society. Scholars and practitioners must therefore do the work of transmitting understandings of women's lives through rich descriptions and excavating meaning from the palpable silences that still surround their realities" (Karimakwenda, 2018: 154).
Thus, I used a qualitative approach to centre survivors outside the 'ideal' victim stereotype.

**Positionality**

Positionality describes an individual's worldview and their stance toward a research task and its context (Holmes, 2020: 1). It is closely linked to self-reflexivity, which involves inserting researchers into their work and reflecting critically on their role (Mbilinyi, 1992: 35; Holmes, 2020: 169). Positionality refers to the interweaving of power and power dynamics through which a researcher's work is processed and demands that the researcher becomes as attuned as possible to perspectives and ways of being in which they negotiate power with/over others and through which they themselves are positioned (Bhavnani, 1994).

I am a Muslim-raised woman of colour, from a lower-middle-class background, and a South African survivor of sexual violence. My intersectional identity – including my experiences of sexual violence – informs both the focus of my research and my positionality as a researcher, particularly in how I do and do not experience power. While I hold academic privilege, I also contend with financial precarity and the insecurities that come with survivorship. Race and rape intersect in profound ways. As Kgalemang and Setume (2016: 313) argue, "race and rape are what Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Kimberly Crenshaw call the 'interlocking systems of oppression". These systems of oppression cannot be understood in isolation; they are inextricably linked. Gqola (2015: 43) links slavery and apartheid to the ongoing stereotype of African hypersexuality, which informs contemporary perceptions of black men's and women's bodies (Bury & Easton, 2020; Paul, 2021). I have remained conscious of the racial aspects of my own experiences with sexual violence and have considered how these experiences differ from those of interviewees from different racial backgrounds, paying close attention to their intersectional identities.

Researching a topic that I have personally experienced presents both advantages and disadvantages. As an 'insider researcher', being a survivor of rape enhances empathy with participants but also raises ethical concerns about professionalism (Saidin & Yacoob, 2016: 848-849). This closeness is an ethical concern that I have considered throughout the research process. Some scholars argue that insider researchers often have a "passion" for their topic that drives their commitment to the research (Saidin & Yacoob, 2016: 849), and while I agree, I also recognise that all researchers, particularly feminist researchers, can be passionate about their work.

Bennett and Pereira (2013: 3) use the metaphor of being a "jacketed woman", describing those with "honoured and privileged" access to education and resources. As a researcher with academic privilege, I am aware of the power dynamics at play in my interactions with participants. "The connection between power and knowledge are both very intimate and very consequential" (Moletsane, 2015: 38). I have worked to treat participants' stories as valuable knowledge and to avoid exploiting them by maintaining sensitivity to the class and educational differences that may exist between us.

Positionality and reflexivity are essential in feminist research. "Feminist geographers have engaged in debates on reflexivity, positionality, difference and representation in research" (Sultana, 2007: 375). Reflexivity is an important "ingredient of good research" (Acosta-Alzuru,

2005: 182) and involves critically examining power relations and researcher accountability in data collection and interpretation (Sultana, 2007: 376). Reflexivity must be continuous; "adding it at the end" risks it becoming mere introspection (Sultana, 2007: 376).

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations are integral to feminist research, particularly with vulnerable populations. In interviewing survivors of sexual violence, central ethical concerns include intimacy, pain, privacy, and change (Bennett & Pereira, 2013: 3).

Feminist methodologies underscore that researchers must actively engage with their own roles in framing the research process, recognising the way their intersectional identities impact the creation of knowledge (Whittingdale, 2021: S13). This self-awareness creates ethical research practices, as researchers reflect on their own power dynamics with regard to their interviewees – specifically when discussing 'triggering' content, such as sexual violence.

I prioritised care, privacy, and safety during interviews. Furthermore, the ethical obligation to maintain participant confidentiality and protect their privacy is of utmost importance. This includes ensuring that the identities of victims and the details of their experiences are not disclosed without their explicit consent.

Consent is a key concern when it comes to the ethics of qualitative research. Informed consent involves giving interviewees a proper explanation of the purpose of this research, the process, and any potential risks. I remained clear that participation was completely voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any point in the research process with no consequences being faced.

The ethics of interviewing victims of sexual violence means that the triggering nature of the content must remain a focal point. I remained aware that conversations around traumatic experiences could trigger an intense emotional reaction. Thus, I created an environment with a strong foundation of sensitivity and trust. Additionally, I offered victims the opportunity to engage in the research however they felt best, including providing them with access to mental health resources if they needed emotional help after – or during – the research process.

The already complicated ethics surrounding this research are exacerbated by exploring participants' "re-encounters" with their perpetrators, as they must revisit the original "event". I made it clear to them that they can share as little, or as much, as they would like – reassuring them

that they could change the topic or even take a break/or stop the interview at any moment. I feel that giving them this choice minimises harm.

Moreover, a typically ignored element of ethical consideration is researcher self-care. Interviewing victims of sexual violence can be mentally draining and triggering for researchers who have experienced this violence themselves – like myself. Seeking support from mental health professionals has been essential for me.

Ethical considerations in this research go further than mere consent and confidentiality. Minimising harm (where possible) and taking care of myself as the researcher were just as vital. I have tried my utmost to honour the victims' voices, while ensuring that the research is conducted responsibly. These considerations shape a methodology that respects both participants and their narratives.

**Research Methods**

My methods, informed by feminist methodology, involved semi-structured qualitative interviews. Qualitative methods emphasise small, purposive samples and a focus on individuals (Gerring, 2017). My research examines survivors' experiences encountering perpetrators in familiar contexts, including universities and online spaces.

In order to recruit my participants, I created a simple poster with my research question and contact details, which I then shared this across my social media platforms and asked friends to share it as well. I then filmed a video, sharing that I was looking for research participants, and posted this as an Instagram reel. My friends shared this as well. Alongside using social media, I put up physical posters in UCT's Office for Inclusivity and Change. It was a struggle to find participants, which delayed my timeline. Many people on social media contacted me about being research participants, but they were not based in South Africa – which is the context of my research.

The criteria for inclusion were that participants needed to be South African women who had experienced a non-stranger sexual violence incident and who, after the incident, had to share academic, social or online spaces with their perpetrator. Participants needed to be over the age of 18 and willing to engage in a 60–90-minute semi-structured interview about their experiences. All participants had to self-identify as victims and/or survivors and be comfortable enough to discuss their navigation of these shared spaces.

After extensive efforts, I found seven women willing to participate. The table below shares their pseudonyms, racial identity, where the interviews took place, and their age.

| Pseudonyms | Race | Where they were interviewed | Age |
|---|---|---|---|
| Interviewee 1 | White | In UCT's Gender Studies building | Early 20s |
| Interviewee 2 | White | At a café | Mid 20s |
| Interviewee 3 | Coloured | At my apartment | Early 20s |
| Interviewee 4 | Indian | In UCT's Gender Studies building | Mid 20s |
| Interviewee 5 | Coloured | At my apartment | Late 20s |
| Interviewee 6 | Asian | At a café | Mid 20s |
| Interviewee 7 | Black | At a café | Late 20s |

I believe that the material gathered from these interviews is sufficient, as the majority of the interviews are over an hour long – with some close to two hours in length. Alongside this, it is an introductory study into a new field – and my sample size was racially diverse.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis followed a thematic approach. After transcribing the interviews, I read through each transcript multiple times to identify recurring patterns, phrases, and emotional responses. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis, I coded segments of text manually and grouped them into broader themes relating to secondary victimisation, spatial negotiation, and emotional labour. This process allowed me to reflect on both commonalities and divergences in participants' experiences. My own positionality as a victim and feminist researcher informed the interpretation of themes, aligning with standpoint theory and the co-construction of meaning between interviewer and participant.

## Limitations

As there is so much literature on the experiences of rape and the meaning of secondary victimisation during criminal processes – yet very little on what it may mean to re-encounter perpetrators in academic, social, and online spaces. As a result, I was unable to draw on existing methodologies for studying this specific phenomenon. Consequently, I had to develop my own approach without much precedent for guidance. In addition, I worked in one language only and struggled to find participants. This means that my study must be considered introductory in nature.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### Introduction

In this chapter, I describe how seven sexual violence survivors navigate a specific form of secondary victimisation. As discussed in the literature review, this refers to ongoing post-survival distress caused by enforced engagement with perpetrators in social, educational, and online contexts, rather than through the legal system. I interpret their narratives by connecting them with each other and the literature. In the first sections, I present the thematic analysis; thereafter I draw on the literature to discuss my analysis and re-theorise the meaning of secondary victimisation. In other words, I offer both a representation of sexual violence for survivors who must share common social spaces and mutual social relationships with their perpetrators, highlighting their navigation of encounters with perpetrators after the assaultive experience(s) to deepen an understanding of what sexual assault actually entails as one continues to live and to "survive."

### How survivors represent the work of talking about their experiences of the assault

Understanding how survivors discuss their experiences of sexual violence is crucial to this analysis. Autobiographical representation of such trauma is inherently challenging, and as a feminist researcher, recognising and thematising these complexities was a key point of entry for understanding their narratives. In order to understand their representations of a particular aftermath, I needed to understand what it meant to discuss anything at all about their experiences. When discussing the experience of speaking out, one of my interviewees said they were often left dumbfounded. "Then I don't know what to say" (Transcript 1). This reflects a profound struggle to express the ineffable pain and confusion associated with their trauma.

Another interviewee felt a sense of destiny in sharing her story: "I just felt like I needed to meet you because I believe in signs...I feel like that's because I also feel like I do have something that I can take away on how to cope" (Transcript 2). This participant's belief in a higher purpose for sharing her story underscores how survivors may find meaning and potential healing through their disclosures. She saw her disclosure as spiritually meaningful and felt guided to share it: "I felt like I needed to meet you because I believe in signs" (Transcript 2). This perspective reveals how some survivors might seek deeper meaning or healing through the process of sharing their experiences.

After this, the same participant said: “I got a boyfriend, basically, and his step cousin is him. He called me and he was like: “Oh I have this guy; he could hook you up with acting and stuff”. And I was like: “Oh no, that’s one of the guys”. And then my whole family found out. My mom sent me to therapy. And my therapist advised me to tell other people so that when I was triggered, or I was going through something, they’d know why. And now if I get triggered and experience a lot of anxiety, then they know I saw them” (Transcript 3). This quote reveals multiple ways she was 'forced' to disclose her experience. Initially, night terrors compelled her to inform her family so they would understand her distress. Later, she had to disclose to her boyfriend when he offered her a networking opportunity involving a perpetrator.

Another interviewee echoed this feeling of ‘forced disclosure’ due to external pressures, saying that they told someone because ‘Google told them to’. “Ja, so I kind of immediately afterwards, was on my phone googling, like what to do. And one of the first things on the thing I read was to just disclose to somebody else as soon as possible...” (Transcript 4). The survivor’s immediate reaction to search online for guidance highlights the urgency and confusion following the assault.

**Relationship with the perpetrator(s)**

Understanding the relationship between survivors and perpetrators is crucial to grasping the full impact of sexual violence. This section examines how various relational contexts—whether intimate, social, or institutional—affect the violence experienced and the challenges survivors face.

From long-term romantic partnerships to transient social interactions, these connections often involve power, control, and emotional manipulation, shaping survivors' experiences and recovery. This chapter explores how such relationships influence survivors' perceptions of assault, the difficulties of ongoing contact with perpetrators, and the broader implications for healing and support. By examining these dynamics, I aim to illuminate the complexities survivors face and the need for targeted support strategies.

Shared social and professional spaces intensified the trauma of one survivor who endured multiple incidents of sexual violence. From childhood harassment by her brother's friends to a brutal assault by university acquaintances, continued interactions with these perpetrators in shared circles and online exacerbated her sense of entrapment and distress (Transcript 2).

In her second year of university, one survivor was raped by four men, including a partner she was

seeing. The perpetrators, part of her social and professional circles, remain present through shared spaces, online posts, and parasocial relationships. These overlapping connections continue to perpetuate her trauma (Transcript 2).

Another interviewee recounted experiences with perpetrators who were classmates and regular contacts in shared social spaces. “It was this guy on campus. We had a class together and started hanging out a bit outside of that” (Transcript 6). A separate interviewee also took the Jammie (the university shuttle) with her perpetrator: “He did at the time. I actually have no clue if he still does. We used to take the same Jammie in the morning” (Transcript 7). The close proximity of perpetrators in these settings created a continuous reminder of the assault, complicating the survivor's ability to find relief or support. This ongoing interaction with perpetrators in familiar environments underscored the difficulty of moving forward when faced with constant reminders of past trauma. In keeping with the ‘theme’ of the perpetrator(s) being in educational spaces, one interviewee went to school with the perpetrator(s) of her youth: “So the girl went to our school and from then onwards I had to be in the same class as her. I had to be in the same space with all of those girls” (Transcript 5).

In summary, the relationships between survivors and perpetrators – whether intimate, social, or professional – play a significant role in shaping the survivors' experiences and recovery processes. These dynamics highlight the challenges faced by survivors in navigating their personal and social environments while grappling with the trauma inflicted by those who were once part of their lives. Understanding these relational contexts is crucial for developing effective support systems and interventions that address the complexities of survivors' experiences.

**Encounter(s) with Perpetrator(s) After the Assault**

Survivors sharing social spaces or relationships with their perpetrators face ongoing encounters that profoundly impact their lives. This analysis highlights the complexities and emotional toll of such interactions based on interviewees' experiences.

**In their own mind**

All survivors face the fear of encountering their perpetrators post-assault, but those sharing social spaces or relationships with them confront a heightened and tangible reality. Their fear stems from a higher likelihood of encountering the perpetrator compared to survivors without such shared contexts.

The psychological aftermath of assault often involves the perpetrator's symbolic or remembered presence. Survivors sharing spaces with their assailants face heightened anxiety due to the likelihood of encountering them. One interviewee described distress upon realizing the perpetrator might still harm others (Transcript 1), while another cited the ongoing reminder of his presence as a significant source of anxiety (Transcript 3).

Likewise, a further interviewee spoke about how her therapist helped her navigate these internal arguments. “She helped me see that what happened wasn’t my fault. I struggled a lot with self-blame and guilt” (Transcript 7). Furthermore, she spoke about how deeply the mental issues she developed from the assault impacted her. “She also gave me tools to manage my anxiety and PTSD, which were really debilitating” (Transcript 7). This illustrates the interviewees’ ongoing mental and emotional encounters with the perpetrator, demonstrating how these interactions and memories continue to affect them.

**On social media**

Survivors of assault in the era of social media face a unique fear: encountering their perpetrators online. This could involve direct contact (e.g., emails, WhatsApp, DMs on X or Instagram) or indirect exposure through shared posts or friends’ pictures. One interviewee described distress upon seeing her friend post pictures with the perpetrators: 'She was taking pictures with them, posting it to social media, and I was like: ‘what the fuck?'' (Transcript 2). Even blocking perpetrators doesn’t always help, as Interviewee Four noted: “Sometimes he will come up on my social media, and sometimes I get really like fucken pissed off” (Transcript 4).

The intrusion can also be direct. One survivor recalled being contacted for months by her perpetrator: “Everything that came after had more of an impact on me than the incident itself. He texted me for months after” (Transcript 6). She mentioned he was later exposed on X for predatory behaviour: “It was big news on Twitter some time ago… him being a perv. A bunch of people on Twitter went public with their stories” (Transcript 6). While others went public, she shared her story anonymously with an account dedicated to exposing such incidents: “Yeah. Like, I sent something into some anonymous Twitter account that was posting” (Transcript 6).

The pervasive nature of social media often leaves survivors with a sense that escape from their perpetrators is impossible: “I often wonder. So, this person comes up on my social media every now and then” (Transcript 3). One participant even followed her perpetrator briefly, reflecting on the futility of the gesture: “We may have followed each other for a while but I know we both had

the other person muted. It was so stupid… I might as well unfollow. Or block" (Transcript 4).

Another survivor continues to follow the girls who assaulted her in primary school: "On social media, you follow everyone. I see their posts, but at this point, they are not in my life anymore" (Transcript 5). However, she no longer follows her ex, reflecting how different relationships with perpetrators influence how survivors navigate the aftermath (Transcript 5). Five of my seven participants spoke about social media, which is just over 71% - this shows what a significant role social media plays in the experience of navigating life after being assaulted by someone that you know.

**On billboards/radio station**

The presence of perpetrators in public and media spaces can exacerbate survivors' anxiety. One participant, whose perpetrator is a well-known public figure, describes the constant anxiety of encountering his image on billboards: "He's on billboards, he's in Sports Scene adverts, so I'll literally just be walking into a mall, and his face will be on a giant poster" (Transcript 2). This is not something she can always expect, as billboards and posters are changed frequently, so she cannot even take alternative routes or avoid certain malls. Hence, she experiences constant anxiety that she will be 'encountering' him in this manner at any given moment. Similarly, another interviewee had to navigate the discomfort of hearing her perpetrator on the radio, which led her to avoid certain media channels: "I had to stop listening to Kfm because I got way too triggered when they mentioned his name on the radio" (Transcript 6). Even though she could stop listening in her own capacity, she might not have been able to avoid Kfm if she was in the car with others or in an Uber, for example.

**When friends speak about them**

For survivors of assault that share social circles and mutual social relationships with their perpetrator(s), they may have to face conversations about their perpetrator(s) when/if these friends speak about the perpetrator(s). Encounters through mutual friends often lead to unexpected emotional triggers, betrayal, and social discomfort.

One interviewee's experience of her sister's interactions with the perpetrator's friends highlights the difficulties of navigating shared social spaces: "It's difficult for her to like come home and be like, 'ugh, he was there'" (Transcript 1). When speaking about their shared social circle, she stuttered quite a bit and stumbled over her words. This, in conjunction with what was said, makes

me believe that it is something that deeply impacts her.

The presence of mutual friends who continue relationships with perpetrators can intensify survivors' feelings of betrayal and distress. One respondent expressed frustration with friends who maintain ties with her perpetrators reflects this issue: “Some of my friends care more about their social status than about me” (Transcript 2).

Mutual friends introduced my first interviewee to her perpetrator. “Yeah. I met him through a friend’s boyfriend. .... And he was really close friends with him even after. And this was back when I didn’t tell anyone. … So that was the main scare” (Transcript 1). As a result of this, she was uncertain about how to navigate things as she had not yet disclosed what had happened to her. When she told people, some of them did not react well. “… my best friend ran into David ... And he told me that he saw him … and said “hey, why don’t we just put the past behind us for now and just have a good night?”” (Transcript 1). Not only did her best friend at the time spend time with the man that harmed her, but he also told her about their interaction – as if it was not consequential. “… he bought him shots … they danced together. … spent the whole night together … told me about how much fun he had” (Transcript 1). These quotes show the ongoing impact of knowing that the perpetrator is still in the social circles of people close to her, which constantly reminds her of his presence.

One interviewee experienced her perpetrator(s) unknowingly come into conversation. “And then it turned out that one of the guys that I slapped in the face – I got a boyfriend, basically, and his step cousin is him. He called me and he was like: “Oh I have this guy; he could hook you up with acting and stuff”. And I was like: “Oh no, that’s one of the guys”” (Transcript 2). Her boyfriend at the time did not know that his step cousin was one of the men that raped her and was merely trying to help her make connections for jobs. Whilst her boyfriend may have been well-intentioned, this is not the case for all of her friends. When I asked her about who she had told, she shared the reaction of some friends: “… as long as they can be homies with the famous people, they don’t really care” (Transcript 2). These friends of hers therefore maintain their friendship with her perpetrator(s) even though they know what these men did to her.

A different respondent went as far as saying that having mutual friends is “the hardest part” (Transcript 7) for her. A different interviewee also linked social circles to my next sub-theme: physical spaces that they share. “Another person who was also good friends with him was this girl

I was at dancing with. And dancing became a really unsafe space for me because she was still friends with him. And … Which is really weird because I have really bad anxiety, and I've danced since I was like six years old. So dancing is like my safe space. So, for it to turn into a very unsafe space for me was really difficult" (Transcript 1).

**At physical spaces that they share**

As discussed above, the shared social circle between one of my participants and her perpetrator infiltrated physical spaces. "So, I ended up having to move dance studios. But I'm at a really nice dance studio now. And, um, and yeah. So, just seeing like – I honestly, personally, because it's a lot better for me now" (Transcript 1). She discussed numerous ways in which the shared social circle impacted her physical spaces, illustrating an example of when it was her sister's birthday last year and her sister wanted to go out to town to celebrate her birthday with her friends – but her friends asked if they could combine her birthday with the perpetrator's birthday, as it was on the same night. Thankfully, her sister said no. Her sister's boyfriend then organised the celebrations, planning a schedule. "… that he organized it with his friends so that the parties are not going to clash. Like we are never going to be in one place at once" (Transcript 1).

Similarly, a different respondent's experience of constantly expecting to encounter her perpetrator in familiar locations illustrates how trauma can shape everyday interactions: "Whenever I was anywhere, like in the car, in the shops, like near the area, I was always, waiting, waiting, waiting to see him there" (Transcript 4).

One interviewee was afraid of her boyfriend physically harming her perpetrator, as they frequent the same social spaces: "And now what I'm scared of is seeing him in public while I'm with my boyfriend" (Transcript 1). When I asked her whether she thought her boyfriend would have an aggressive reaction and/or do something illegal, she said: "Yeah. And he's trained in it so. Yeah, that's what's scary" (Transcript 1). She has thus put precautions in place, saying: "whenever we go out, it's like I would say, 'If by any chance like he is here just stay with me. Stay with me. Just don't do anything'" (Transcript 1).

Another participant is a dancer, and one of her perpetrators taught at the studio that she used to go to. "One teaches dance at my studio. Which I left. I saw him a month ago at dancing" (Transcript 2). This used to be a physical space that they shared, but after seeing him there – she left a space that used to be a happy and safe space for her, as the fear and anxiety of seeing him

again overpowered whatever attachment she had to the dance studio. She said: “when I left dancing that day all the dancers were like, … Why? The dance instructor thought that something was wrong with her. … Now I have to apologize for going through something … because that asshole is in the dance team” (Transcript 2). Not only did she have to leave a formerly safe and happy space – but she was also inundated with questions about why she left, forced to apologize to the dance instructor and to reassure the dance instructor that her reason for leaving had nothing to do with the instructor. Another social space that this interviewee and her perpetrator(s) shared was the physical space of clubs – as she is a dancer at clubs and her one perpetrator is a rapper, another is an MC at events and clubs, whilst the other is very famous and close friends with both of them. Therefore, he frequents the club scene as well. Hence, this is one place where she has to encounter all three of them, perhaps even at the same time on occasions. “Then the guy who I was having a thing with when it all happened, I’m seeing him at least once a month. Like. He raps. Next week he’s going to be at the club that I dance at” (Transcript 2). This shows us how even though the initial event of the assault is “over” (in that she is no longer experiencing the actual physical assault happening in real time), she still has to continuously encounter her perpetrator(s) [at least once a month] because of the work that she does. This interview was conducted last year, and she told me: “I don’t intend to be here next year. I intend on being out of South Africa. So maybe that will help with that. I mean, I still think I'll struggle in relationships and struggle with sex in general, but that won't be what it is” (Transcript 2). I have checked up on her recently and can happily say that she achieved her goal of moving out of South Africa – therefore, she will no longer have the fear of encountering her perpetrator(s) in physical spaces or on billboards.

One of my participants still had to “see them after for another two, two and a half years” (Transcript 3). She said that their breakup was not instantaneous, as they “broke up over the course of like two, three months” (Transcript 3). This is because they were living together at the time. Beyond that, they also shared workspaces. “We were on that set together. I remember the first, they had like this pre-shoot, like lunch. And I was just like very happy to roll my eyes every time like my ex said something” (Transcript 3). As they shared social spaces, she encountered them at parties as well. “The next time after that I can remember was another party a few months later” (Transcript 3). Due to their multiple encounters, she spoke to the perpetrator once. “We did actually talk about it once. It was maybe like a year or two after. I was like, hey do you remember that thing? I mean

like the whole relationship was abusive" (Transcript 3). However, she said that the conversation was confusing. "I remember talking to her afterwards and being like, how am I doing? And she was like, no you doing just the right amount of what you are doing. You are doing well" (Transcript 3). Furthermore, she spoke to me about when the perpetrator messaged her as a result of the fact that they shared the physical space of sets because they were both in the film industry. "… they messaged me about something like a photo walk or something people were doing, said that they were going, and I could go and afterwards we could have coffee. … I was just like in bed for three days after that" (Transcript 3)

Since one of my interviewees frequented Muizenberg, where one of her perpetrator's lives, she had to worry about encountering him there: "… I'm still expecting him to be there. And there is like this latent anxiety about it. … I've decided that you can't have that fucken suburb. And he can't have the market … I don't have any fun at the market" (Transcript 4). He has even ruined a market that she formerly loved. "Toby [her ex], yes. I mean, we stayed in high school together and then saw him quite a few times out and about, but in the last two years, no" (Transcript 4). She had to attend school with one of her perpetrators and then had to see him 'out and about' after. Thankfully, she did not bump into him anywhere unexpectedly in the last two years. However, she "organised a meeting with him at one point" (Transcript 4) because she felt she "needed to" (Transcript 4) as she was unable to "let it go" (Transcript 4). She then went on to say that "I thought, that if I could just sit him down and say it … I don't think you can forgive … I was trying to forgive him, but it didn't work. … I did see him then" (Transcript 4).

**In academic spaces**

An interviewee directly encountered the perpetrator on campus, which caused her significant anxiety and an intense emotional response. "I would like, look over and he'd be staring directly at me. … I just wanted to walk straight up to him and just be like, what are you doing? And like, I got up and then the crowd started moving and then I just looked at him walking away and I was like, coward" (Transcript 1).

Following the encounter mentioned above, the interviewee explained the immediate impact on her mental state, indicating how seeing the perpetrator affects her deeply. "It made me really anxious. Um. I was thrown off for the rest of the day. I couldn't think straight or anything" (Transcript 1). She elaborated on the aftermath of seeing the perpetrator, illustrating the extent of the anxiety she experienced to the point of being sent home from lectures. "And then it just, I

started like freaking out. My lecturers actually sent me home at one stage because they were like, 'You, you're, you're not concentrating'. Yeah. So yeah. And it did cause me a lot of anxiety seeing him" (Transcript 1). This illustrates how it directly impacted her education. The anxiety this participant felt is something that was shared by two other participants. "I was always scared of seeing him on campus" (Transcript 6). The other participant also took the same Jammie (UCT Shuttle Bus) as her perpetrator. These buses are rather small, so the chance of them coming into contact increased significantly.

Another interviewee went to school with the perpetrator(s) until grade eleven. "… since then, I haven't really seen any of those people. I've seen them like now and then. … at the mall or somewhere" (Transcript 5). She also spoke about the decline in her physical health, and how she believes this was linked to the assault(s). This highlights the interviewee's experience of re-encountering trauma because of the shared physical space, the impact on her mental and physical health, and the prolonged healing process. She talked about how having to confront the perpetrator(s) every day at school "definitely affected" her "in a lot more ways" than she realised (Transcript 5) – and how this was worsened by the fact that the girl was "favoured" by teachers. Not only did she have to see the perpetrator(s), but she was even in 'competition' with one of them. "She was favoured by the teachers, everyone liked her, and she got to have the prefect thing" (Transcript 5). This is when my interviewee said she "really felt the difference" (Transcript 5).

When this interviewee was asked how she felt about the times she has seen them in public (restaurants, malls, and the like), she said: "Uhm… I think, having left the space [of the school that they both attended], working through my shit and then going back, there were times where I felt like weird. But there were also times when I felt like okay" (Transcript 5). Alongside this, she discussed how she "definitely" thought the fact that she had to see the perpetrators after the initial encounters prolonged the healing process for her. "… that was very difficult for me. It affected my marks definitely" (Transcript 5). Moving schools can heavily impact the grades of children, however – this was not the case for her. "And when I got to Islamia, I experienced this change, and I was still doing great, I wasn't failing or anything like that. I was getting in the seventies which is still quite high" (Transcript 5). When she moved schools, her grades remained. Then her marks had a "rapid change" (Transcript 5). This shows us that being assaulted, and then having to encounter the perpetrator, impacted her grades, "It was around that time that my grades started slipping … I think it is like when the bullying really began … It was

when I went from like having seventies to like having forties … teachers would just call me lazy" (Transcript 5). Alongside slipping grades, she felt further victimised as the teachers assumed she was not working as hard as she should have been – when they did not know about the internal battle she was facing each day when encountering these people who brought harm to her.

## THE MEANING OF ONGOING LIFE

Experiencing sexual violence irrevocably alters a person's life, distinguishing their existence before the event from their ongoing life afterward. For survivors who know their perpetrators, the separation between the assault and its aftermath can be particularly complex. The following analysis explores how survivors grapple with the intersection of the event and its lingering effects on their sense of self and relationships. The first sub-themes of this section speak to the participants' sense of how the assault changed their relationship with their ongoing lives, and I include consideration of how my interviewees see the question of an aftermath, given that they have re-encountered their perpetrators in both expected and unexpected ways in social spaces.

### The Lingering Effects of the Assault

One interviewee spoke about her sense of self – and how it was altered by the experience of being assaulted. The survivor describes how the experience of assault altered her identity, suggesting that the trauma creates an "aftermath" that is not entirely distinct from the event itself but rather a continuation of it. This sense of self has been impacted by seeing the perpetrator– she went as far as saying that it has shaped her. "I started having night terrors. So, like, screaming in my sleep and stuff" (Transcript 2). Night terrors are something she did not experience before the assault, so this is one thing that is new in this "ongoing" post-assault life. The trauma does not end with the event; instead, it continues to influence their life, their mental and physical health, and their perception of themselves and the world around them; this is well referenced in the literature on survivors' trauma (Hannan, Zimnick & Park. 2020)

The specificity of an aftermath in which victims know their perpetrators impacts many things in their life: their friendships with individuals who are in the same social circle their perpetrators, the navigation of being in areas frequented by their perpetrator(s), their schooling experience, social events, their work, their home, the transport that they use, their hobbies and their social media. "Sometimes he will come up on my social media and sometimes I get really like fucken pissed off" (Transcript 4). The trauma of the assault is recapitulated by the re-encounters, and there can be no sense of any closure to the actual experience.

Initially, the assault acts as a catalyst for these changes, with the event itself marking the beginning of a new, altered sense of self. Survivors may experience symptoms they had never encountered before, such as night terrors or severe mental health issues, which signify the profound impact of

the trauma. These changes are not just momentary but continue to affect their lives in significant ways, creating an "aftermath" that feels like a continuation of the assault itself.

During the unpacking of how her sense of self has changed, one participant wondered aloud what parts of herself were truly her and what was a result of the trauma from the assault. She wonders about what she would have been like had the assault never happened. When speaking about not being as physically affectionate as the people around her, she said: “I can’t tell if it was the years of men. I can’t tell if it’s a me thing or …” (Transcript 2). Here, she tries to figure out if her not being as physically affectionate as some of her loved ones is a result of years of sexual abuse from different men or if it is simply who she is – and if she would have not been a ‘touchy’ person even if she had not experienced the multiple instances of sexual assault that she was victim to.

A further respondent spoke about how deeply the mental issues she developed from the assault impacted her. “She also gave me tools to manage my anxiety and PTSD, which were really debilitating” (Transcript 7). This illustrates the interviewees’ ongoing mental and emotional encounters with the perpetrator, demonstrating how these interactions and memories continue to affect them.

Along the lines of their sense of self changing, their understanding of what sex is – and what men are – has also changed. “… it's also really affected my relationship with sex” (Transcript 2). The interviewees' reflections on sex reveal a complex interplay between their experiences of sexual assault and their current relationships with their bodies and sexuality. These threads of material did not flow out explicitly into talk about how re-encounters with perpetrators made them think about 'men' or 'sex', but I believe the interviews gave them space to explore this.

One survivor describes how her relationship with sex has been profoundly affected by her trauma. She says, “It’s not good for me. It’s not a reward or a treat or an indulgence. It’s like it’s nothing. So, when a guy wants it, I just think that’s all men want. You know what I mean? That’s all you want me for; it doesn’t matter who I am. I could be the next girl, it doesn’t matter” (Transcript 2). This statement encapsulates her belief that sex, rather than being a mutually enjoyable experience, is simply a means for men to objectify her, reducing her to a mere body rather than a person with agency and worth.

However, her relationship with sex and sexuality is not monolithic. She notes a stark difference in her sexual experiences with women compared to men, highlighting the complexity of her feelings.

As a bisexual woman, she finds liberation in her relationships with women, where she feels more in control and able to initiate rather than merely receive. “Being with women – it’s very liberating. I get to feel like I’m sexy, it’s the only place where I’m initiating rather than receiving everything that is sort of given to me” (Transcript 2). This experience contrasts sharply with her interactions with men, where her trauma is more present, and she feels more like a passive participant than an active one. Yet, even in this liberation, she wonders whether this difference is a result of her trauma or something inherent to her sexuality, reflecting the ongoing struggle to understand who she is apart from her traumatic experiences.

The effects of trauma on her sexuality extend beyond her emotional responses to include physical actions and appearances. She describes a heightened awareness of her body and how she presents it to the world, often feeling unsafe when showing skin. “I’m very aware of like wearing bras. Like, I’m not very showy with my skin – you know what I mean? And if I do, I’m doing it for the male gaze. This is what you want, right? You know. And if not, if I’m trying to feel safe – then I will just wear the baggiest, most covered clothes I have” (Transcript 2). This hyper-vigilance reflects a broader discomfort with her sexuality, a discomfort that she connects directly to her experiences of sexual violence. She articulates this unease with the equation she makes between nudity and danger, stating, “I think I don’t enjoy my sexuality... I just feel like nudity equals danger” (Transcript 2).

In these reflections, it becomes clear that the question of "what is sex?" for these survivors is inextricably linked to their trauma. Their experiences with sex are fraught with the aftereffects of sexual violence, which have altered their perceptions, behaviours, and feelings about their bodies and their sexual relationships. The struggle to reclaim their sexuality, to separate it from the trauma, is ongoing and deeply complex, illustrating the lasting impact of sexual violence on their sense of self and their ability to experience intimacy.

The reflections on relationships with men among the interviewees reveal how their experiences of sexual violence at the hands of men who they trusted fundamentally altered their perceptions of and interactions with men. These changes manifest in various ways, from deep-seated distrust to altered dynamics in both platonic and romantic relationships – as the men who they had trusted, inflicted harm upon them. Re-encounters with perpetrators only deepened this sense of men as dangerous because the perpetrators could, and did, re-appear.

One interviewee discusses how her relationships with men shifted dramatically after her assault. She mentions losing several male friends following her breakup with her ex-boyfriend, Samuel, indicating that her ability to feel safe around men had been severely compromised – especially when some of these men are friends with Samuel. "… my best friend ran into David ... And he told me that he saw him … and said "hey, why don't we just put the past behind us for now and just have a good night?"" (Transcript 1). Not only did her best friend at the time spend time with the man that harmed her, but he also told her about their interaction – as if it was not consequential. "… he bought him shots … they danced together. … spent the whole night together … told me about how much fun he had" (Transcript 1). These quotes show the ongoing impact of knowing that the perpetrator is still in the social circles of people close to her, which constantly reminds her of his presence – directly impacting her relationships with men, and her understanding of who they are.

In summary, the sense of self for sexual assault survivors who share common social spaces and mutual social relationships with their perpetrators undergoes a significant, multifaceted change that encompasses both mental and physical dimensions. The trauma they experience reshapes their identity in profound ways, manifesting in altered behaviours to avoid seeing them, coping mechanisms, and even personality traits.

Together, these narratives illustrate how sexual violence experienced by an individual whom the victim trusted has profoundly disrupted the interviewees' relationships with men. Whether through the loss of friendships with men, the alteration of familial bonds, or the challenges in romantic relationships, the trauma of sexual violence has left a lasting imprint on how these survivors view and interact with men. Their stories reveal a common theme of mistrust and fear, which they must navigate in their ongoing efforts to rebuild and redefine their relationships with men.

**What it means to separate the event from the aftermath?**

This question is one that has been going around in my brain since the conceptualisation of my dissertation topic. When formulating my 'interview guide', I kept this question in mind. Is it even possible to separate the event of sexual assault from the aftermath? Or is the aftermath simply a continuation of the event? Once I had transcribed my interviews and begun the analysis, I noticed even more how blurry the 'line' that 'separates' the event of being assaulted from the aftermath is.

The challenge of differentiating between the assault and its aftermath is evident in survivors'

reflections. For some, like one participant who learned about her perpetrator's post-assault transformation from the mutual friends they share, there exists a clear delineation between the person her attacker was during the assault and who he has become since. "… he went to anger management classes. He went to a clinic. Did DBT. He is on medication. And she said that he's like a completely different person" (Transcript 1). This shows us that she not only separates the event from the aftermath but even separates who he was at the time from who she believes him to be now. This survivor reported feeling some relief knowing that he had sought help and changed his behaviour. This is a surprisingly positive way in which sharing common social spaces and social relationships benefits this survivor in navigating her aftermath from a more favourable perspective.

In contrast, another survivor found the aftermath more intertwined with the event itself. "And I have only recently started acknowledging like one particular experience we had. I call it sexual assault because I do not want to… I know it is difficult for me to say rape" (Transcript 3). For this interviewee, with time came the realisation that what the perpetrator did to her was not okay. Her aftermath was about realising what had happened to her. Although the aftermath is not linear, the 'stage' of realisation is one that another interviewee had in the 'beginning' – although it was still a few months after their breakup, when she was in the clinic.

One interviewee drifted between talking about the actual assault and the aftermath in a way that was very much not black and white, but rather various shades of grey. One of the few places I could distinguish a clear sense of 'aftermath' was when she spoke about how her sense of self changed. When asked if she experiences any physical side effects 'after', she said: "So apparently women carry their stress in their hips. And when I do stretches for dancing, that area is like – so damn tight all the time. And your body remembers, you know what I mean?" (Transcript 2). She talks about how women often carry stress in their hips, which is a common belief in both physical and emotional health circles. "Plus, I, um, actually did get like an STD" (Transcript 2). This is a very physical way in which one can see the 'aftermath'. The last sentence, especially, could read like a math equation. Interviewee plus the event equals an STD (which is an aftermath).

The link between the aftermath and encountering perpetrators "after" the initial event is evident in the second paragraph of this subtheme, when the interviewee speaks about her optimistic view on one aspect of how encountering her perpetrator through information shared by mutual friends creates a favourable aspect to her aftermath. However, this same interviewee discusses how

seeing their mutual friends became an "aftermath" in and of itself. She felt it was incredibly difficult to see them in the beginning, especially when they would speak about him – as she would know it was him, even unnamed. When they spoke about him, she was reminded of him and subsequently, of the assault. This reminder caused her to "freak out" (Transcript 1).

Another interviewee could not visit the shops in the areas that they both frequent without fearing she might run into him. This shows us that "mundane" tasks become so intertwined with the aftermath of the assault when it is someone you have a high chance of running into. Likewise, this intertwining occurs for some people that must attend the same school/university as their perpetrator – which is the case for three of my participants. Analogously, an interviewee shared public transport with the person who assaulted her – because of this, she often felt violated all over again by simply taking the same bus as him. Therefore, the violation continues "after" the assault itself. This is how an interview participant felt once they fell ill, as they believed this was linked to the assault. The same interviewee is certain that seeing her perpetrators after being assaulted was the reason behind her healing process being "delayed", as well as her bad grades.

Corresponding with the interviewee who had difficulty returning to dance, another had to leave her studio because her perpetrator was a teacher there. This same interviewee is forced to encounter her perpetrators at the club where she dances. Another interviewee was forced to encounter their perpetrator regularly as they lived – and worked with – their perpetrator. As a result of their physical proximity, the perpetrator kept in contact with her. Their contact impacted her navigation of an aftermath as she felt that the trauma was continuing via their contact, which had a negative influence on her mental health.

As discussed earlier, survivors who share common social spaces and mutual social relationships with their perpetrators often encounter their perpetrators on social media platforms in one way or another (mutual friends posting with/about them, and/or clubs that they both frequent posting a picture of the perpetrator at an event are two examples of this). This means that the "aftermath" is transferred to the social media sphere as well. Another interviewee echoed a similar experience of how her experience of using social media changed after the assault. Her perpetrator used it to reach out to her. If they did not know each other, this is not something that he would have been able to do – furthering the link between aftermath and knowing your perpetrator/their knowledge of you through mutual social relationships and shared social spaces.

As a result of situations like the ones mentioned above, the aftermath becomes less distinct from the event itself. Re-encounters with perpetrators especially deepen this indistinction, making "secondary" victimisation - that of having the perpetrator active in the social world around the survivor - difficult to sever from the assault itself, or its damages.

## SOLIDARITY BETWEEN SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE INFLICTED UPON THEM BY KNOWN PERPETRATORS

Throughout these interviews, I noticed a 'solidarity' of sorts developing between myself and some of my interviewees. Alongside this, I noticed some interviewees spoke about a solidarity formed between them and other people whom they have opened up to – as well as a gendered difference in responses. "Also, I find it easier to talk to girls about this than to guys. If I talk to a guy about this, they immediately go 'I'm so sorry, that sucks'. Whereas if I talk to a girl, a lot of them relate. And they're like 'I understand because I've been through that too'" (Transcript 1). Despite this, she has had one positive experience of opening up to a man. "The one time I actually met a guy who was sexually assaulted by a woman, and I was having a full-on conversation. It was the first time I had spoken to a guy who actually understands" (Transcript 1). When speaking about the people who defended her when she opened up about her assault, she said: "it, like it just creates like the feeling of like somebody is willing to back you up on this like to a point that will hurt the other person, yeah" (Transcript 1). The theme of solidarity among survivors of sexual violence emerges as a critical aspect of their healing and coping processes. Across the interviews, this solidarity manifests in various forms, including shared experiences, mutual understanding, and support from both familiar and new connections.

One interviewee notes the gendered differences in responses when discussing her assault, emphasising how women friends are more likely to relate due to their own similar experiences. She explains, "If I talk to a guy about this, they immediately go 'I'm so sorry, that sucks'. Whereas if I talk to a girl, a lot of them relate. And they're like 'I understand because I've been through that too'" (Transcript 1). This highlights a common experience among female survivors, where conversations with other women often lead to a shared understanding, fostering a sense of solidarity. The interviewee recounts a rare instance of finding solidarity with a male survivor, which was particularly meaningful because it was "the first time I had spoken to a guy who actually understands" (Transcript 1). This interaction underscores the profound impact that shared experiences can have, even across gender lines, in building connections based on mutual understanding.

Another interviewee asked me many questions about my own experience(s) with sexual violence, and I think this helped her feel more comfortable speaking about her experiences. When we were talking about her encountering her perpetrator(s) in cyberspace, she asked me: "How do you, do

you have any like advice or like what do you, what are you trying to achieve with this research?" (Transcript 2). I then spoke to her about the changes I wish to bring about, especially in the university space, and then in the societal space – saying: "being able to put up like a research paper that's going to make people like your friends … read it and think … maybe it's not that good to post this picture, this person has done something to my friend". From this, we then 'bonded' over how difficult life 'after' the assault is. This led to a lengthy discussion about our lives and the paths we have both gone on after our assaults, I spoke to her about my son – whose conception was a result of me being raped – and she got excited about him being three years old. We spoke to each other about therapy and the different forms of therapy. There was a strong sense of community being built between the two of us, based on our shared traumatic experience. Throughout the interview, we found many things that we – as survivors – related to one another about. Although I did not discuss my own experience with re-encountering perpetrators, the blurriness of "event" and "aftermath" described above formed part of the rapport and solidarities I developed with my interviewees. I write this up as a "finding" because the ethics of listening to survivors make one alert to possibilities of hurting an interviewee who is discussing survival; the work between myself and the participants, however, opened up the notion of solidarities, rather than simply pain.

Another interviewee describes how she only felt comfortable sharing her experience of sexual violence after a close friend disclosed her own rape. "I told a very close friend, because she told me about an experience that she had with her boyfriend… And then, I told my story" (Transcript 3). Although she refers to the person as a "very close friend" in the interview, she later notes that they were not particularly close prior to this disclosure. This reciprocal sharing creates a bond between the two women, who were not particularly close before this conversation. This pattern repeats with other friends, where mutual disclosure of traumatic experiences leads to closer relationships and a deepened sense of solidarity. The interviewee emphasises how these conversations are emotionally intense and memorable, marking them as significant moments in her life. These shared experiences not only help in processing trauma but also solidify friendships, transforming casual acquaintances into close confidants through the act of mutual vulnerability.

One interviewee describes a form of solidarity that developed even before she fully recognised her own experience of sexual violence. She recounts breaking up with her boyfriend after he molested

her friend, and how her anger toward him eventually expanded to include the trauma he inflicted on her. “I was so angry with him about that, and then kind of like two years later then these memories… came to shape in a different way” (Transcript 4). Her realization, triggered by a friend’s trauma, shows how shared anger fosters solidarity. This connection between the two women, based on a mutual understanding of their abuser’s actions, exemplifies how solidarity can be both a catalyst for personal realization and a means of emotional support.

Interestingly, one interviewee discusses a complex form of solidarity with her perpetrator, whom she suspects was also a victim of sexual violence. She contemplates confronting her perpetrator but ultimately decides against it, torn between the desire to address her trauma and the fear of reopening old wounds for the perpetrator. This internal conflict illustrates how solidarity can sometimes extend beyond fellow survivors to include a nuanced understanding of the perpetrator’s possible experiences. This kind of empathy, while not necessarily common or expected, adds a layer of complexity to the concept of solidarity among survivors, showing that it can sometimes blur the lines between victim and perpetrator.

Another interviewee underscores the importance of solidarity in feeling less isolated. She explains that talking to others who have had similar experiences offers a sense of “unspoken understanding” that makes her feel less alone. Conversely, discussing her trauma with those who haven’t experienced it can be challenging, as they may be dismissive or fail to grasp the depth of the impact. She shares how learning that others had similar experiences with the same perpetrator made her feel validated and less dramatic, reinforcing the importance of solidarity in processing trauma. Shared survivorship deepened the conversation. A different participant finds solace in a support group for survivors, where the validation, understanding, and community she experiences are essential to her healing process. “Talking to them has been incredibly validating. We all understand each other in a way that others might not” (Transcript 7). She emphasises the power of sharing stories with those who have walked similar paths, noting that this solidarity offers both emotional support and practical advice. This community reduces isolation and strengthens her resolve to heal.

In summary, solidarity among survivors is a crucial element in their healing journey. Whether through mutual disclosure, shared anger, or participation in support groups, this solidarity offers survivors validation, understanding, and a sense of community that helps them cope with their trauma Shared experiences remind survivors they’re not alone, offering strength in facing long-

term trauma.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This chapter theorizes findings on how survivors of sexual violence navigate what I now want to argue constitutes secondary victimisation when sharing spaces with perpetrators, linking key themes to theoretical frameworks and literature on sexual violence, rape culture, and secondary victimisation.

Despite participant diversity, key themes emerged: survivors' narratives of discussing assault, relationships with perpetrators, encounters in the 'aftermath,' and the interplay between these experiences and solidarity among survivors sharing spaces with perpetrators. My research addresses the gap in studies on facing perpetrators in daily life—educational, social, and media spaces—beyond PTSD or trial-based secondary victimisation. This required exploring the 'aftermath' as survivors narrated assault and reflected on re-encounters, an often intertwined and challenging distinction. This chapter theorises the 'aftermath' to clarify these entanglements.

## RAPE CULTURE

### What re-encounters with perpetrators in social circles does to rape culture?

The idea of "rape culture" within social and institutional spaces, as spoken about by Gqola (2015) and Tuerkheimer (2015), is vital in comprehending the way shared spaces turn into sites of re-traumatisation. The way sexual assault becomes normalised and the unwillingness to challenge abusers in shared places perpetuates a cycle of victimisation. This is something that links each of my themes.

Rape culture plays a role in the way gender shapes how survivors experience disclosure. One participant noted men often respond with sympathy, while women relate through shared experiences (Transcript 1). This aligns with Puckett's (2018b) findings on how gender norms and shared understanding affect validation, with women offering solidarity not typically found in male responses.

Speaking about sexual violence is not a simple or singular experience. Instead, it includes a complicated negotiation of personal, emotional, and social factors, influenced by gendered dynamics, societal rape myths, and the desire of victims to retain autonomy over their narratives. Victims' experiences with opening up should not be separated from the broader cultural context of rape culture, where the fear of shame and the myths surrounding rape frequently stop victims from speaking out, preventing them from experiencing healing and validation.

The societal and cultural legacies of violence, especially in contexts like South Africa – in which historical legacies of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid shape modern-day gendered violence, make survivors' experiences more complex. Gqola (2015) asserts that South Africa is a country founded on the "trauma of slavery and sexual subjection". The profoundly embedded patriarchal structures further rape culture.

Moolman (2020) asserts that toxic masculinity is an intensely entangled societal force that perpetuates rape culture, and this penetrating notion may impact how people react to victims' stories of being violated. When the friends that the survivor shares with the abuser choose to continue the friendship with the abuser or attempt to minimise what the survivor has been through, it points to the larger societal norms of patriarchy. This creates an isolating experience which does not make the journey to recovery easy for survivors. Gqola (2015) and Moolman (2020) contend that rape culture and toxic masculinity work to perpetuate harmful social norms that sustain the

patriarchy.

My research shows that rape culture is deepened for survivors who have to re-encounter their perpetrators in social and media spaces, where these perpetrators are treated as “ordinary” social beings while the survivor remains within their recollections of who the perpetrator is and what they did. This disjunction, about which many discussed, creates parallel worlds for the survivor, where her “truth” gets erased by the ease with which her perpetrator seems to be navigating the world.

## SECONDARY VICTIMISATION

**How does the term need redefining/deepening in the face of my introductory research?**

A general understanding of secondary victimisation is as a "key concept in research into the experiences of victims of crime, related policies and legislation, and practices of support and care" (Pemberton & Mulder, 2023). More specifically, secondary victimisation refers to the further trauma that survivors encounter when they engage with societal institutions, individuals, or systems (such as the police, medical professionals, or even family and friends) who respond in disbelief – sometimes blaming them and/or minimising what happened to them. This includes but is not limited to – being exposed to stigma, having their trauma dismissed, their credibility being questioned and being subjected to aggressive questioning (Orth, 2002; Wasco, 2003).

This, however, is not the understanding I will be working with. My research seeks to think of the term 'secondary victimisation' further than institutional responses – to include the psychological, social, and mental effect of re-encountering one's perpetrator in everyday spaces. These encounters – whether at social events, e-spaces, or in academic environments – may be retraumatising events in and of themselves, even without apparent hostility or disbelief. I position these experiences as a form of secondary harm: indirect yet profoundly distressing, rooted in a social world that is often ill-equipped to protect or acknowledge the ongoing presence and agency of survivors.

The problem of seeing abusers after experiencing sexual abuse can be considered a form of "secondary victimisation", even though this term is mostly made use of in legal contexts to explain the struggle victims go through during criminal proceedings. Despite this, the term is not limited to the legal field. Gqola (2015: 93) proposes that victims may face secondary victimisation when individuals mishandle their trauma, especially in the context of the victim re-encountering their abuser. Talking about sexual violence is emotionally complex, and can be considered another form of secondary victimisation, as interviewees described feelings ranging from precariousness to spiritual consolation. These varied experiences highlight the individualized nature of disclosure and its societal and cultural context.

Talking about trauma typically brings about both agony and solace. An interviewee said, "It's a mix of emotions...on one hand, it's incredibly painful to recount those memories...on the other hand, there's a sense of relief" (Transcript 6). This dual experience is an important aspect of trauma

disclosure. It considers the possibility of healing, as well as the torment of revisiting trauma. This aligns with the findings of Abrahams et al. (2013), who found that victims of non-stranger sexual violence typically struggle with a greater sense of guilt and shame.

Victims must learn to deal with the mental reality of living with ongoing trauma, and the highly likely chance of physically re-encountering the abuser(s). Secondary victimisation here, then, does not refer to the court-based processes of the law and the way these position the survivor, but to a different form of re-engagement with the assault, where the figure of the perpetrator exceeds the frame of the time the attack took, and seeps into daily social life.

The effect of sexual assault on victims is overpowering, complex, and long-lasting, changing their sense of self in subtle and unmistakable ways. Research underscores the physical and mental impact that survivors experience due to being a victim of sexual violence, especially in the context of South Africa, where sexual assault is a vital problem of public health (Mgoqi-Mbalo, Zhang & Ntuli, 2017; Orth, Van Wyk & Andipatin, 2020). The trauma victims suffer usually leaves them with long-lasting psychological challenges. Some of these are anxiety, PTSD, and depression (Mgoqi-Mbalo et al., 2017). They may also have physical struggles that impact their lives daily (Gqola, 2015; Orth et al., 2020) - because of this, being a survivor of sexual violence does not end with the 'event', it becomes a constant compulsion that penetrates all areas of the victim's life. As such, the experience of sexual assault does not merely remain in the past but becomes an ongoing force that permeates every facet of a survivor's existence, radically changing their identity.

When speaking to an interviewee about how we do not want assaults to be defining things, we also acknowledged that it does change your sense of self – especially if it is multiple occasions of being assaulted that are spread over many years. Since she knows her perpetrators, she gets to see them living their life as if nothing has happened, as described in the above section The fact that the assailants seem unaffected contrasts sharply with the profound and lasting impact the trauma has had on her and constitutes an ongoing sense of injustice: her "brokenness" is marked by the perpetrators' visible (to her) freedom Thus, "secondary victimisation" becomes the result not of a court process, where the survivor is denied independent credibility due to their status as a witness, but of the precarity of the survivor's control over social and media spaces long after the actual assault.

## PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL SPACES

### What do they become for my participants, especially when there is a likelihood of re-encountering the perpetrator?

Victims of sexual assault that must share physical spaces with the people that abused them face a severe mental struggle that throws their daily lives into disarray, delaying their journey of recovery. I have looked at the way victims navigate sharing physical spaces with abusers, utilising the lived experiences of my interviewees and the literature that already exists to explore the complicated effect these encounters have on victims' psychological state. The evidence proposes that these constant encounters trigger new ways of mental anguish that hinder the victims' capacity to function in work, academic and social places.

Moor and Anderson (2019) highlights that victims of sexual assault that share places with abusers typically have worse anxiety and paranoia. These experiences are in harmony with the experiences of being destabilised by encountering the abusers in physical spaces that my interviewees spoke about. O'Neil and Morgan (2021) describe the way institutional responses – or lack thereof – may make it more difficult for victims to have a sense of safety due to their worsened emotional state. This was something multiple interviewees spoke about, as they felt retraumatised and unsupported due to institutional failures.

Moor and Anderson's (2019) argument that victims that must be in physical places with their abusers experience an amplified psychological toll is supported by the quote of my interviewees. The persistent fear of encountering abusers leads to ongoing mental struggles. This throws their mental state into disarray, leaving them without the capacity to function in their daily lives – especially in work and educational environments.

Hlavka (2020) argued that plenty of victims develop coping mechanisms like desensitisation and/or avoidance when they must share physical places with abusers. These strategies typically end up impacting them in the long run, despite assisting in the short term. An interviewee had to pull out of her dance studio as she was experiencing extreme anxiety because of her abuser teaching at the studio. The place that used to be a space of happiness has turned into a space of re-traumatisation, which forced her to leave. Her leaving is in line with Hlavka's (2020) finding that victims typically resort to avoidance as a coping mechanism, a strategy that results in them being isolated from the places that brought them joy.

Victims that are forced to be in social spaces with the people that have harmed them face unique difficulties. The terror of meeting their abuser once more is an actual possibility, not merely an anxiety based on trauma.

For these victims, seeing the perpetrator is not merely a social and/or physical encounter, but a psychological experience that both reactivates the trauma, and reminds the survivor of her own vulnerability at any moment. The mental entanglement with the abuser – through anxiety surrounding highly possible meetings and/or flashbacks – persists in haunting them even after the assault has taken place. An interviewee spoke about this continuous mental struggle. One participant summed up this ongoing psychological burden: "The paranoia stays" (Transcript 6).

The recurring psychological and mental encounters with abusers after an assault showcase the deep mental effect of sexual assault, especially when victims remain sharing mutual spaces with perpetrators. These encounters are deeply rooted in the psyche of the victim – where anxiety, terror and memories shape their everyday lives – and are worsened because of being in close physical range of their perpetrator(s).

Victims of sexual assault usually have to handle complicated mental struggles when navigating social circles that are shared with their abuser(s). This struggle is worsened when friends have conversations that are centred around the abuser, or when they are forced to encounter the abuser in shared places. The navigation of this experience is further complicated by the fact that some survivors may not feel comfortable and/or ready to speak about what the perpetrator has put them through, so some friends may not know what happened.

Puckett (2018a) argues, in her article for *Teen Vogue*, that a potential solution for victims encountering their perpetrator(s) in social situations is to take themselves out of the situation completely. Nevertheless, as Puckett acknowledges, this is rarely a practical solution, specifically if the perpetrator plays a role in the victim's social circle. The persisting effect of shared social circles cannot be understated. Victims of sexual assault typically face societal pressures when their friends choose to keep connections to their abusers. This worsens the feeling of being isolated.

O'Neil and Morgan (2021) argue that the lack of institutional support for victims that are forced to occupy the same physical space as the abusers do can worsen the mental struggle of these encounters. Sexual assault persists in South African universities (Omar, 2019), plenty of students

struggle with notable blocks to accessing safety and support in shared academic spaces. Zapp et al. (2021) underscores the way plenty of universities fail to properly address sexual assault, leaving victims vulnerable to persisting danger. An interviewee spoke about the negative effect regularly encountering abusers, and the anxiety brought about by it, had on her studies. A lack of assistance from teachers added to this, as they blamed the dip in grades on her being lazy – instead of acknowledging what she was going through.

In short, sharing social circles with abusers alters victims' identities, both physically and psychologically. Their sense of self is altered in many ways, resulting in changed behaviours in an attempt to avoid their perpetrator(s), personality traits, and ways of coping. These narratives illustrate the profound and lasting changes that sexual assault inflicts on survivors' sense of self. The trauma of sexual violence does not remain a discrete event but weaves itself into the ongoing fabric of survivors' lives, altering how they perceive themselves, their relationships, and the world around them. The intersection of mental, physical, and emotional impacts is evident in the survivors' stories, where the ongoing effects of trauma shape their daily experiences and fundamentally change how they navigate the world. This ongoing struggle to redefine oneself in the aftermath of trauma is a central aspect of the meaning of ongoing life for survivors.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

### A point of power and vulnerability for survivors

Social media is located as a "world" even more unpredictable than the real world of social engagement; it is vital to the interviewees' identity and life mobility. The popularity of social media has changed the ways victims of sexual assault navigate their post-trauma experiences. Digital feminist activism has given victims new spaces to share their narratives, challenge rape myths, and confront the narratives that support rape culture. As Krause and Van Zyl (2021) explain, online platforms have grown to be a critical aspect of allowing victims to be heard, assisting in dismantling detrimental stereotypes, and uncovering the fake dichotomy of the "stranger danger" myth. These e-spaces are crucial in confronting the immensely embedded myths surrounding sexual assault that penetrate not only academic conversations, but also those of the public as well – especially by exposing the fact that many victims are no strangers to the abusers.

However, for survivors of sexual abuse who know their abusers, social media can turn into a violent and anxious environment. Digital spaces can be a new way for abusers to repetitively harass and intrude on their victims, but it can also give victims another place to open up about their narratives – and to find community whilst doing so. Social media obscures the lines between what is public and what is private; this results in victims having a new anxiety of encountering their perpetrator(s) in the social media sphere.

This anxiety shows up in a multitude of ways. Some people see posts reshared by/posts with their perpetrator(s) shared by people in their shared social spaces, or direct messages from their abusers.

Victims may block their abusers, but the ubiquitous nature of e-spaces does not make it easy for victims to wholly get away from reminders of their trauma. This differs from material places, where there might be steps victims could take to try and prevent or limit these meetings. Victims face increased difficulty in trying to escape from their trauma due to social media's incessant presence in daily life. One interviewee made this clear when speaking about how her assault was worsened by her perpetrator harassing her online.

Algorithmic suggestions, mutual interests, and/or a shared social circle may result in the victim seeing their abuser on social media even after unfollowing and/or blocking them.

Gill and Harrison (2019) assert that marginalized victims, specifically those from a lower class and refugees, face more challenges when accessing support and navigating the journey of

recovery. Solidarity is a critical mechanism in getting over these struggles, giving victims a space to open up about their challenges and fight for systemic change. This is shown with movements such as the #MeToo movement. It called attention to how vital the online space is as a platform for solidarity, allowing victims to speak about their narratives, fight against detrimental societal notions, and to counter rape myths. The work of digital feminist activism (Krause & Van Zyl, 2021) is critical in this regard, as it provides platforms for survivors to voice their experiences, challenging rape myths and deconstructing harmful societal narratives.

My findings show that the digital era, especially in its power over the meaning of the social, has brought about a critical shift in the navigation of sexual assault, as victims must now navigate the continuous presence of abusers in e-spaces – alongside the navigation of the mental and physical aftermath. Social media sites give perpetrator(s), and others, new ways to harass survivors – despite being a powerful tool for solidarity and activism. Survivors now have to navigate private and public encounters with abusers online, and this not only complicates their journey to recovery, but I would argue that it creates a context in which it is difficult to secure spaces free of re-encounter with perpetrators. This, in turn, has implications for how one might theorise the "aftermath" of sexual assault.

## THE “EVENT” VS THE “AFTERMATH”

### Is it possible to separate the two?

An important problem in research on trauma is discovering whether it is possible to separate the traumatic experience from the aftermath of it. This has implications in understanding the lived experiences of victims, as well as the mental toll. Certain authors propose that depression and PTSD are connected to factors that happen before, during, and after a traumatic incident – which creates the impression of a process that is linear, in which the assault and the aftermath are seen as entirely separate from each other. Mgoqi-Mbalo, Zhang, and Ntuli (2017: 301) reinforce this perception by arranging their research in distinct themes: pre-assault, assault-related factors, and post-assault factors. This linear structure does not encapsulate the complicated lived experience of most victims, in which the assault and the aftermath are entangled and indivisible. Mgoqi-Mbalo, Zhang, and Ntuli (2017) underscore how critical the relationship between survivors and abusers is, stating that only 35% of their interviewees experienced abuse at the hands of a stranger (2017: 304). The relationship suggests that the aftermath is actively impacted by continuous interactions with the abusers. They did not analyse the repercussions of these interactions on the survivors. This omission is especially visible when thinking about daily re-encounters, such as encountering the abuser in a social space that they share, as this can deeply disturb the journey to recovery for victims – due to their sense of safety being negatively impacted. This is echoed by an interviewee that said: "I can’t even go to the shops around the area... I can’t help but be scared that I’ll run into him" (Transcript 2). The increased anxiety shows us how the aftermath of abuse is a lived experience that occurs in reality, during daily encounters, as well as being a mental journey.

The idea of being “triggered” is looked at by Carter (2015: 3), who defines it as an extreme mental reaction to an experience that brings about memories of the initial assault a victim has been through. Many victims feel that interactions with their perpetrators after the abuse are connected.

Victims narrate their stories fluidly, even though the literature suggests that post-abuse healing is marked by a distinction between the assault and the aftermath. Puckett (2018a) believes that the aftermath of sexual violence is something victims need to navigate continuously, since the effects (physical and mental) are never entirely repressed. A participant echoed this, explaining: "It’s like I’m still living in the aftermath... I can’t escape it, because I keep seeing him everywhere" (Transcript 2). This highlights the penetrating nature of trauma, where the assault itself cannot be

tidily separated from the aftermath as daily life turns into an ongoing reminder of the trauma experienced.

Fourie et al. (2023) states that the relational dynamics between the abuser and the survivor may deeply influence the mental challenges the survivor faces, but the impact of seeing the perpetrator after the assault has not been researched enough. This gap in the literature is apparent in the experiences of victims who continuously had interactions with the people that abused them in the e-space, as well as the physical space. When discussing how her experience with social media platforms has been altered after being assaulted, an interviewee said: "He used social media to reach out to me, which wouldn't have happened if I didn't know him... It's like he was there, even on my phone" (Transcript 3). This quote demonstrates the way the aftermath can penetrate e-spaces, as well as physical spaces, which makes the distinction between the original instance and the aftermath more complex.

The notion that the aftermath cannot be tidily distinguished from the original assault is emphasised by the continuous interactions victims have with perpetrators, both online and in-person. The trauma still influences victims in a manner that goes further than the original assault, shaping their sense of self, their everyday lives, and their relationship dynamics. Gill and Harrison (2019) state that systemic forces and intersecting identities make it more difficult for the victim to get away from the aftermath. Victims face extra struggles in reclaiming their sense of agency and receiving support, even more so when they come from marginalised backgrounds.

In sum, the theoretical notion that the assault and the aftermath can be distinguished from each other does not acknowledge the reality that most victims experience. The effects of abuse continue daily, not confined to the initial incident. My participants further the idea that the aftermath is a continuous struggle that has an ongoing impact on how survivors' mental, bodily and social encounters are shaped – as opposed to being a linear "next step" after being assaulted.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

It is important to explore an "aftermath" of sexual violence which includes the possibility of everyday encounters with a perpetrator for a plethora of reasons, as there is still much that is unknown about this aftermath. For example, it is not known whether public online disclosures are assisting survivors of sexual violence in their recovery – or making the journey of recovery a more difficult one (Gunderson & Zaleski, 2021). For survivors of sexual violence who know their perpetrator, this could be an arguably more difficult decision. If they name the perpetrator, they could find themselves in legal trouble. If they do not name the perpetrator but it is someone that attends the same university as them, or someone in their friendship group – there may be speculation on who the perpetrator is, and they may be 'forced' to see the perpetrator on campus or at social gatherings. This would probably bring about immense anxiety as they would be fearful of how the perpetrator may react to their public acknowledgement of what has been done to them, regardless of the survivor not publicly naming them. This is one example of many gaps that I hope my research can contribute to.

This dissertation was my attempt at contributing to the literature surrounding the complexities of navigating life and secondary victimisation when you have been assaulted by someone you know.

In response to Sub-question 1: **"How do survivors represent the experience of encountering known perpetrators in shared social spaces?"**

The research reveals that victims commonly speak about these encounters as unpredictable, disempowering and mentally draining. The presence of a known perpetrator in academic or social environments causes hypervigilance, fear, and stress. Many victims described isolating themselves socially, changing their routines, and/or avoiding specific places. These responses showcase the embodied and continuous nature of trauma in the aftermath of sexual violence.

In response to Sub-question 2: **"How do survivors navigate the complexities of mutual social relationships and networks when the perpetrator is known to them?"**

My findings show that mutual social networks are commonly spaces of silence and/or betrayal. Participants spoke about feelings of blame and judgement from friends and peers, coinciding with feeling a lack of support. Some friendships grew after shared disclosures, but others ended. Victims often had to weigh the consequences of speaking out against the chance of not being

believed and/or excluded societally. My research underscores how secondary victimisation frequently comes about from the social dynamics within these mutual networks.

In response to Sub-question 3: **"What role do digital spaces and social media play in shaping these experiences of secondary victimisation?"**

My interviewees spoke about the duality that e-spaces hold. They can reproduce harm, but they can also be a space for community-building and visibility. Victims reflected on anxiety with regards to digitally encountering their perpetrator, handling indirect contact (such as posts and likes), and a fear that they would receive backlash and/or legal threats as a result of opening up about their experiences. The e-space blurs the line between public and private, producing a new dimension of secondary victimisation.

When reflecting upon my research process, I can acknowledge the plethora of challenges I have faced. This includes an absence of literature that examines secondary victimisation through the lens of survivors who know their perpetrators, especially in a South African context. This lack of literature suggests a crucial gap in the field, reinforcing the need for more research into the experiences of survivors who know their perpetrators, particularly within settings where shared social spaces with perpetrators are often unavoidable.

A critical contribution of my research has been the unpacking of an "aftermath" when it comes to sexual assault. The typical view treats assault and aftermath as separate, linear stages—mostly legal or psychological. My research challenges this division. This is where my research differs from the traditional understanding, as I have sought to underscore the spatial and social elements of this "aftermath" – especially with regards to physical and e-space encounters. As the digital sphere is a relatively "new" area of research (with social media only truly gaining popularity in the last 15 years, and being an ever-changing space), there is not sufficient research on the role it plays in being a space for secondary victimisation when victims might virtually encounter their perpetrators'. This presents an area for future research, as digital spaces increasingly shape trauma, disclosure, and social navigation. Their evolving role makes them central to understanding secondary victimisation.

My scholarship has taken steps to highlight the above. However, I was limited in numerous ways. I was only able to conduct seven interviews. My interviewees were diverse with regards to their access to resources and support, but the small number of participants limited my ability to conduct

a truly intersectional analysis of how class, race, and gender impacted their experiences of navigating life after being assaulted by a known perpetrator. Ongoing research into this topic would benefit greatly from a more intersectional approach that considers the way different aspects of the participants' intersectionality influence their navigation of the spaces they share with their perpetrator(s).

Moreover, vital legal and ethical questions surrounding opening up publicly about being assaulted – especially on social media – were brought up when conducting this research. Victims who made the choice to speak about what they have been through could still be subject to speculation, judgement, and potentially retaliation – even without naming their perpetrator(s). As such, we are privy to the manner in which their words hold extreme social consequences. This showcases the demand for further victim protection from both institutions and the law, especially for victims who know – and share spaces with – their perpetrator(s). Workplaces, universities, and social structures as a whole need to keep in mind the full scope of navigating life *post-assault*, as opposed to viewing sexual assault as an instance of violence that consists of the isolated instance and a crystal-clear **end**.

In sum, my research is a starting point in necessary discussions on secondary victimisation. It highlights how current institutional responses fall short for victims sharing spaces with perpetrator(s). If institutions were to stop looking at this as a thing that is over when a court case is closed, or a formal report is lodged, and instead take note of the continuous impact it has on victims – we might be able to create systems that better support survivors and recognise the complexity of their experiences.

This research also opens avenues for future inquiry, particularly in relation to digital dimensions of secondary victimisation. How do survivors engage with, avoid, or confront their perpetrators in online spaces? What role do mutual social networks play in shaping these experiences? And how can institutions better support survivors who navigate these dynamics? These are critical questions that deserve further scholarly and policy-driven attention.

This research is just one piece of the broader puzzle on sexual violence and justice. It offers insight while underscoring the need for further study. Moving forward, I can only hope that my research becomes a catalyst for reform within institutions (and society as a whole) and for more studies, ensuring that survivors get to navigate life "*after*" the "initial" assault with support that

sees how complex their experiences are – instead of being misunderstood and alone.

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