Addressing Sexual Violence on Campus: An Exploration of First-Year University Men's Constructions of Sexual Violence through a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

This mini thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology degree at Rhodes University.

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Abstract

This research explored how first-year men students at a South African university construct sexual violence using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. Through the use of vignettes depicting various sexual encounters, the study examined participants' interpretations of these scenarios and the underlying discourses about sexual violence that emerged in their talk. Five key discourses were identified: Sexual Refusal, Justification, Responsibility, Trauma and Damage, as well as the discourse of 'real' Rape. Participants' interpretations informed these discourses of sexual violence as involving the absence of consent, the presence of physical force, exploitation of vulnerability, trauma, and sexual violence as a criminal/moral wrongdoing. The findings reveal that participants' discourses largely aligned with existing societal narratives about SV and sex, often reflecting and reproducing harmful societal perspectives about gender, sex and interpersonal relations. While some participants showed progressive narratives and positions of compassion, uncritical engagement with these discourses perpetuated understandings that normalise unequal power dynamics in sexual relations. Participants' talk illustrated varying levels of readiness to intervene in sexual violence scenarios, taking active respondent positions in some scenarios while showing uncertainty in others. Their negotiated interpretations of the vignettes suggest a potential for influential roles in challenging harmful campus cultures around sexual violence.

Keywords: sexual violence, consent, rape culture, men students, masculinity(ies), discourse, systemic inequality, intervention.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the community of Pine Trees (formerly *Die Gaaitjie*) in Plettenberg Bay, whose resilience, stories, and experiences have shaped my passion for advocacy and preventative intervention work. Thank you for raising me and for instilling in me the values of strength, perseverance, and love. It is my deepest hope that my work in this field will one day help co-create, with you, an environment that not only challenges systems of inequality but also nurtures the boundless potential and strengths you hold. Ndiyabulela, ek sal vir ewig dankbaar wees aan julle!

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Contextual Background

1.1. Introduction

A rape-prone society is one in which rape is prevalent, normalised, allowable and embedded within the social fabric (Sanday, 1981). South Africa can be conceptualised as one such society (Mills, 2010, as cited in Gmeiner, 2014). The 2021/2022 South African Police Services (SAPS, 2022) annual crime report revealed a total of 41 739 rape cases for the period 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. This amounts to an increase of 5,409 cases compared to the previous year. Of these reported cases, 6969 (16%) were from the Eastern Cape - the province where this study is located (SAPS, 2022). This prevalence is not unique to South Africa but is noticeable at a global level where rape remains a critical issue that affects individuals and communities worldwide, with consequences for psychological, social, economic, sexual and reproductive health (Orth *et al.*, 2020). Global survey studies from 2000 to 2018 indicate an average of 736 million women (nearly 1 in 3) having experienced some form of sexual violence (SV), including rape and other forms of sexual assault, at least once since the age of 15 (World Health Organization [WHO] 2021).

While these statistics highlight and emphasise the widespread nature of SV, they ought to be approached with caution due to the significant under-reporting influenced by various factors such as stigmatization, victim-blaming, and other components of what is termed as 'rape culture' (Orth *et al*., 2020). Coined in 1975, 'rape culture' describes a societal framework that normalises men's sexual aggression and violence, shifts blame onto the victim/survivors and operates to diminish the severity of SV (Brownmiller, 1975). The concept of rape culture and its role in maintaining and perpetuating SV in society will be discussed in the second chapter of this thesis.

While the statistics mentioned above look at the prevalence of SV in broader society, similar trends have been noted globally within the context of higher education institutions (HEIs). Estimates based on US campus statistics of SV revealed that 1 in 4 women were sexually assaulted by the time they graduated (King *et al.*, 2020). At the same time, a study conducted on students in 2021 to estimate the prevalence of SV at one of the HEIs in the United Kingdom, using self-report surveys over the previous year, revealed that 20.5% of the

students had experienced at least one act of forced and attempted SV in the form of sexual touching or rape (Steele *et al.,* 2024). Similarly, a different study also conducted at an HEI in the United Kingdom on women students revealed that 65% of them had experienced SV, with 8% of the surveyed students admitting to having been raped (Reynolds, 2018, as cited in Mkhize *et al.,* 2022). A recent systematic review analysed 78 studies from 2000 to 2017 to assess the prevalence of SV perpetration among Canadian and American college men. The review found that, in a sample of 5,524 college men, 29% had admitted to perpetrating SV, while 6% had admitted to committing rape (Anderson *et al.,* 2021).

In South Africa, the Minister of Higher Education and Training reported 47 cases of campus rape and sexual assault across South African public universities in 2017 (Nkosi, 2018, as cited in Boonzaier *et al.*, 2019). Statistics by Higher Health revealed that 10% of all reported rape cases in South Africa occur in HEIs (Higher Health, n.d). These statistics suggest that the prevalence of SV persists in spaces of higher education in South Africa.

1.2. Sexual Assault and Rape

SV is an umbrella term for any attempted or completed non-consensual sexual interaction (Steele *et al.*, 2024). It takes different forms of sexual behaviours ranging from unwanted sexual comments, sexual assault, sexual coercion, and aggression to rape and rape-murder, as reflected in the South African legislation, which makes reference to 59 different sexual offences (Vetten, 2014). Rape, in legislation, is often distinguished as a criminal offence separate from other forms of SV - with specific standards of evidence to determine the act as rape. The South African Sexual Offences Act (Sexual Offences and Related Matters Amendment Act 32 of 2007) defines rape as an act involving unlawful and intentional sexual penetration without the individual's consent, placing emphasis on penetration without consent as a standard of evidence of rape. The Act differentiates rape from sexual assault. It defines sexual assault in two parts: first, as the unlawful, intentional act of sexual violation without consent, and second, as the act of causing someone to believe they will be sexually violated (Sexual Offences and Related Matters Amendment Act 32 of 2007). This definition of sexual assault highlights both sexual violation and the use of threats or fear to initiate sexual activity as acts of violation.

From these definitions of rape and sexual assault, the absence of consent is a shared standard. While the construct of consent is not the focus of this study, it plays an integral role in the definitions of rape and sexual assault, as illustrated in this Act. Consent, often positioned as the opposite of coercion, understood as verbal and nonverbal cues that communicate a 'free agreement' or willingness to engage in a sexual activity (Powell *et al*., 2013). Despite this shared standard of constructing rape and sexual assault - a clear distinction is made between these two phenomena.

This separation of rape from sexual assault often locates rape within the criminal justice system. In contrast, other forms of SV, such as sexual coercion, unwanted sexual contact and sexual harassment, are often classified as misconduct and dealt with in terms of institutions' disciplinary codes - often away from the legal system (Vetten, 2014). However, as Ellis (1989) notes, acts of SV - irrespective of where it is on the spectrum - share a common foundation in the exertion of power (often gendered) and control over another's body (also see Phillips, 2017). In light of this, the thesis focuses on rape and acts of sexual assault, both of which constitutes SV - a pervasive societal issue that expands beyond individual sexual decisions and is deeply rooted in broader systems of power relations (Cahill, 2001).

1.3. Context

1.3.1 The Prevalence of Sexual Violence in the Contexts of Higher Education Institutions

International studies, particularly from the US, indicate university campuses as spaces conducive to SV, often attributing this to fraternity culture (King *et al.,* 2020). This culture, characterised by excessive alcohol consumption, masculine group bonding, and the objectification of women - fostering rape-accepting beliefs and attitudes among students in HEIs (Hills *et al*., 2021). Fraternities are social organisations - mainly in US colleges - that form brotherhoods based on familiar sports and individual goals (Parcher, 2017). While these social organisations are known for promoting a sense of brotherhood, belonging and social responsibility among college students, they have been criticised for heavy drinking and promoting group mentality, referred to as *lad culture* (Hills *et al*., 2021; Jozkowski, 2017). Lad culture, marked by misogyny and sexist behaviours, promotes the view that women act as gatekeepers to sex, positioning men as obligated to pursue and obtain sexual encounters

(Phillips, 2017). Within these peer groups, [1]men students often encourage and support one another in behaviours that construct sex as a goal to be pursued and achieved (Giraldi & Monk-Turner, 2017). Here, rape and sexually aggressive acts constituting SV are seen as endemic and pervasive social issues - both reflecting and contributing to broader societal norms that protect unequal and powered interpersonal relations.

With high prevalence rates reported in both non-conflict and conflict-affected settings, SV remains a concern across Sub-Saharan African countries. In a systematic review of studies on the prevalence, risk factors and consequences of SV on university campuses across the region, Mzilangwe *et al.,* (2025) highlight the widespread nature of SV in universities between 2014 and 2023. In Nigeria, two university-based studies reported high rates of SV: 39.5% of young women at one institution reported experiencing some form of SV (Ajayi *et al.,* 2023), while another study found that 46% of women undergraduates had been subjected to SV (Mezie-Okoye & Alamina, 2014).

Recent statistics illustrate that sexual assault is a significant concern in South African campuses, with 20 to 25 per cent of women reporting sexual victimisation during their time in university (Makhaye *et al.,* 2023). HEIs in South Africa play an influential role in the society's socio-economic and cultural well-being. They encompass aspirations relating to academic achievement and symbolise hope for employment and socio-economic advancement. Given that HEIs are microcosms of the larger community, South African HEIs are prone to the pervasiveness of SV. South Africa is home to twenty-six HEIs (including universities and TVET colleges), with 420 campuses and approximately two million students and staff (Makhaye *et al.,* 2023).

Research focusing on gender relations in South African universities illustrates how the university context(s) strongly reflects the country's patriarchal culture of dominance (Gordon & Collins, 2013; Shefer *et al.*, 2015; Sikweyiya *et al.,* 2023). These studies collectively illustrate how unequal, gendered relations and sexually violent behaviours are normalised and prevalent in the contexts of South African universities. The thesis, therefore,

[1] The researcher consistently uses the term men instead of males to emphasise gender as a social and cultural construct. This choice is based on conceptualising gender as construct and reflects an understanding of performing masculinity as shaped by societal roles, expectations, and identities - rather than as a purely biological category (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Even in instances where *males* may be grammatically correct, men are used to highlight the social dimensions of gender.

seeks to understand constructions of SV from a conceptualisation of SV as being rooted in societal conditions and climates that allow and encourage its persistence.

1.3.2. Student Protests Against Sexual Violence on South African campuses

The eruption of *#EndRapeCulture* protests by South African university students in 2016 was an offshoot of the 2015 *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall* protests that called for the decolonisation of university curriculums and campus cultures that were not inclusive of the dynamic student body (Krige, 2021). The topic of decolonising university curricula and cultures, prompted talks about the need for overall transformation, including the destabilising of normalised campus rape cultures that perpetuate gender-based violence and SV, culminating in the widespread *#EndRapeCulture* protests of 2016 (Krige, 2021). The *#EndRapeCulture* protests were widespread in South African university campuses and introduced conversations about problematic masculinities and patriarchal social organisations in public spaces, including the university context(s) (Krige, 2021). These protests sought to expose institutional cultures within South African HEIs that proliferated rape-supportive cultures on campuses (Gouws, 2018). Initiated by students in response to their frustration with the university management's handling of SV cases, the movement critiqued management's responses to SV for perpetuating victim-blaming narratives and protecting perpetrators of sexual assault (Gouws, 2018). These protests were comprised of various protests against rape culture across South African HEIs campuses, which saw predominantly young women mobilise against SV in South African universities (Gouws, 2018).

One such protest was Rhodes University's *#RUReferenceList* in April 2016, which intended to expose and disrupt rape culture on campus (Gouws, 2018). Rhodes University - the setting of this study, a Historically White Institution in a small town in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, witnessed the unexpectedly intense *#RUReferenceList* protests. This intensity surprised many, given the university's established policies addressing SV, the annual Silent Protest since 2006, a well-functioning Counselling Centre, and harassment officers for students and staff (Macleod *et al.*, 2018). During the protests, students raised concerns that, despite the university's numerous initiatives to combat SV on campus, their experiences remained unchanged (Macleod *et al*., 2018). Inconsistencies between University policies and their implementation were identified and outlined (Sexual Violence Task Team, 2016) - reflecting a stark difference between documented policies and students' experiences. These

protests thus highlighted that the power dynamics sustaining rape culture and SV on campus had not been dismantled, despite the university's efforts in writing.

On 11 April 2016, a campus organisation called Chapter 2.12, which refers to Chapter 2 Section 12 of the South African Constitution regarding safety, dignity and the right to bodily autonomy, posted statements on campus walls allegedly made by officials about reported cases of SV (Macleod *et al*., 2018). The protests escalated as students deemed the institution's response unsatisfactory following the removal of the posters by Campus Protection Unit officials. By April 16, the *#RUReferenceList* was shared and went viral on social media. The *#RUReferenceList*, although no direct allegations were made, was a list understood to be of names of 11 allegedly known rapists who were students at the university, with no action taken against them (Gouws, 2018). The list ended with a powerful *et al.* (Macleod *et al.,* 2018) - an abbreviation used in academic referencing to cite a source with multiple authors, meaning *and others*. On April 17, women students entered the residences of the men named on the list, leading to a dispute over whether the alleged perpetrators were 'kidnapped,' according to management or 'encouraged' to leave the institution and turn themselves in - according to the students (Macleod *et al*., 2018). This marked the dispute between the university's management and the protesting students, which would culminate into rape culture protests that would result in police interference, shutdowns, naked protests, university routes being barricaded, and nighttime vigils for mobilisation (Macleod *et al*., 2018). By April 20, the university obtained an interdict against the demonstrations, resulting in a two-day campus closure. Students all over South Africa responded by hosting anti-rape protests, mass meetings, silent protests, disruptions and visual demonstrations, which saw the nationwide *#EndRapeCulture* protests on South African HEI campuses (Macleod *et al*., 2018).

In response to the *#EndRapeCulture* protests, various HEIs established SV Task Teams (SVTTs) to develop recommendations for policies that challenge cultures perpetuating SV on campuses (Gouws, 2018). Rhodes University was among these institutions, forming a SVTT (2016) aimed at countering rape culture and SV on campus. This SVTT was set up in an open, inclusive, public, and participatory manner, with its function not only to gather information and make recommendations but also to operate as a systemic intervention (Macleod *et al*., 2018). The task team delivered a report outlining 93 recommendations on strategies to challenge SV on campus (SVTT, 2016). These recommendations were based on the SVTT's three-pronged approach to addressing SV at the university, namely: (1)

retributive justice, (2) remediation, mediation and restorative justice, and (3) reparative justice (SVTT, 2016).

This study focuses on the third conceptual approach, reparative justice, to addressing SV at Rhodes University, which looks at addressing the gendered norms and narratives that underpin rape culture on campus. Among recommendations made under this conceptual approach, the SVTT (2016) advised sustained dialogues about the manifestations of rape culture on campus as an essential site for knowledge-sharing, identifying progressive counter-narratives, and effectively intervening to dismantle rape culture. Underlying this approach is its collective aspect, which speaks to dismantling rape-sustaining narratives, power relations, institutional arrangements, and everyday practices that foster systems of inequality in which SV is normalised (Verdeja, 2008, as cited in SVTT, 2016). Inspired by this, the present study seeks to facilitate dialogues about sexual assault and rape among its participants, using the data collection process as a knowledge-sharing space between participants where narratives about SV are explored and shared with the potential of being challenged.

The Rhodes University Anti-Harassment, Discrimination and Gender Harm Office is located in the Equity and Institutional Culture Office, which deals with preventing and disciplining various forms of human hurt and violence, including SV, Gender-Based violence, hate speech and discrimination on campus. To support the ongoing efforts of this office in addressing SV and rape culture on campus, the study's findings will be shared with the Rhodes University Anti-Harassment, Discrimination and Gender Harm Office. This contribution aims to support the enhancement of interventions focused on rape culture on campus.

1.4. Problem Statement

1.4.1 Factors Perpetuating Sexual Violence in Higher Education Institutions

Several factors have been identified as contributing to the high prevalence of SV in HEIs. Firstly, the pressure-inducing academic demand has been identified as leading students to seek relief through party cultures that involve excessive alcohol and substance misuse, combined with peer pressure that promotes behaviours linked to SV (Clowes *et al.,* 2009; Shefer *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, Makhaye and colleagues (2023) identified several factors

specific to South African HEIs that heighten the risk of SV, including a campus culture that normalises heavy drinking and campuses' openness, allowing for easy access and escape routes for potential perpetrators.

Other major factors highlighted in some studies include inadequate campus security, limited surveillance and ineffective security measures, which exacerbate risks for students (Makhaye *et al.,* 2023). These findings echo those of Lekganyane *et al.* (2023), who explored students' perceptions of safety at two South African HEIs, namely the University of Limpopo and the University of Venda, using case studies to collect data. They found that students generally feel unsafe on campus due to poor lighting, limited security surveillance, absence of police presence and lack of emergency contact systems (Lekganyane *et al*., 2023). Makhaye and colleagues (2023) further noted the absence of effective deterrents due to underreporting, inadequate sanctions for perpetrators (who hold influential positions), reluctance by university authorities to address rape cases to avoid reputational harm, and limited understanding among university disciplinary committee members about the nuances of rape definitions as factors contributing to SV prevalence (Makhaye *et al.*, 2023). In their study of students' attitudes towards safety and security measures utilised on campus - Tshivase and Mdlungu (2020) found that while the students were generally aware of the safety measures such as fencing, residence locking systems, campus security patrols and available lighting around campus - they found these interventions ineffective.

While all these factors provide crucial insights into understanding the persistence of SV within HEI, several points of contention emerge: (1) Firstly, these responses are reactive and ameliorative, focusing on managing risk *after* SV incidents occur rather than preventing them. (2) These approaches typically emphasise increasing campus security to reduce risk, shifting the responsibility toward potential victims/survivors, and sometimes allowing institutions to avoid liability. (3) Lastly, such interventions focus heavily on legal processes and reporting mechanisms, which, while important, may inadvertently imply that SV incidents are unavoidable, falling short of addressing the deeper contextual factors and norms that make SV possible (SVTT, 2016).

Such risk reduction strategies for future victimisation, though not poor interventions, are often after-the-fact responses and risk placing the responsibility for risk and safety management on the victims/survivors, thus perpetuating victim-blaming stereotypes (SVTT, 2016). In addressing the often problematic constructions of SV, HEIs have a critical role in

shaping campus culture and fostering an environment where proactive, preventative measures and meaningful changes reduce SV prevalence. A deeper understanding of the ways sexual assault and rape are conceptualised and justified within HEIs provides an opportunity to explore some of the mechanisms, such as talk, that contribute to keeping conditions that perpetuate SV in these contexts intact (Ngabaza *et al.*, 2015).

1.4.2 Research Focus

For many South African students, their first year at university represents a significant transition, marking their initial experience of living away from home and escaping parental oversight (Gordon & Collins, 2013). This newfound independence often occurs in an environment characterised by excessive substance use and prevalent sexual activity (Gordon & Collins, 2013). As a result, many first-year students find themselves in a 'party rape culture,' where they face pressure to consume alcohol and drugs and engage in *risky* sexual behaviours (Anderson & Naidu, 2022). This is further made complex by the precarious and uncertain position some of these students might find themselves in. For example, for some men students, this independence may mean navigating and negotiating various, potentially conflicting ways of being a man (Shefer *et al.,* 2015). Exploring first-year men's constructions of SV may, therefore, play an integral role in supporting these students in navigating performances of masculinity that challenge rape culture and the normalisation of SV on campus. While this study hopes to contribute to supporting students in performing healthier sexual and interpersonal relations, its focus is on the use of critically and non-judgmentally facilitated dialogues about SV among first-year men students to explore their constructions, explanations and interpretations of SV.

1.5. Research Objectives and Questions

At the core of this research project is the exploration and critical examination of first-year men students' interpretations and responses to incidents of SV depicted in the vignettes presented during interviews. This study questions the extent to which these participants draw from dominant and existing discourses of SV, underpinned by misogynistic and patriarchal perspectives, to make sense of examples of SV incidents.

The main research question explored is as follows:
How do participants make sense of and explain incidents of SV as depicted in vignettes?
To answer this main question, the following sub-questions have been identified:

1. How do participants construct SV?
2. How do participants construct victims/survivors and perpetrators in the depicted scenarios?
3. What discourses do participants draw upon to construct SV and position themselves, victims/survivors and perpetrators?
4. What social reality is constructed from the discourses used by participants?

1.6. Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter contextualises the research topic and the problem statement. It provides the backdrop that has informed the current research while justifying the research problem's relevance and the study's purpose.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework (s)

This chapter establishes the relevance of the research problem within the existing literature and theoretical frameworks, providing a synopsis of international and local research. It contextualises the current study within a body of research and illustrates how it contributes to research and existing knowledge of men students' construction of SV on campus. In essence, this chapter provides the developments of constructions of rape in literature while also providing a synopsis of the study's theoretical frameworks and key concepts.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Design

This chapter describes the conceptual framework informing the topic, sampling procedures, data collection and analysis methods, research designs and the motivation for these selected methods. It further discusses how these approaches and designs are relevant to the research problem. Moreover, this chapter later discusses the research's ethical considerations and validation criteria.

Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings, Analysis and Interpretation

This chapter presents the study's findings and analyses and interprets them. The chapter explores the discourses participants drew upon in their explanations of the scenarios. It provides and explores the implications of using these discourses in

broader understandings of SV. Lastly, this chapter explores the possibilities for intervention, as guided by the findings of this study.

Chapter 5: Limitations and Conclusion

This is the thesis's final chapter, which summarises the study findings, discusses the study's limitations and the implications and suggestions for future research in the field of gendered violence, focusing on SV on campus.

1.7. Concluding Summary

This chapter has provided a broad overview of this research project and thesis. The study aims to initiate critical discussions on how incidents of SV are explained from the perspective of men university students studying at an HEI while exploring the discourses that emerge from these participants' interpretations of scenarios of SV incidents. The study engages these men participants in negotiating narratives using dialogue and stimuli materials as conversation facilitators. It seeks to create a space for critical reflection, where participants can engage in sense-making processes regarding SV incidents. The goal is to encourage a nuanced and broader perspective on SV.

Chapter 2

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework(s)

2.1. Chapter Outline

This chapter outlines and discusses the relevant literature pertaining to research on students' constructions of SV and the factors influencing these. Informed largely by feminist scholarship, the review begins by challenging stereotypes and misconceptions about SV. It then provides broad, theoretically informed conceptualisations of the key concepts in the research - discussing the historical and context-specific developments of the topic at hand. This chapter, therefore, seeks to highlight the need to explore constructions of SV through discourse as an entry point to developing constructions of SV that may challenge broadly accepted yet problematic assumptions of SV and sexual interactions.

2.2. Challenging Stereotypes and Misconceptions about Sexual Violence

Despite clear legal definitions of rape and sexual assault, there tends to be discrepancies in definitions of what constitutes SV among lay people and various societal entities (Haugen *et al*., 2018). Hills *et al*. (2021) attribute this discordance to the gap between traditional depictions of rape and the lived experiences of victims/survivors. Traditionally, SV - particularly rape - has been depicted as a crime perpetrated by unfamiliar or unknown assailants, often encapsulated in the 'stranger danger' narrative of rape, portraying predatory forms of rape (Hills *et al*., 2021). This portrayal oversimplifies the multifaceted nature of rape, ignoring the diverse and nuanced ways in which it occurs, such as within intimate relationships, rape by acquaintances, sexual coercion and aggression (Gavey, 2005).

Empirical evidence supports a more nuanced understanding of rape. For instance, a study examining the epidemiological patterns of rape by reviewing reported cases in a hospital in Northern Cape, South Africa, found that 56% of perpetrators were known to the victim/survivors (Egenasi *et al.*, 2024). This finding aligns with the SAPS 2019 report, which indicated that a third of recorded rape offences involved perpetrators known to the victims/survivors (SAPS, 2020, as cited in Ngubane *et al.,* 2022). Similarly, international reports, such as one from the US Department of Justice, revealed that about 90% of college

women victims/survivors knew their perpetrators (Kreb *et al*., 2016, as cited in King *et al*., 2020). International data emphasises this from studies conducted between 2000 and 2018 on the prevalence of gendered violence, showing that 27% of ever-partnered women globally aged 15 and older had experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence at least once since the age of 15 (WHO, 2021). In contrast, only 6% of women globally experienced SV from non-partners or strangers (WHO, 2021). These statistics highlight the significant difference between SV perpetrated by known individuals and the common perception that strangers primarily commit rape, challenging stereotyped depictions of such assaults.

The persistence of such misconceptions can be tracked to societal narratives and scripts that construct SV as a distant, isolated event - positioning it as a crime of strangers rather than something that occurs between individuals known to each other, such as family, social acquaintances and intimate partners. These understandings of SV have been influenced by historical conceptualisations that framed rape as a hidden and secret act, associating it with shame and guilt and making it invisible within everyday society (Gavey, 2005). However, feminist movements and theories have long critiqued this narrative, asserting that it distorts the reality of rape, its pervasiveness in everyday life, and its marginalisation of victim/survivor experience (Brownmiller, 1975; Kelly, 1988: gavey, 2005). Feminist movements emerging during the second wave in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly those that laid the foundation for feminist poststructuralist critiques, challenged the dismissal of rape as 'just sex.' They problematised how this positions *genuine* cases of rape as rare and marginalised occurrences outside mainstream society (Gavey, 2005). This narrative of rape as a distanced occurrence is problematic in that it conceals the extent to which rape is intricately linked to everyday expressions and practices of sexuality and power.

In addition to this, traditional constructions of rape have often involved popular understandings of SV that define specific features of an event or particular characteristics of the victim/survivor, as constituting a 'real' instance of of SV (Haugen *et al.,* 2019). These generally include a stranger using excessive force to assault the victims/survivors (usually a woman), in a place that they unquestionably have a right to be and that they immediately report the rape incident . When these conditions are met, the victim/survivor is more likely to be perceived as a legitimate or 'genuine' victim/survivor of the assault (Haugen *et al.,* 2019).

Kelly's (1988) work was pivotal in challenging and debunking these narrow definitions, especially through the concept of the continuum of SV, which dismantles the

binary between ‘real’ versus ‘minor’ SV. Her framework highlights how a wide range of harmful - often dismissed or normalised - exist on a spectrum of violence and coercion. Kelly’s insights echo and bring to mind what Gqola (2015) refers to as the *rapability* of alleged victims/survivors.

Gqola (2015) refers to the concept of rapability as a social construct that designates certain victims/survivors of rape as true victims/survivors based on various socially determined considerations. In this framework, categories of victim/survivorhood are established and maintained. On one hand, some individuals are seen as “true victims/survivors” of rape - which are those considered undeserving of the violation inflicted on them (Haugen *et al.,* 2019). On the other hand, there exists a category of “unrapable” individuals who are deemed unlikely or even impossible to be rape victims/survivors (Armstrong, 1994). This distinction is based on a wide array of social determinants including, but not limited to, their behaviours immediately after the incident, their relationship to the perpetrator, sexual orientation, and prior sexual history and behaviour (Haugen *et al.,* 2019). These criteria not only justify SV but also perpetuate a skewed understanding of who is considered a legitimate victim/survivor of rape and who is safe to rape without repercussions. This not only reflects and reinforces stereotypes about rape and rape victim/survivors but also reinforces the beliefs about SV as a rare, exceptional event (Gqola, 2015). Within this framework, rape affects not only the victims/survivors who experience it but also everyone who experiences their bodies as rapable and adjusts their actions accordingly (Cahill, 2001). Further, this framework reflects the definitional struggle in understanding SV, creating a hierarchy of the legitimate victims/survivors (Brownmiller, 1975).

This reflects a societal belief that SV, specifically rape, is something perpetuated by strangers and therefore distanced from *our* social circles, despite evidence that suggests that rape occurs much closer to home than *we* would prefer to admit. This distancing narrative not only conceals the prevalence of rape but also shields society from engaging in critical reflection about how everyday actions contribute to an environment that is conducive for SV to occur - becoming a method of how patriarchy protects itself and maintains social control (Jozkowski, 2017; Gqola, 2015). Here, the term patriarchy refers to *terrains of power,* social arrangements characterised by varied systems of dominance that render privileges to some individuals over others - for instance, privileging men over women in some contexts, perpetuating unequal relations (Hunnicutt, 2009).

This distancing construction in a patriarchal society, therefore, absolves individuals from engaging in critical self-reflection regarding how their behaviours contribute to what Gavey (2005) refers to as the cultural scaffolding of rape. The cultural scaffolding of rape is explained as the "discourse of sex and gender that produce forms of heterosex that set up preconditions of rape [...]" (Gavey, 2019, p.3), which encompasses constructions of cultural norms and practices that enable SV. Lastly, this distancing construction serves to 'other' the perpetrator – turning them into unknown and unknowable, or deviant, individuals rather than ordinary men acting on the normative gender and sex role expectations inherent in patriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality. Consequently, this construction not only disregards the pervasive nature of rape *within* societal structures but also serves to minimise the experience of victims/survivors (Gqola, 2015).

While early constructions of SV, inherently 'othering,' have evolved, remnants of such constructions persist in present-day public discourses of rape. The portrayal of rape as a *scourge,* for instance, within political discourse is problematic in nature as it perpetuates the perception of rape as an aberrant occurrence distanced from mainstream society and marked by sporadic, short-lived spikes in prevalence, failing to acknowledge the long history of SV in South Africa, and its integration into the society (Bridger & Haza, 2022). Such narratives protect the individuals who perpetrate SV and the social organisations and structures that support it.

Gqola (2015) highlights additional distancing discourses in public talk about rape perpetrators as monsters or animals, somewhat inhuman. While this language expresses the heinousness of the act of rape and moral outrage, it illustrates a discomfort and resistance toward conceptualising SV as endemic and a part of society- committed by everyday humans (Possel, 2005; Bridger, 2024). It further distracts from exploring, debunking and wrestling with the societal factors that have contributed to South Africa having such a high prevalence of rape (Boonzaier *et al*., 2019). In avoiding this discomfort, *we* not only run the risk of overlooking rape as the pervasive issue it is, but we also avoid the reality that there is something *within* our society that enables SV and makes it acceptable (Gqola, 2015). The use of collective pronouns here is intentional to highlight the need for collective accountability and to emphasise the understanding that the collective ignorance of SV, as ingrained and interwoven in *our* society, absolves us of the urgency to reflect on our collective contribution to making rape permissible.

2.3. Intersectionality: The Constructions of Sexual Violence in South Africa

South Africa is often described as a nation "at war with itself," grappling with one of the highest rates of rape globally (Altbeker, 2007, as cited in Snodgrass, 2016, p.64). To understand the prevalence of gendered violence in South Africa, it is essential to examine the country's history of SV, using the lens of oppressive systems such as colonisation and apartheid. This turbulent history not only entrenched violence in South Africa's societal landscape but also normalised it in ways that still influence present-day South African society (Gqola, 2015; Bridger, 2024).

Colonial South Africa was marked by structural violence and institutionalised rape, with SV serving as a key mechanism for maintaining and perpetuating sexual and racial control over enslaved people, consolidating racial and gender hierarchies (Thornberry, 2011). This established a process of sexual othering and objectification that emerged from and sought to maintain a violent, patriarchal, and white supremacist social organisation (Posel, 2005). African women, in particular, were dehumanised through harmful stereotypes that depicted them as hypersexual and incapable of being raped - while portraying African men as dangerous predators and a threat to women, particularly white women (Armstrong, 1994). These harmful stereotypes reinforced episodes of the 'Black peril' panic, characterised by widespread fears and social hysteria among white colonists that Black men endangered the safety of white women (Posel, 2005).

This racialised fear and dehumanisation of Black men and women, respectively, worked hand in hand to sustain the colonial project. Through the portrayal of Black people as inherently violent and hypersexual, colonists legitimised their acts of violence, including SV, while devaluing the lives and experiences of South Africans - particularly Black South Africans (Snodgrass, 2016). As a result, SV became normalised, institutionalised and intertwined with the social system of the time (Armstrong, 1994). This reinforced patriarchal values and expressions of masculinity that upheld a racially informed and class-discriminatory social order characterised by unequal gender relations and gendered power imbalances (Snodgrass, 2016).

This gendered and racialised social system of violence persisted well into the apartheid era. The apartheid regime further entrenched the normalisation of SV within marginalised communities - with deliberate efforts to hide the issue of SV from public

discussion and awareness, especially SV perpetrated within white working-class families (Bridger, 2024). While SV in white communities was downplayed, it was often portrayed as a routine and unavoidable part of township life (Armstrong, 1994; Gqola, 2015; Bridger, 2022). Media coverage during apartheid rarely addressed SV and the broader intersecting social inequalities and oppressions it reflected (Bridger & Haza, 2022). This narrative not only concealed the true prevalence of rape across different races and classes (Posel, 2005) but also reinforced existing power structures, deflecting attention from the broader societal issues of oppression (Bridger, 2024).

As South Africa transitioned out of apartheid, rape began to emerge as a public and political issue, partially due to the influence of feminist activism, shaped predominantly by Western feminist principles (Bridger, 2024). This movement brought attention to violence within the family unit, resulting in a shift in how rape is conceptualised. This shift presented a disturbance in constructions of rape that positioned it as just a public crime committed by strangers - highlighting rape occurring in familiar, private spaces (Bridger, 2024). Despite this discursive shift, interpersonal relations were still shaped by patriarchal structures of dominance and norms that privatised the family unit, positioning it as a private, self-contained institution separate from social accountability and public intervention (Possel, 2005). This privatisation, alongside patriarchal systems, contributed to the difficulty in recognising rape as deeply embedded within society rather than distanced from society, thus challenging these feminist movements.

Buiten and Naidoo (2016) argue that rape in South Africa must be understood not merely as an individual crime, but as an issue deeply embedded in societal and gender inequality, enabled by the socio-economic and political legacies of apartheid. Within this context, SV has been framed through intersecting dynamics of race, gender, class, and power (Bridger, 2025). This backdrop - combined with the nurtured culture of violence, fostered under apartheid - has contributed to the normalisation of SV in South Africa (Buiten & Naidoo, 2016). Bridger (2025) takes it a step further by arguing that, beyond the legacy of normalised structural violence, SV has been effectively erased from national memory and discourse both during colonial and apartheid rule, and continuing into the democratic era (also see Klerk *et al.*, 2024). This erasure, she suggests, has helped to foster and sustain a public culture that either privatises SV or constructs it as coincidental, limiting how it is recognised and addressed in contemporary South Africa.

For example, the remnants of apartheid-era constructions of rape, which framed this form of SV as an act committed by a deviant Black man, in the townships (a dominant public discourse at the time - as discussed in previous sections), continue to shape present-day narratives that associate SV with marginalised, disenfranchised communities and perpetuated by poor, Black men (Graham, 2013; Jewkes *et al*., 2015). This construction reinforces harmful stereotypes about Black men and disadvantaged communities while falling short of addressing the structural inequalities - entrenched in socio-economic, racial and gender hierarchies - that continue to privilege certain social [i.e. gender, socio-economic and racial] groups and institutions over others. In so doing, these narratives obscure the systems of inequality that shape interpersonal relations and contribute to the persistence of SV.

2.4. Constructions of Masculinities and Sexual Violence

In South Africa, SV and other forms of gender-based violence are increasingly understood as manifestations of manpower and gendered power dynamics (Gobodo-Madikizela *et al*., 2014, as cited in Nkosi, 2020). This perspective presents a shift, identified in the literature, from earlier views of men as inherently problematic and rape-prone to focusing on how some expressions of masculinities, often associated with violence and aggression, reinforce gendered violence. Masculinity, here - much like femininity, is not fixed but understood rather as being socially constructed expectations, standards and practices in which men are expected to express their manhood (Ammann & Staudacher, 2021). Here, societal norms idealise certain traits associated with performing masculinity successfully over others, creating a hierarchy of acceptable ways of being a man in society.

In this regard, some expressions of masculinity are considered more ideal, making them dominant, while others are seen as less desirable or acceptable, making them subordinate (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2016). This presents a fluid, dynamic, hierarchical landscape of masculinities (Shefer *et al*., 2015). Connell's theory of [hegemonic] masculinity serves as one of the key contributors to which these hierarchies of masculinity have been conceptualised in literature (1987, as cited in Jewkes *et al.,* 2015). The hegemonic masculinity here refers to societal values, often shaped by men in positions of societal power, that function to structure society in ways that reinforce gendered inequality (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2016). It consists of various components: a hierarchy of masculinities and

unequal access to power among men over women and other men who do not have access to the power that affords them the status of dominance. The hegemonic masculinity, in Connell's theory, was therefore conceptualised as the ideal expression of manhood and linked to masculine ascendancy, dominance and status where men who fit into this category are influence-carrying men who hold significant power in their contexts (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2016). The hegemonic masculinity is distinguished from other, subordinate, 'weaker' masculinities.

While this theory offers valuable insights into how power is unequally negotiated and distributed not only between men and women but also among men themselves, it has been contested and critiqued - especially as it relates to understanding masculinity in African contexts with the aims of intervention development. One such critique is that these theories are rooted in Western individualistic conceptions of personhood, thus falling short of fully accounting for the complex life experiences of African men. In contrast, African perspectives on personhood and selfhood often emphasise collectivism, incorporating aspects of spirituality and community in conceptualisations of how manhood is practised (Rapport & Overring, 2000, as cited in Mfecane, 2018).

For instance, Mfecane (2016) highlights that masculinity in African contexts is accomplished through performance and behaviour and achieved through social practises - specifically in front of other men - speaking to the communal aspect of masculinity (Kimmel 1994, as cited in Mfecane, 2018). These practices of masculinity vary across different contexts and may include speaking in traditional, sacred or social gatherings and ceremonies among other men, fulfilling the role of being a breadwinner and protector, and having multiple sexual partners in other contexts (Graaf & Heinecken, 2017; Graham, 2013). Different contexts idealise certain practices of masculinity over others. As such, African men-focused interventions developed from frameworks of understanding men based on Global North conceptualisations have been critiqued as underperforming for not critically addressing the multiple facets of being a man in African contexts.

Emerging research has, therefore, moved towards understanding that masculinities in Africa do not fit a single, uniform construct but rather encompass a range of practices influenced by various contexts (Ammann & Staudacher, 2021). While dominant markers of masculinity in these contexts include the expectation to demonstrate virility and sexual aggression, they are contested and challenged by calls for socially responsible masculinity -

emphasising safer sexual and respectful sexual practices (Graham, 2013). This highlights the fluidity, complexity and plurality of African masculinities. While some idealised forms still draw from hypermasculine norms that tend to valorise violence and aggression (Graaf & Heinecken, 2017), alternative masculine identities are emerging. These include compassionate masculinities characterised by care, respect and Ubuntu-informed principles of collective service and empathy for others (Ammann & Staudacher, 2021). Supporting this shift, Langa *et al.* (2024) observed that since 2014, South African literature has increasingly moved away from essentialist constructions of masculinities, promoting positive masculinities that are non-violent, non-risk-taking, egalitarian and non-hegemonic. This discursive and epistemological shift towards positive masculinities challenges the oversimplified portrayals of African masculinities. It also reframes violence perpetuated by men - not as a natural or inevitable part of being a man, but as emerging from oppressive societal structures and unmet emotional needs (Ratele, 2022). However, despite this shift in literature, Langa *et al.'s* (2024) systematic review of literature between 2014 and 2024 revealed a persistence in older essentialist and violent portrayals of masculinity. This coexistence of competing narratives illustrates the diverse and complex arena of the field of masculinities studies in South Africa.

This complexity has become evident across various men groups. For instance, young men face significant pressure to conform to traditional masculine norms, particularly those tied to heterosexuality, risk-taking, and fearlessness (Shefer *et al*., 2015). Nkosi (2020) found that university traditions, especially those in on-campus residences, reinforced dominant traditional masculinities, while Shefer *et al*. (2015) discovered that young men, despite internalising a self-perception of danger, were open to exploring alternative masculinities. Despite recognising alternative ways of being a man, such as practising safe sex and respecting women partners, participants faced discouragement from expressing these alternative masculinities in front of other men due to peer pressure and societal norms (Shefer *et al*., 2015). This speaks to the complicated negotiation of expressing masculinities in such contexts.

Building on these insights, Khumalo *et al.* (2021) examined how university environments impact masculinities and sexual behaviours among men students at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal. Their study identified two key themes: the university environment as a space for negotiating masculinities and the influence of social expectations and peer pressure on risky sexual behaviours (Khumalo *et al.*, 2021). The researchers

concluded that the transition from home to university life shifts many young men from subordinate to dominant masculinities, highlighting the fluidity and context-dependent nature of masculinity (Khumalo *et al.*, 2021). Understanding these shifting masculinities is crucial to the present study, which examines young men's constructions of SV and how they position themselves - as men - within discourses of SV.

This section sheds light on the complex interplay of socialisation, power dynamics and peer influence in the context of multiple masculinity ideals. The recognition of the fluidity of masculinity provides a framework for understanding how young men navigate pressures to conform to dominant masculinity while grappling with the moral implications of SV.

2.5. Normalised Sexual Violence in Higher Education Institutions

This section of the thesis examines how SV is perpetuated and normalised within South African HEIs, highlighting the coping mechanisms developed by students to navigate these environments. Through a review of some studies, the metaphors, gendered spaces and social dynamics that sustain a culture of SV on campuses are discussed, as well as the disconnect between students' constructions of SV and their lived experiences in relation to this form of violence.

Patterns of SV on South African university campuses reflect broader societal issues, particularly the normalisation of gendered violence and its impact on women students' safety and well-being. Studies have consistently shown that men often target women as sexual objects, with many campuses described as sexual *hunting* grounds (Anderson & Naidu, 2022; Treffry-Goatley *et al*., 2018). Men students have been found to often target women students, viewing them as sexual prey (Treffry-Goatley *et al*., 2018). Universities in South Africa play an influential role in the society's socio-economic and cultural well-being, symbolising opportunities for academic and socio-economic advancement (Mkhize *et al.*, 2020). However, the pervasive SV in South African HEIs poses a significant obstacle to students' positive experience, safety and well-being, particularly women (Mkhize *et al.,* 2020). Reports indicate that approximately 20 to 25% of women students in South African HEIs report experiencing sexual victimisation during their time in university (Makhaye *et al.*, 2023). However, this figure may be underreported due to a lack of consistent tracking and reporting

mechanisms within universities (Department of Higher Education Training, 2016, as cited in Makhaye *et al.*, 2023).

Treffry-Goatley *et al*. (2018) conducted a study involving 15 women students at Nelson Mandela University and the University of KwaZulu-Natal, where students referred to their campuses as sexual hunting grounds. Using two participatory visual methods such as collages and storytelling, the study revealed that students used various discourses and metaphors, such as the hunt for meat and sex for favours, to describe campus sexual dynamics and what drives SV in these contexts (Treffry-Goatley *et al.,* 2018). These metaphors and descriptions are deeply rooted in patriarchal scripts that reinforce traditional gender norms and normalise gendered violence (Treffry-Goatley *et al.,* 2018). Consistent with these findings, Anderson and Naidu (2022) found that women students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal perceived certain residences as masculine, where they felt vulnerable to sexual aggression, particularly in these spaces. The researchers noted that first-year women students, often referred to as fresh meat, were especially targeted by senior students. The study further revealed that women students had to navigate and avoid dangerous spaces on campus as a strategy to protect themselves from SV (Anderson & Naidu, 2022).

Gordon and Collins (2013) reported similar findings in their study, which sought to explore how women residence students at a South African university had their identities and social interactions affected by the presence of gendered violence on campus. These researchers found that students developed various methods to cope with SV on campus, highlighting a troubling normalisation of SV and the acceptance thereof as inevitable (Gordon & Collins, 2013). This pattern of normalised SV was further highlighted in a study that explored students' experiences of sexual harassment - a form of SV, by Jagath and Halmall (2023). The study examined the nature and causes of sexual harassment at a South African university campus and found that sexual harassment was prevalent at the university in the form of non-verbal, verbal, and physical harassment. An interesting finding in the study was how men students considered their acts of sexual harassment as innocent banter, rationalising this as typical displays of men behaviour (Jagath & Halmall, 2023). While the majority of women students agreed that all undesired and uncomfortable behaviours are considered sexual harassment, many of them viewed rape as the only form of SV serious enough to be reported. They tended to frame other types of SV, which fall outside of the 'serious rape' construction, as normalised behaviours that form part of general, everyday life on campus (Jagath & Halmall, 2023). This illustrates a disconnect between the perception

and reality of SV, revealing the ongoing struggle to construct, make sense of and address SV in a context where it is normalised (Bridger, 2024).

Similarly, research by Kiguwa *et al.* (2015) at the University of Witwatersrand revealed that both men and women often struggled to define, interpret and recognise some behaviour as SV, particularly when these behaviours were seen as acceptable or common. Through role-playing scenarios relating to SV, the study revealed that even sexually aggressive actions were sometimes minimised and dismissed, illustrating a deep-rooted acceptance of such behaviours. This normalisation reflects the enduring legacy of South Africa's history, where SV was not only condoned but became woven into the social fabric (Kiguwa *et al.,* 2015).

2.6. The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape

2.6.1 Heterosexuality, the Construction of the Body and Constricted Agency

Feminist conceptualisations of rape suggest that men-centred norms within heterosexuality play a significant role in facilitating and fostering environments conducive to SV (Gavey, 2005). This framework positions men's dominance as normative and desirable while promoting gendered power imbalances in sexual relationships, thus constructing a dynamic that fosters gendered power imbalances that disregard consent and blurs the lines between consensual sex and rape. These dynamics are sexual scripts, culturally embedded narratives that prescribe how individuals should think, behave and act in sexual situations (Siegel *et al.*, 2021). These scripts are learned through various media, peer cultures, socialisation, and broader cultural messaging - structuring expectations around sexuality and often in deeply gendered ways. For instance, within such scripts, women are positioned as passive givers of sex whose resistance is expected to be challenged and overcome, while men are cast as sexual initiators whose assertiveness and forthright natures of being takers of sex is rewarded (Gavey, 2005). Such harmful sexual scripts therefore operate subtly to promote and naturalise men's persistence and women's passivity in sexual interactions. As explained by Siegel *et al.* (2021), these scripts implicitly excuse non-consensual and coercive sexual behaviour by embedding it within broader societal assumptions about gender, sexuality, desire and dominance.

In South African contexts, research demonstrates how these norms manifest in heterosexual relationships, where gender inequality and patterns of men dominance and

women's vulnerability are prevalent (Gordon & Collins, 2013). Studies among university students have shown that coercive practices in relationships are not only common but are often justified through traditional gender roles, reinforcing an environment on campus in which men's entitlement to women's bodies becomes a socially accepted script (Clowes *et al*., 2009). For example, Nkosi's study sought to explore how students' constructions of gender influenced their beliefs about rape culture and SV (2020). Nkosi (2020), in their sample of undergraduate on-campus residence students and student leaders at the University of Pretoria, demonstrated that the university environment reflects the broader patriarchal culture of the country that perpetuates unequal, gendered relations offering variations of men's privilege. This normalisation of men's dominance and privilege perpetuates a view of the woman's body as a passive object, reducing women's sexual role to pleasing their men counterparts, thus minimising their agency and autonomy (Haugen *et al*., 2019; Kahalon *et al*., 2018; Gqola, 2015). Furthermore, this dichotomy in traditional gender roles facilitates the normalisation of a culture that excuses SV by framing it as 'normal' behaviour rather than an unacceptable act (Buiten & Naidoo, 2016). By embedding these norms into everyday interactions, men-privileging heterosexuality serves as a cultural scaffold that supports and excuses SV, emphasising the difficulty in distinguishing SV from consensual encounters within such a gendered framework (Gavey, 2005).

2.6.2 A Culture of Rape

The term 'rape culture' has become an overarching concept to conceptualise gendered violence and societal beliefs relating to SV, from normalised sexual harassment, sexual objectification and sexism to systemic responses to victims/survivors of SV (Parcher, 2017). 'Rape culture' is defined as "attitudes, perceptions and stereotypes that normalise SV" in larger society along with its microcosms, including universities (Gouws, 2018, p.4). Initially developed within feminist scholarship, often with a focus on violence against women and girls, rape culture conceptualisations have advanced - increasingly recognising normalised SV in diverse gendered contexts, beyond the heteronormative lens (Mayeza, 2022). The key functions of rape culture have included the trivialisation of rape experiences, thus reducing this act to sex and, as such, rendering it inevitable, tolerable and acceptable (Gqola, 2015). This function of rape culture therefore normalises and subsequently promotes the acts of SV. Rape culture further constructs definitions of i) what counts as SV, ii) who genuine victims/survivors are, and iii) who is worthy of support, thereby facilitating victim-blaming narratives constructed through discourse and talk (Anderson & Doherty, 2008).

Rape culture not only shapes societal expectations but also functions as a scaffold that desensitises individuals to SV through various media (Orth *et al*., 2020). These include language, problematic beliefs widely held about rape, such as rape myths (which will be discussed in more detail below), societal cultures and masculinities that normalise sexual aggression and unequal gendered power relations, to name a few (Sande & Chirongoma, 2021). Through language, for instance, rape culture is identified in communicative acts such as rape jokes, catcalling and verbal scripts of street harassment (Sande & Chirongoma, 2021). These communicative cues often desensitise us to the severity of rape, affecting how rape is collectively thought about in society, therefore, resulting in a light-hearted association with rape-promoting behaviour (Sande & Chirongoma, 2021). Through rape humour, rape myths and other societal cultures, SV is trivialised, and the reality of the adverse effects of it is often obscured and downplayed (Perez & Greene, 2016). In addition to language as a medium of acceptance and promotion of SV, cultural practices and beliefs that excuse and tolerate it also form part of the factors that promote rape culture - thus dispersing normalised and widely accepted beliefs about rape and sexual assaults (Sande & Chirongoma, 2021). This desensitisation and trivialisation of SV fosters a culture in which this form of violence is tolerated, with research revealing an increased connection between rape humour, sexual harassment and the tolerance for SV (Perez & Greene, 2016).

In South Africa, rape culture is intricately connected to larger societal issues of violence stemming from normalised violence and entrenched gender norms (Gqola, 2015). A national study examining the prevalence and patterns of rape perpetration revealed that 27% of the men admitted to committing rape, with many normalising such acts as expressions of masculinity, while 75% of them reporting to have committed their first rape before the age of 20 (Jewkes *et al.*, 2011). Buiten and Naidoo (2016) assert that sexual assaults are often perceived as typical men's behaviour, reflecting a societal acceptance of sexual violation as part of normal masculine behaviour.

Despite the existence of strict legal frameworks against rape, South Africa still grapples with a significant discrepancy between legislative rights and the everyday realities experienced by its citizens - this is particularly apparent for SV (Buiten & Naidoo, 2016). Public discourse around rape in South Africa is often sparked by media coverage of high-profile cases (Buiten & Naidoo, 2016). Notable examples of highly publicised rape cases that reflect rape culture in South Africa include the case involving former President Jacob Zuma (Gqola, 2015) or media coverage of horrific cases of rape-murder such as that of

Anene Booysen (Orth *et al.*, 2020). This often positions discussions about SV, particularly rape, within the realms of activism (Bridger, 2024). This positioning creates periodic episodes of societal panic that perpetuates a construction of rape as a scourge, or what Bridger and Hazan (2022) refer to as a cyclical crisis. This cyclical crisis construction fosters amnesia about the longer histories of SV in South Africa, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Furthermore, while activism against SV has played a crucial role in awareness raising and advocating for social change to challenge rape prevalence, it operates within specific circles that may not reach broader society. As such, activism-informed constructions of SV, which often involve the scrutinising of patriarchal and other socio-political forms of oppression (Bridger, 2024), differ from common-sense constructions of rape based on frameworks of normalised traditional gender norms that infiltrate sexual activities, as well as victim-blaming and rape excusing discourse (Anderson & Naidoo, 2022).

Orth and colleagues (2020) argue that the pervasiveness of SV within South African society is not solely a consequence of its prevalence but is also actively constructed and perpetuated by patriarchal societal attitudes and norms. As such, conceptualisations of SV have been understood as a manifestation of unequal gendered power, with rape acceptance and normalisation attributed to patriarchal worldviews and assumptions that normalise sexual aggression (Buiten & Naidoo, 2016).

In South African university campuses, rape culture manifests through normalised fears and pervasive harassment that affect students' daily interactions and movement. The 2016 #EndRapeCulture protests, initiated by students, were a response to frustrations with university management's handling of sexual assault cases, levelling accusations of either concealing incidents or failing to take action against perpetrators (Gouws, 2018). Students highlighted and critically exposed problematic SV policies, which they critiqued as minimising or denying responsibility for managing any and all forms of SV by predominantly treating SV as a criminal offence to be dealt with outside of the university disciplinary codes (Gouws, 2018). Students further critiqued the university management for being highly legalistic and procedural in handling reported cases, often neglecting the social impact of the knowledge of incidents amongst the student body. These two issues led to campus mobilisations across South Africa against rape culture, which essentially highlighted institutional apathy toward sexual assault cases, drawing attention to the normalisation of SV on campus (Gouws, 2018).

Despite these protests nearly a decade ago, the pervasive threat of SV on campuses persists. A study conducted by Singh *et al*. (2016) at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal revealed that 94% of the 113 participants interviewed reported feeling unsafe on campus, with SV being their primary fear, followed closely by verbal, physical, and emotional abuse. These findings mirror those of an earlier study by Gordon and Collins (2013), who found that many students, especially women, lived in anticipation of SV, which shaped their interactions and self-perceptions as if they were waiting to be violated. This sense of vulnerability highlights the deeply entrenched impact of rape culture within HEIs, where pervasive fears of SV alter students' daily experiences and underscore the prevalence of SV in South African HEIs (Oni *et al*., 2019).

Studies further emphasise the prevalence of SV on campuses. Oni *et al.* (2019) reported that 21,6% of the participants at one South African HEI had experienced inappropriate and unwanted touching. At the University of Cape Town, 45% of the women students reported inappropriate sexual behaviour within their first month, with over 70% of these incidents occurring multiple times (Phungula, 2007, as cited in Mkhize *et al*., 2022). Located within a country where gendered violence is rife, the issue of SV pervasiveness in HEI is not confined to university campuses alone. Instead, it reflects broader societal challenges about rape and SV within the South African context (Mkhize *et al*., 2020). The pervasiveness of SV in society, therefore, is not only a by-product of SV prevalence but also of how these concepts are constructed by society.

2.6.3 Rape Myths

At the core of rape culture are pervasive rape myths — false beliefs about rape, victim/survivors, and perpetrators—that create a hostile environment for victim/survivors (Thelan & Meadows, 2021). Decades ago, scholars like Brownmiller (1975) and Burt (1980) highlighted the role these myths play in sustaining and increasing the prevalence of SV (Thelan & Meadows, 2021). Rape myths distort perceptions by downplaying the reality and extent of rape, excluding certain incidents from being seen as “real” rape, and perpetuating victim-blaming by suggesting that victims/survivors were somehow responsible for SV (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). By shielding society from acknowledging the true nature and prevalence of SV, these myths contribute to the oppression and control of victims/survivors (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994).

Gqola (2015) conceptualises this phenomenon as part of the "female fear factory," wherein patriarchal societies cultivate a generalised fear, especially among women and marginalised groups, ostensibly as a means of encouraging caution. Rather than protecting women, this fear perpetuates rape myths, fuelling victim-blaming and disbelief in victim/survivors' accounts. This shifts responsibility from perpetrators to survivors, trivializing SV and hindering prevention and intervention efforts (Anderson & Doherty, 2008).

Research aimed at developing instruments that assess the prevalence of acceptance of rape myths has typically identified several commonly held ideas and attitudes about SV that appear to be foundational to these myths. These include: (1) She Asked for it, and she wanted it, (2) It was not really rape, (3) He did not mean to and (4) She lied. These myths were used to develop McMahon and Farmer's (2011) adapted version of Payne *et al.*'s (1999) Illinois Rape Scale (as cited in Schlegal & Courtois, 2019). For purposes of this thesis, an additional myth is added, (5) She owed him sex, which speaks more specifically to the complexities this myth causes in negotiations of sex among young people in South African contexts.

1) She Asked for it, and she wanted it: The first myth that victims/survivors of SV were somehow, through their behaviour or appearance, asking for sexual attention perpetuates the notion of seduction and, ultimately, victim-blaming. This notion is, arguably, influenced by the construction of women as givers of sex and men as takers within heterosexual sexual interactions (Gavey, 2005). This concept is tied to the implicit rules that supposedly prevent SV, where breaking these rules places the victims/survivors in a position of responsibility and blame for the violence directed at them (Gordon & Collins, 2013). These unspoken rules include not wearing short skirts, not walking alone at night, not flirting with men, and not drinking with men (Gordon & Collins, 2013). Violating these rules suggests that the victims/survivors invited or wanted the violence they experienced. In a study exploring how women students from KwaZulu-Natal understand and experience gender-based violence, participants developed preventive strategies to protect themselves from feared victimisation. They lived according to what Miller (1997, cited in Gordon & Collins, 2013) termed a 'rape schedule,' shaping their behaviours based on the fear of being raped. This responsibility placed on and often accepted by victims/survivors is contradictory (Gordon & Collins, 2013). While it offers a false sense of security, it normalises SV, obscures

the understanding of SV as a systemic social issue and prevents action against it (Gordon & Collins, 2013).

Further, this myth is informed by ideas that question sexual refusal based on sexual scripts that posit that women are unable to demonstrate their sexual desire and men as being required to persist in their pursuit of sex despite women's resistance (Fagan & Anderson, 2012 as cited in Gmeiner, 2014). This form of resistance is referred to as 'token resistance,' which is the act of refusing sex while *actually* wanting to engage in it (Harris, 2018). This script creates a culture in which refusal of sexual activities is not taken seriously.

(2) It was not really rape: The second myth—that only certain instances of SV truly qualify to be recognised as SV—contributes to a culture where the seriousness of rape is questioned. This myth diminishes the gravity of SV by relying on narrow, stereotypical definitions, typically involving a stranger using physical force and visible resistance from victims/survivors who did everything possible to prevent it. Such definitions construct what is deemed to be real rape based on who is deemed to be the 'true' or genuine victim/survivor. Real rape, in these definitions, only occurs when the victims/survivors are considered blameless, according to patriarchal expectations of women's appearance (conservative and 'non-provocative) and behaviour (sensual, tender and submissive).

Part of this myth further rests on one end of what has been referred to as the Madonna-Whore Dichotomy (MWD) in Western literature on women's sexuality (Tanzer, 1985, as cited in Bareket *et al.* 2018). The MWD is a construct based on Carnerino's painting, The Madonna of Humility with the Temptation of Eve, representing the dichotomy of purity and lust (Dunlop, 2002, as cited in Bareket *et al*., 2018). This has been used in Western literature to describe the polarised representations of women in general as either 'good,' pure and chaste or as 'bad,' promiscuous and seductive (Bareket *et al.* 2018, p.1). Women who meet these expectations are therefore viewed as deserving of protection and provision, thus protecting patriarchal and hierarchical gender organisations by rewarding those who embrace traditional gender roles and hierarchies while punishing those who resist them (Kahalon *et al.*, 2019). The myth that an incident is considered a true act of rape when the victims/survivors fit narrow and problematic expectations reflects the staunch standards of the victim's sexuality that strips victimhood from those who deviate from these standards. This dichotomy then primarily functions to preserve the control of and surveillance over

victims/survivors' sexuality and bodies (Kahalon *et al.*, 2019) by reserving the status of the 'true' victims/survivors to those who meet the construction of purity and goodness.

(3) He did not mean to: The common belief that perpetrators did not intend to commit SV frames such incidents as accidental and unintentional, thus protecting and ultimately absolving the perpetrators of accountability while casting doubt on the victims/survivors' credibility based on their behaviour. This belief is influenced by the notion that rape is incomprehensible and only committed intentionally by deviant 'others.' (Jordan *et al.*, 2022). The myth suggests that familiar individuals do not commit rape knowingly. It further draws on constructions of heterosexual desire that invoke biological explanations, such as being too arousal or driven by an uncontrollable sexual urge (Jordan *et al*., 2022). This framing implies that rape is not committed under normal circumstances, portraying the perpetrator's behaviour as accidental or misunderstood and positioning the victims/survivors as having invited sexual attention.

(4) She lied: Linked to the positioning of victims/survivors as inviting sexual attention, the myth that the victims/survivors lie about being sexually violated introduces the other half of the MWD, which rests on the construction of women as promiscuous, conniving manipulative, and seductive (Kahalon *et al.*, 2019). Women who are perceived to endorse this half of the dichotomy are viewed as resisting patriarchal arrangements and are often penalised for this resistance (Kahalon *et al*., 2019). These constructions of and punitive responses to women's sexuality support problematic ideas that women, particularly those who fall outside of the standards for the blameless victims/survivors, may allege SV to protect their reputation or as a vindictive measure used for revenge against ex-partners. Interestingly, this myth creates an interlocking discourse that not only undermines the victims/survivors' credibility but minimises the perpetrator's accountability. It reflects the portrayal of perpetrators as powerless, lacking the power to control themselves (Gqola, 2015), in response to the manipulative victims/survivors. Consequently, it paints perpetrators as powerless to control their impulses, shifting the focus away from the harm inflicted on the victims/survivors (Payne *et al.*, 1999).

(5) She owed him sex: The myth that women owe sex to men reflects broader issues of entitlement, particularly within socioeconomic contexts where power imbalances are present. This myth reflects constructions of men that emphasise and idolise their economic power, which ends up constructing sexual interactions and heterosexual relationships as

transactional. This dynamic supports the idea that men are entitled to have sex as a form of compensation for their role as breadwinners. For example, the #FeesMustFall protests of 2015 highlighted the financial vulnerability faced by many students from disadvantaged backgrounds as more Black students access HEIs (Anderson & Naidu, 2022). The increase in economically challenged student populations has fuelled transactional relationships in HEIs, where men in positions of power may feel entitled to women's bodies. An additional aspect the myth of men's entitlement brings to mind is the idea that the negotiation of consent is no longer necessary once certain relationship achievements have been reached. This includes ideas around the assumed consent in already existing and ongoing relationships (Brady *et al.*, 2018). This myth thus reflects the dynamics of transactional relationships, wherein entitlement to sex creates dangerous power imbalances (Shefer & Strebel, 2012, as cited in Khumalo *et al*., 2021).

2.6.4 Victim-Blaming and Responsibility

Victim-blaming is a prominent feature of rape culture, which seeks to minimise or deny SV by placing responsibility on survivors for their victimisation (Anderson & Doherty, 2008). This shift in responsibility from perpetrators to victims/survivors not only mitigates the perceived severity of SV but also alleviates some of the negative social connotations associated with sexual assault (Parcher, 2017). Victim-blaming thus functions as a means to downplay SV prevalence, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and protecting established power structures.

Anderson and Doherty's (2008) research illustrates how victim-blaming is unevenly applied, often favouring a hierarchy of empathy based on gender and sexual orientation. This study explored the attribution of responsibility of SV amongst homosexual and heterosexual men and women. The researchers' findings showed that heterosexual men who were victims/survivors of SV showed more empathy than women or homosexual men victims/survivors. These biases, often rooted in traditional gender norms, reflect society's limited empathy toward victims/survivors who deviate from the 'ideal' and contribute to an environment where victim-blaming becomes normalised (Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Hayes *et al*., 2013). While the focus of Anderson and Doherty's study differs from the present study, their findings highlight the influence of patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies within victim-blaming discourses and, ultimately, the negotiation of empathy towards victims/survivors. These dynamics operate to reinforce traditional gender roles, maintain

patriarchal dominance and speak to the concept of the ‘ideal’ victims/survivors (Parcher, 2017).

Similarly, Gordon and Collins (2013) found that university students positioned themselves as ideal victims/survivors by taking precautions — such as dressing conservatively and avoiding high-risk environments — navigating campus spaces with heightened vigilance. These precautionary behaviours to "avoid" rape and sexual assault bring to mind the dichotomy of sexuality and how potential victims/survivors might internalise and conform to the MWD in order to maintain the status of being the ideal victim. This can occur as they anticipate being assaulted, or, as some participants in Gordon and Collins (2013) described it, as they play the ‘waiting game’, and illustrates how victims-blaming and responsibility attribution may reinforce a culture that places responsibility onto victims/survivors.

Further research supports these findings. Rohland (2009) found that men students, while acknowledging that men predominantly perpetrate rape, often absolved themselves of individual responsibility for such acts. In contrast, women students felt a stronger obligation to prevent and speak out against rape. This gendered divide in perceived responsibility highlights the distinct pressures placed on women to avoid victimisation while reinforcing men’s detachment from prevention efforts. Similarly, Hills *et al.* (2021) found that UK university students frequently upheld rape myths and tended to blame victims/survivors in sexual situations. King *et al.* (2020) further observed confusion regarding consent and nonverbal cues, increasing the risk of SV.

Together, these studies emphasise the way in which rape culture, rape myths and victim-blaming beliefs are clear examples of how socially circulating ideas and values about sexual interactions, gender and sexuality in a patriarchal social organisation scaffold a culture in which SV thrives.

2.7. The Cultural Scaffolding of Sexual Violence in Action

Understanding the relationship between the acceptance of or adherence to the beliefs that underpin the cultural scaffolding of SV is crucial in making sense of high levels of SV. Research consistently links the acceptance of rape myths with an increased inclination toward SV. For instance, in O'Connor's (2021) longitudinal study with 488 first-year college men at

the University of Central Florida in the US, a causal relationship was found between SV and the acceptance of rape myths. This aligns with the findings of Musonda and Chishimba (2024), whose study revealed that while undergraduate students at the University of Zambia were generally less accepting of rape myths, they still endorsed some victim-blaming narratives and lacked perpetrator accountability, reflecting subtle yet persistent aspects of beliefs that support and perpetuate a culture of SV (Musonda & Chishimba, 2024).

Complementing these findings of links between ideas and values that organise an environment conducive for SV to continue, Siegel and colleagues (2020) investigated young men's definitions of rape from the Psychology Undergraduate cohort of the University of North Dakota in the US (Siegel *et al*., 2020). The study sought to explore the extent to which participants drew from rape myths and traditional sexual scripts in their basic definitions of rape amongst men with a history of SV perpetration and those without a history of SV perpetration. Participants' constructions of SV drew from nine key patterns of talk, including lack of consent, advantage-taking, penetrative and non-penetrative sexual acts, harm to the victims/survivors, and gender-specific roles. The results of this study found that men with histories of SV held narrower definitions of rape, often informed by rape myths (i.e. rape requires visible/physical harm to be considered as such) in comparison to those without a history of perpetration (Siegel *et al*., 2020). Notably, these individuals were less likely to include non-penetrative SV in their definitions than those without a perpetration history (Siegel *et al.*, 2020).

Collectively, these studies reveal the complex ways in which socially circulating ideas and values about sexual interactions become woven together in ways that support and maintain SV and the normalisation thereof. In other words, this complex interplay is an example of the cultural scaffolding of SV.

2.8 Constructions of Sexual Violence

Research highlights the widespread prevalence of rape culture on university campuses (Gordon & Collins, 2011; Gouws, 2018; Mkhize *et al.,* 2020). In their study exploring University of Kwa-Zulu Natal students' perceptions of the ongoing prevalence of rape culture and its impact on their interpersonal relationships, they found that the normalisation of SV is shaped by familial influences, peer dynamics that promote the sexual objectification of women, students' lifestyles, and pervasive social media influences (Mkhize *et al.*, 2020).

Furthermore, this study revealed that both men and women participants reported similar experiences relating to rape culture, noting that excessive alcohol consumption increased the likelihood of encountering or perpetrating SV. This environment often allowed for sexually violent behaviours to be downplayed, with men participants reflecting on their actions and acknowledging their roles within rape culture. In addition, the study found that students influenced each other's behaviour, encouraging and supporting sexually violent behaviour and downplaying its seriousness (Mkhize *et al.*, 2020).

This differed from the findings of Sikweyiya and colleagues' (2023) study, which sought to examine the comprehension of SV among men students. While Mkhize *et al.* (2020) identified a reflective stance amongst their men participants, Sikweyiya *et al.* (2023) offer a contrasting perspective in their study amongst men students in HEI across five South African provinces. Sikweyiya *et al*. (2023) sought to investigate the circumstances under which participants understood SV to occur within their institutions. Their findings revealed a normalisation of sexual harassment, where participants viewed such acts as attempts to capture women's attention and express their attraction rather than recognising them primarily as acts of violence (Sikweyiya *et al*., 2023). Additionally, participants showed some understanding of rape, often associating it with scenarios involving "sex for grades or favours," where men overtly exerted power over vulnerable students. Furthermore, there was a strong aversion towards generic depictions of stranger rape in dark alleys, which participants attributed exclusively to non-student men from outside the campus (Sikweyiya *et al*., 2023).

The findings of this study indicate that these South African men students had challenges recognising their everyday behaviours related to sexual interactions (i.e. sexual harassment) as instances of SV and were likely to identify SV in situations involving clear abuse of power or coercion (Sikweyiya *et al*., 2023). Additionally, the participants of this study appeared to subscribe to the 'stranger danger' narrative of SV, which portrays SV as an issue primarily associated with unknown perpetrators. This perspective contributes to an 'othering' effect, distancing the problem from their experiences and behaviours. These findings align with existing discourses that distance individuals from rape by portraying perpetrators as 'other.'

These kinds of distancing discourses, existing presently in some South African discourses of SV, bring to mind the rape myth that Rape is a Deviant Event. This rape myth was included in the original IRMA scale by Payne and colleagues but removed in the more recent revisions of the scale (Schlegal & Courtois, 2019). While the Deviant Event myth has been removed in later revisions of the IRMA, Sikweyiya and colleagues' (2023) findings illustrate a normalised construction of SV that often depicts SV as a deviant event occurring in dark alleys perpetrated by inhuman strangers (Boonzaier *et al*., 2019). As stated earlier, this myth fails to acknowledge the complexities of rape within society. It is deeply entrenched in 'othering' colonial and apartheid mechanisms of oppression, which construct rape as a distant crime committed by a 'deviant other.' (Boonzaier *et al.,* 2019). The historical roots of this myth in South Africa make it particularly relevant for this section and discussion on South African constructions of SV.

Collectively, the findings of these studies raise important questions about what might shape men students' constructions of SV. Additional findings in Sikweyiya and colleagues' (2023) study revealed how constructions of SV were negotiated and challenged amongst participants in their focus group discussions. This illustrates the potential for collective dialogues to challenge and reshape constructions of SV among men university students, highlighting the importance of dialogue in transforming perceptions of SV. These studies, therefore, collectively highlight the crucial need for the continued exploration of how men students make sense of SV and the critical role these understandings can have in intervening and possibly destabilising the understanding of SV on campus.

2.9. Men-Focused Rape Prevention and Education in Universities

Campus SV remains a pressing concern in HEIs globally. Many institutions have developed policies and interventions to address and reduce SV; however, these have frequently been critiqued for disproportionately placing the burden of prevention on women students. Bedera and Nordmeyer (2015) found that 80.36% of rape prevention and risk reduction messages across 40 U.S. college websites were directed at women, with only 13.97% of the 'tips' given to students to prevent SV on campus focusing on men. This manner of talking about SV perpetuates a view that SV prevention is primarily women students' responsibility. Such an approach not only risks reproducing victim-blaming discourses but also reduces SV to an issue which occurs at the individual level, silencing the hidden unequal power dynamics - at the societal level that enable SV to take place

(Boonzaier, 2019). This misses the opportunity to understand the effects of talk and communication and engage men students as active participants in SV prevention, emphasising the need for a shift toward men-focused interventions (Bedera & Nordmeyer, 2015).

The findings of the It's On Us campaign (as cited in Nittle, 2023) echo this critique, with only 45% of college men reporting to have received SV prevention training, and one-third of these men still unable to identify or intervene in potentially sexually violent situations. This gap suggests that current interventions may focus more on policy compliance than on fostering a deep understanding of SV and healthy [sexual] relationships. This speaks to skills that enable men students to intervene in SV. While this aligns with bystander education approaches, it takes it a step further by highlighting the need to include skill-building training interventions in these bystander approaches.

Bystander approaches to interventions focus on shifting community SV norms and intervening practices, encouraging individuals to play their role as proactive community members (Ruvalcaba *et al*., 2022). Men-targeted bystander intervention approaches in HEIs have grown in popularity given the potential these have for SV prevention, reduced acceptance of rape myths and progressive understandings of SV, particularly in American and UK HEIs (e.g. Banyard *et al*., 2007; McMahon *et al*.. 2011; Pfaff, 2024; Yount *et al*., 2020). Bystander approaches have been especially deemed useful in supporting bystanders to move from positions of not knowing how to intervene (inaction) to having skills to intervene effectively. One such framework is the Four stages of becoming a prosocial bystander. Within this framework, the bystander must 1) be able to notice the event as SV, 2) interpret it as a problem that 3) requires intervention, and 4) have the necessary skills to intervene (Fenton *et al*., 2016). The current study focuses on the first two stages of this framework.

Social norms and peer attitudes are essential components in shaping intervention success. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2010, as cited in Ricardo *et al*., 2011) notes that when men perceive other men are ready to intervene in SV cases, they are more likely to take action themselves, emphasising the role of positive social influence in motivating behaviour change. This speaks to community-based interventions for SV, suggesting that interventions may benefit from emphasising community accountability and collective responsibility in SV prevention. The *One Man Can* intervention is a man-focused

intervention facilitated by the Sonke Gender Justice Programme and draws from bystander, community-based and skills-training-informed approaches to intervention.

A South African study aimed to adapt the *One Man Can* intervention to engage male student leaders in SV prevention at a local university. This adaptation of the interventions was a six-session programme over six months involving workshops and discussions that addressed topics such as societal pressures, courage to take action, and personal values in relationships. Men students from this intervention expressed enthusiasm for developing the skills necessary for active SV prevention, and the intervention appeared to foster increased accountability among participants. The findings of this study demonstrated how the six topic-focused workshops allowed participants to reflect on their own beliefs, community norms and social practices that reinforce gender inequality (de Villiers *et al*., 2021). The findings of this study illustrated that participants found it challenging to discuss SV and identify ways of intervening, attributing this to the scarcity of having honest conversations about SV in everyday contexts. Despite limitations, including selective sampling and a reduced participant pool post-intervention, this study emphasised the potential of targeted men-focused interventions that centre on constructive and engaged dialogues to foster meaningful change (de Villiers *et al*., 2021).

Integrating these insights, the present research explores how men students understand and construct SV and how these constructions fit within the broader frameworks of intervention. By exploring how men students make sense of and explain hypothetical incidents of SV, this study seeks to provide essential insights into the social constructions that shape men students' behaviours. These findings are important for informing interventions that go beyond awareness-raising, moving toward opening opportunities for reflectively exploring the deep-seated discourses that contribute to how SV is understood.

In this way, the very act of engaging men students in discussions about SV as part of the research functions as an intervention itself, opening up critical dialogue and encouraging participants to reflect on their own understandings of responsibility, healthy sexual interactions and SV. This process of reflection can encourage a more active, engaged role for men in SV interventions, aligning with the call for more men-focused interventions in SV prevention programs.

2.10. Concluding Summary

This review of literature on the constructions of SV reveals a profound influence of South Africa's historical and socio-political backdrop, marked by colonialism, apartheid, and entrenched patriarchy. This legacy has fostered a culture where violence, including SV, is normalised, with men students often rationalising and downplaying sexually aggressive behaviours as harmless conduct (Gordon & Collins, 2011). This normalisation is exacerbated by university practices that inadequately address and sometimes obscure the prevalence of SV on campuses.

Efforts to educate and prevent SV have been critiqued for disproportionately placing the burden of prevention on women students, failing to foster genuine understandings and behavioural changes among men students with many prevention programmes being perceived as mere compliance exercises rather than impactful interventions (Nittle, 2023).

Therefore, there remains an ongoing need for inclusive educational programs that delve into the constructions of SV and the discourses that shape these constructions - programs which encourage critical discussions on expressions of sexuality and gender that perpetuate SV. These programmes could play a pivotal role in reshaping the understanding of SV and behaviours by fostering open, critical dialogues that include men students' perspectives.

Chapter 3

Methodology Chapter

3.1. Chapter outline

This chapter will outline the research methodology used in this research. The overall objective of this study was to explore the discourses first-year men students draw on to explain and make sense of scenarios of SV within the context of the university setting that were presented to them. The chapter provides an overview of social constructionism as the research paradigm in which the study is embedded and details the sampling procedure, data collection and analysis used to implement the study. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the validity of the data and important ethical considerations made in this study.

3.2. Research Paradigm and Approach

The study embraced qualitative research methodologies guided by the principles inherent in this approach. Qualitative research seeks to explore and comprehend social phenomena from the individuals' perspective, making it well-suited for investigating the research question, which aimed to understand SV as a social phenomenon through participants' explanations of the scenarios provided (Mohajan, 2018). Qualitative approaches are inherently exploratory, seeking to uncover the underlying reasons and mechanisms behind social phenomena within specific contexts, offering a nuanced understanding of the social world (Polinghorne, 2005). Given the researcher's inquiry to explore a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of SV, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate.

3.2.1 Social Constructionism as a Theoretical Framework

The study adopted a Social Constructionist lens, viewing phenomena such as SV as socially constructed and interpreted within specific cultural and social contexts (Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999). Social Constructionism posits that reality is not simply given but actively constructed through social processes, including language, interaction, and communication (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). This theoretical framework seeks to elucidate how individuals conceptualise and interpret their social environment, emphasising the role of discourse in shaping these interpretations.

Violence and what constitutes it is understood as a socially constructed phenomenon, with its conceptualisations varying over time and reflecting underlying power dynamics (Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999). A Social Constructionist lens, therefore, invites a critical examination of the processes through which certain social concepts become accepted truths or taken-for-granted assumptions (Phillips, 2023). These frameworks of understanding are transmitted and reinforced through cultural communication, particularly language and discourse (Burr, 1995). By critically engaging with these assumptions, the study aimed to bring to light the understandings of SV drawn upon by participants, thus contributing to a more nuanced and informed discourse on the subject. Viewing SV through a Social Constructionist lens highlighted the role of societal norms and widely accepted beliefs in shaping participants' constructions of and responses to such incidents. This approach was particularly relevant given the pervasive influence of rape myths and rape culture, which often obscures the reality and pervasiveness of SV and perpetuates harmful stereotypes (Sande & Chirongoma, 2021).

Finally, Social Constructionism emphasises that understanding the social world and its phenomena is shaped through interactive and interpersonal processes that occur in social contexts (Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999). This highlights the collaborative nature of human interaction, where individuals negotiate, construct, and reinforce shared understandings through discourse. For these reasons, Social Constructionism was utilised not only to inform the study's methodologies but also as a theoretical framework that informed the research perspective.

3.3 Study Setting

This study was conducted at Rhodes University, a small, research-intensive institution situated in a peri-urban area in Makhanda, Eastern Cape. The university has a student population of roughly 8 000 students, with a fairly balanced gender composition - 50% women and 40% men (Rhodes University Institutional Planning, 2019). Rhodes University holds significant relevance for this research due to its critical role in the national conversations about SV in South African HIEs. Rhodes students were at the forefront of protests against SV on campus which would spark widespread #EndRapeCulture campaigns and movements across South African campuses nationwide. These campaigns and movements laid bare the deep-seated cultural and institutional challenges around addressing

SV on campus, making Rhodes University a meaningful and important site to explore how SV understood, constructed and spoken about on campus.

This study focuses on how first-year men students talk about SV, with an aim to unpack how these constructions shape - and in turn are shaped by - broader societal SV discourses. Understanding how SV is framed and constructed in everyday talk can reveal how language itself can be a point of intervention in how society responds to SV and potentially unlearns harmful norms around SV.

3.4. Sampling Method and Recruitment

This study employed purposeful sampling, specifically homogenous sampling, as described by Patton (2015), which involves selecting participants who share key characteristics relevant to the research question. This approach allows for the collection of information-rich data and a nuanced exploration of participants' discursive constructions of SV.

Participants were selected based on two primary inclusion criteria: (1) they self-identified as men, and (2) they were in their first year of undergraduate study. A corresponding set of exclusion criteria was applied, which included: students younger than 18, those engaged in academic study in second year or above of their studies, and those who do not self-identify as men were excluded from the study. This focused selection was designed to ensure that the participants reflected a specific subgroup - first-year men students - who are situated at a crucial point of transition into the university environment. This period of transition is often characterised by exposure to new norms, power dynamics, and cultural scripts around gender, sex and sexuality, which are essential to the discourses the study sought to explore. Focusing on this particular group, the study aimed to explore the shared discursive frameworks through which its participants construct meaning around SV. This is well aligned with the study's social constructionist orientation, which values the co-construction of meaning within specific social and cultural contexts.

A limitation of this sampling approach is its restricted generalisability. The intention of this study, however, was not to generalise the findings but rather to develop an in-depth and nuanced understanding of how SV is constructed by its participants and within a specific context (socially and developmentally). Purposeful sampling was therefore deliberately used

as an appropriate method for capturing the depth and complexity of participants' discourse, relevant to the study's aims and area of inquiry.

3.4.1. Recruitment for the study occurred in three levels, as stipulated below:

Phase 1 (The initial recruitment phase): this phase was facilitated during the Sexual Consent Awareness talks conducted as part of the first-year Orientation programme by the Anti-harassment, Discrimination, and Gender Harm Office during the first academic term. A participant information sheet (see Appendix G) was circulated during the talks, where interested individuals were asked to share their student numbers linked to their student email addresses. In this phase, significant interest was shown by students who attended the talks, with 54 individuals expressing their willingness to participate.

Phase 2 (Research Information Dissemination): This phase involved disseminating the research advertisement (see Appendix B) and research information sheet (see Appendix C) via email to the 54 initially interested participants to facilitate informed consent. After going through the advertisement, interested individuals were asked to indicate their interest in the focus group discussions that would be arranged. This stage yielded a marked decrease in interest, with only six participants responding to the call; one was 17 - younger than the criteria set for the research. Of the five students who met the inclusion criteria, two responded to the set times for data collection. This lower-than-expected response rate prompted the researcher to explore alternative sampling and recruitment methods within the purposeful sampling framework that would not need a large sample size for data collection (Luborsky & Rubeinstein, 1995). This led to the third phase of recruitment.

Phase 3: The researcher implemented a snowball sampling technique in response to the low recruitment response rate. This technique involved the researcher asking participants who had responded to recommend and invite other potential participants interested in participating in the research (Luborsky & Rubeinstein, 1995). The initial two participants were encouraged to refer others who met the research criteria and would be interested in participating. This approach yielded two additional participants, resulting in a total of four participants. As such, the data collection methods needed to be adjusted to dyad interviews instead of focus group discussions, given the response and availability of participants. However, in retrospect, these dyad interviews aligned powerfully with the research's social constructionist approach. They allowed the researcher to collect data on how participants'

interactions during dyad interviews influenced their constructions of the scenarios presented in the vignettes - assessing whether participant interaction impacted discourse shifts.

3.5. Data Collection Procedures

This research ran parallel to another research project that focused on constructing sexual consent, with data collection occurring simultaneously across the both projects. Both studies utilised the same vignette sets, and shared an interview schedule that incorporated questions about sexual consent and SV to guide the conversation with participants (see Appendix F). The study applied Social Constructionist tenets to inform its methodology and theoretical frameworks, employing dyad interviews and vignettes to explore how participants construct and interpret instances of SV.

Two dyadic interviews, with two participants each, were conducted. The interviews took place at on-campus venues and were conducted separately, with each session lasting between 90 and 120 minutes each. While participants were not reimbursed, refreshments were provided in consideration of the interview length and possible clashes with dining hall schedules.

Dyadic interviews generally involve two participants who engage with open-ended questions and respond to one another in dialogue, enabling the co-construction of meaning. This interactive format encourages participants to reflect, elaborate and sometimes challenge each other's perspectives, aligning well with the study's goal of understanding how SV is discursively constructed (Morgan *et al.*, 2013).

The open-ended nature of these interviews facilitated an environment where participants could engage in meaning-making processes, allowing the study to capture the socially constructed nature of their responses. The interview questions focused on language and discourse; for instance: "How would you describe what happened in the story?" (see Appendix F). Additional interview questions influenced by the invitation to examine taken-for-granted assumptions, as extended by the social constructionist lens, included: "How would you respond to a friend who told you that they had an experience like this?" and "Did anyone involved make bad choices? What were these bad choices? Why were they bad choices?"

Such questions aided in exploring some of the assumptions that informed the participants' responses. Interview questions such as the ones mentioned above were used to elicit the words, discourses and descriptions drawn upon by participants to make sense of and explain the provided vignettes. The dyadic interviews not only allowed for more data and contributions from each participant but also allowed each participant to develop a more personal narrative about the research topic (Morgan *et al.*, 2013). Through the use of dyad interviews, this research sought to understand the discourses drawn upon by participants to make sense of and explain scenarios presented in vignettes that may be considered acts of SV. The interviews were open-ended and were positioned as conversation-facilitating questions among participants.

Overall, the data collection was structured as a conversation due to the researcher's theoretical stance, which asserts that explanations of SV emerge from negotiated and co-constructed dialogues (Phillips, 2023). As such, the dyad interviews among participants served not only to understand participants' perspectives on the scenarios but also to investigate how they interpreted the presented vignettes while engaging in dialogue with each other. This exploration included assessing whether participants' understandings of the vignettes shifted as they interacted with each other. Given this interactive and interpersonal process of meaning-making, Social Constructionism provided a powerful and well-suited approach to the research aim.

Participants were presented with five short vignettes that reflected familiar stories relating to SV within university settings (see Appendix E). They were then probed about the stories depicted in the vignettes in dyad interviews. Some of the vignettes were underpinned by notions of rape myths described in section 2.6.3 of this dissertation and other real-world elements that complicate how SV is recognised and responded to, while one vignette reflected a case of consensual sex. This approach aimed to explore how participants positioned the victims/survivors and perpetrators of SV depicted in the vignettes, providing valuable insights into how border societal scripts influence participants' interpretations of the scenarios provided. By drawing from these scripts to make sense of the vignettes, the study sought to understand how these scripts, underpinned by societal norms, shape students' constructions of SV and their interpretations thereof. This method also allowed for assessing participants' critical engagement with rape myths. Aspects of elements which complicate how SV is understood were covered in the four vignettes as indicated below:

1. Vignette 1 (SV in the context of intimate relationships)
2. Vignette 2 (SV in the context of alcohol intoxication)
3. Vignette 4 (SV in the context of the absence of physical violence and aggression)
4. Vignette 5 (SV when the victims/survivors are considered to have a promiscuous sexual reputation)

Vignette 3, which depicted consensual sex, was used to assess whether participants were able to differentiate between consensual sex and SV and to explore how participants understood consent in relation to SV.

3.6. Data Management

The dyadic interviews were audio recorded using two sets of recording devices - one being for backup purposes. Participants were informed of this before their participation (see Appendix D). Audio recordings were transferred from the recording devices and stored in password-encrypted files. They will remain in cloud storage for the next 5 years in accordance with POPIA and Rhodes University data management requirements. Once the audio recordings were transferred to electronic files, they were permanently deleted from the recording device. The researcher had access to the recordings for transcription purposes. While the anonymised transcriptions will be made available for analysis validation and publication purposes for future research and/or interventions, the collected data will be permanently deleted after 5 years by the researcher.

3.7. Data Transcription

Recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim using the Jefferson Transcription method. The Jefferson Transcription method is a conversation analysis that accounts for details in which talk is delivered, such as timing, speech latency, volume, pitch, emphasis, and embodied features such as body language, amongst other features (Park & Hepburn, 2022). Jeffersonian transcription has been identified as beneficial for research that comprises "talk-in-interaction" (Park & Hepburn, 2022, p.1). Because data collection in this project was structured as a conversation to assess how participants' talk is negotiated as they interacted with one another, the Jeffersonian transcription method was viewed as most appropriate.

3.8. Data Analysis and Interpretation

The resulting text underwent analysis using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) techniques, a method informed by Michel Foucault's understanding of knowledge and power dynamics (Foucault, 1977). In Foucault's work, the body is conceptualised as a contested site influenced by societal norms, laws, culture, and perceptions, where individuals' power over their bodies is subject to the environment within which they exist (Foucault, 1977). Given the researcher's understanding of SV as partially rooted in exercising and expressing unequal power relations, with the body often being the site onto which this power is exercised, exploring the notion of power as circulated in discourse was imperative for this study.

A Foucauldian approach to data analysis proves helpful in examining the interaction between participants' language, subjectivity, and the power dynamics inherent in the vignettes (Willig, 2013). FDA delves into the role of language in shaping individuals' discourses and their reproduction of societal norms (Willig, 2013). In this study, FDA was employed to investigate whether participants' responses to the vignettes perpetuated discourses aligned with rape culture and other hegemonic discourses about SV.

Moreover, the FDA goes beyond analysing discourse to understanding the broader context in which these discourses operate (Hanna, 2014). It identifies and examines the various systems of meaning that shape individuals' constructions of social realities, including rape myths and counter-discourses (Willig, 2013). This feature of the FDA aligned well with the research's aim to explore participants' interpretations of scenarios of SV within the broader cultural context.

Additionally, FDA focuses on the consequences of discourses on individuals' speech, meaning-making processes, and social practices (Willig, 2013). By analysing participants' responses to hypothetical scenarios, such as how they would react to a friend disclosing a similar experience (see interview schedule), FDA enabled an examination of the impact of discourses on actions and behaviours, with language understood as social action - with the ability to reproduce society (Willig, 2013).

Overall, the FDA was utilised to interrogate the relationship between individuals' subjectivity and their explanations, highlighting the role of power dynamics in shaping discourses surrounding SV (Willig, 2013).

The process of data analysis was guided by Willig's six stages of FDA (2008):

- Stage 1 (Discursive Construction): The first stage involved identifying the various ways in which participants talked about and constructed the objects "sex," "sexual act," and "SV." This stage of the analysis was guided by the question: "How do participants construct SV?" It included identifying and coding both implicit and explicit ways in which participants spoke about sex and other elements of the scenarios that influenced participants' talk about sex, SV, and consent [or lack thereof] in the scenarios provided. Given that this research focuses on exploring how SV is constructed and the ideas contributing to how participants understand it, this stage of the FDA explored the ideas and notions from which participants draw to construct SV and, subsequently, their interpretations of the vignettes presented as acts of SV. This stage further included identifying various language devices drawn upon, such as metaphors, descriptions, and practices, to negotiate and make sense of the presented vignettes. This allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the subtitles to these constructions.

- Stage 2 (Discourses): the following stage of the analysis sought to assess how the objects, victims/survivors and perpetrators in the vignettes were constructed in multiple ways - looking for consistencies in how participants constructed the objects identified. It was guided by the question: "What discourses do participants draw upon to construct SV and position victims/survivors and perpetrators?" For example, exploring whether SV was consistently constructed as the absence of consent during sexual activity or whether determining acts of sex as SV was dependent upon various other nuanced elements such as unequal power dynamics, advantage-taking, coercion, and alcohol intoxication, amongst others. Examining the different ways the same object is constructed allowed the researcher to assess how the various discourses were drawn upon to facilitate alternative constructions of the same object.

- Stage 3 (Action Orientation): This phase of the analysis focused on examining how the text objects related to one another and, essentially, the functions of participants' explanations of the depicted scenarios. Exploring this provided the various social realities collectively shaped by participants' talk and narratives. The two questions used to explore this stage of the analysis were: "What social reality is constructed from the discourses used by participants?" and "What is gained from constructing the

objects in this way in this context" (Hanna, 2014, p.9). The aim of this phase was, therefore, to further understand and explore the potential impact of the various explanations and conceptualisations of SV provided by the participants. This included the effect of participants' responses to the vignette in reproducing or challenging existing discourses, essentially identifying the potential discourses these responses may [re]produce.

- Stage 4 (Positionings): This stage focused on locating the participants' various constructions of SV and sex within broader discourses of SV in the social context. This included locating participants' constructions within wider societal scripts about SV and sex. This stage sought to assess and explore whether participants drew from rape culture-informed interpretations of the given scenarios while also looking for text that would draw from counter-discourses to construct SV, victims/survivors and perpetrators. This stage of the analysis was guided by the question: "What positionings come from locating participants' discourses of SV within wider discourses?"

- Stage 5 (Practice): This stage explored opportunities for action offered by the participants' discursive constructions identified with the text object. This stage was guided by the question: "What possibilities of action are offered by participants' discourses of SV and wider discourses?" It sought to examine the opportunities for possible action that emerged from participants' discourses of SV, their positionings of victims/survivors and perpetrators, and the function of these discourses.

- Stage 6 (Subjectivity): this stage of the analysis process entailed exploring the links between the participants' discursive constructions and the implications of these for subjective experience. Guided by the question: "How do these discourses shape subjectivity and identity, and the consequences of taking up different subject positions in discourses of SV?" This stage sought to speculate the kinds of experiences that would be made available by the participants' constructions of SV. For example, this part of the analysis included exploring participants' internal reality that may be constructed by a discourse that makes it challenging to identify SV and differentiate it from sex.

3.9. Research Rigour and Trustworthiness

Parker's (2005) three overarching criteria for evaluation were used as guidelines to evaluate the rigour and trustworthiness of this research. These included (1) grounding, (2) coherence and (3) accessibility. The first criterion questioned whether the research was grounded in literature and other bodies of knowledge. This research sought to contribute to existing knowledge about SV amongst university first-year men students, intending to provide a comprehensive exploration of how its participants would typically make sense of and respond to incidents of SV on campus. The second criterion was utilised to question whether the material provided (including writing and arguments provided) was presented coherently. This criterion was utilised to assess whether the research paradigm and methodologies were coherent and thus able to answer the research questions the study sought to explore. Lastly, the research's accessibility was evaluated, including whether the research accounts for the conceptual background, methodology and theory of its topic of interest. This criterion also encompassed the research's accessibility to communities outside the research community, including its participants. As such, the linguistic accessibility of the research was considered to allow for accessibility beyond the field of academia. As a thesis, the findings were further shared with the Anti-Harassment, Discrimination, and Gender Harm Office to potentially contribute to existing knowledge about and interventions to challenge SV on campus.

Potential threats to trustworthiness were identified, and the management of these risks is discussed below:

3.9.1 Participant-Research Power Imbalance

The research process, from recruitment to interviewing, involved navigating complex and multi-layered power dynamics. The researcher held authority over the participants through their ability to ask questions, use the data collected, and potentially label participants as "problematic," overtly or implicitly, during the writing phase. Several measures were implemented to address the power imbalance between the researcher, a postgraduate student, and the first-year participants. The questions were designed to promote dialogue among participants rather than reinforce the researcher's authority. Additionally, the researcher aimed to facilitate knowledge co-creation by making participants aware of differences in their

educational backgrounds and experiences with discussions about SV, encouraging respectful engagement between them.

The recruitment process was complicated because it was conducted during mandatory consent sessions organised by the Anti-Harassment, Discrimination & Gender Harm office as part of the orientation week program, which introduced challenges to voluntary participation. The researcher had to be aware of the potential indirect pressure participants might have felt due to the compulsory nature of these sessions. This likely contributed to the relatively low response rate observed during the second recruitment phase following the distribution of research materials. To mitigate any risk of coercion, the research materials, such as flyers and posters, emphasised the voluntary nature of participation and the importance of informed consent.

This method has since gained recognition as a crucial means of enhancing research credibility, particularly in the context of qualitative studies, which are inherently susceptible to individual biases (Vivek *et al.,* 2023). In the study, researcher triangulation was employed to minimise bias and to reduce the likelihood of misrepresenting participants during the thesis writing process.

Triangulation—introduced as a methodological strategy in the 1950s—was employed to enhance the study's credibility to mitigate potential biases associated with using a single approach in qualitative research. This strategy involved collaborative consultations with the research supervisor and a peer researcher to review and critically challenge the themes identified during data analysis. This process included sharing transcripts and audio recordings with the supervisor and second researcher, a fellow postgraduate student who was also completing her Masters in Counselling Psychology dissertation on a related theme, as explained in section 3.4 of this dissertation. The involvement of the second researcher provided a critical perspective, allowing the primary researcher to refine and scrutinise the themes drawn from the data.

The feedback from the second researcher was crucial in exploring various interpretations and perspectives, thereby enhancing the study's credibility and breadth (Carter, 2014, as cited in Vivek *et al.*, 2023). This triangulation approach was integral to data analysis and the formulation of recommendations, ensuring alignment with the research's overall aims.

3.9.2 Reflexivity and Social Location

This section will discuss the key demographics that speak to my positionality as a Black, Zionist, South African woman - and how I navigated this during the research process. Given my subjective positionality as a woman and the participants' positionings as men, the impact of these different positionings was considered as having potential effects on the validity of the research. Reflexivity was utilised throughout the research process to address this issue. Reflexivity is the acknowledgement of the researcher and participants' subjective positioning's impacts on the research process. As such, my reflection on the impact of these positionings became part of accounting for and considering this impact on the research process (Flick, 2006, as cited in Rohland, 2009). Research journaling, debriefs with the peer researcher, and supervisory consultation supported and encouraged continual reflection in conducting this research and its write-up.

The process of obtaining ethical approval and clearance for this research was one of the most emotionally and mentally taxing aspects of the research, which not only tested my resilience as a researcher but deepened my awareness of the structural and institutional barriers that regulate knowledge production. The ethics review process involved repeated revisions of my chosen methodological choices, with specific attention relating to my positionality as a woman researcher. While some of the feedback was constructive, the back-and-forth directive feedback process was a continuous proving of my competence to conduct research on men - an assessment I found to be based not on my qualifications and training but on my positionality as a woman.

This experience proved to be taxing and prompted me to reflect on the implicit biases that shape how objectivity in research is constructed. From a social constructionist perspective, I came to understand that the objectivity I strive for as a researcher is not an inherent or neutral stance but is instead socially constructed through *shared* language, interactions and meaning-making processes (Burr, 1995; Phillips, 2023). In light of this, I viewed my positionality not as a limitation but as an opportunity to transparently explore how my processes of meaning-making, as a researcher, interact with those of the participants.' An interaction that occurs within dynamic contexts, which shape both sets of processes in ways that require ongoing reflection. This experience, in essence, highlighted how institutional ethics frameworks, while necessary, can perpetuate assumptions about the researcher's suitability based on positionality and identity as opposed to competency. Despite these

challenges, this experience was sobering, revealing how power regulates knowledge production and representation.

Conducting research on men's constructions of SV in South Africa, as a woman, presented a complex area to navigate, particularly when considering how African masculinities and their role in SV have historically been framed through narratives that pathologise Black men in these contexts. Such narratives often depict African Black men through an essentialist lens, portraying them as inherently problematic, violent and criminals - thus perpetuating a stereotype of African masculinities in crisis and in need of rescuing (Ammann & Staundacher, 2021).

With a sobering understanding of the power of representation, I grappled with the responsibility of advocating for change without reinforcing harmful narratives that stigmatise and pathologise participants. This concern was particularly salient given that all four of the participants were Black men. My concern was grounded in the awareness that framing participants' views solely through a deficit lens and as isolated from their social contexts could lead to stereotypes that fail to capture the socio-cultural complexities contributing to how men make sense of SV. This internal tension significantly influenced my approach to integrating literature and theoretical frameworks instead of separating the two, emphasising the historical and social factors that shape understandings of sexuality and sex in the South African context.

Keeping in mind that participants' willingness to engage in the research and their commitment to seeing it through signified interest in addressing structures that sustain SV, I was encouraged to critically reflect on participants' voices, talk and language without reinforcing monolithic ideas of men in African contexts. Given this, I aimed to open up space for dialogue, firstly with participants and then with the data collected, on the socio-cultural context in which these constructions exist, thus encouraging more nuanced understandings that go beyond stereotypes. This informed my interpretation and required conscious reflexivity to ensure that my own experiences and potential biases did not skew the portrayal of participants and, thus, the analysis of their responses.

Additionally, being a Black Zionist woman with a conservative appearance, I reflected on how my visible identity might influence the openness of men participants - to talk about sex and SV during interviews. I recognised the potential assumptions associated

with my presentation and its implications for the research process - particularly concerning social desirability in participants' responses. Therefore, it was crucial to establish rapport and create a safe, non-judgmental space where participants could freely engage despite our differing social positions. Additionally, as an educated woman and intersectional feminist researcher, I acknowledged the importance of being mindful of my personal views on the provided scenarios. This awareness extended to how I facilitated conversations among participants, including maintaining non-judgmental body language and facial expressions, especially when encountering differing viewpoints.

Ultimately, this research demanded an ongoing negotiation between advocacy for change and the ethical imperative to portray participants' talk and discourse with respect and complexity. The reflective process was not only essential to maintaining the research's ethical integrity but also ensured that it contributed meaningfully to discourse on SV without reinforcing harmful or simplistic narratives.

3.9.3 Social Desirability Bias

Interviewing men about their understandings of SV, primarily framed as violence against women, within a supposedly progressive university context posed a potential challenge to the validity of collected data, given the gender dynamics involved. Research studying men's perceptions of SV - mainly when conducted by women researchers - often illustrates a pattern of distancing discourses, in which participants position themselves as nonviolent and distanced from perpetration (Dheensa *et al*., 2022). As such, the potential of participants presenting socially acceptable responses to avoid judgment or stigma posed a potential challenge to the validity of the research findings (Dheensa *et al*., 2022). To mitigate this, the research used vignettes instead of exploring the participants' personal experiences. This strategy was used to better understand how participants would respond to and make sense of incidents of SV in a non-threatening and exposing manner.

Additionally, rapport was essential in addressing the potential of social desirability. From the beginning, this approach was integrated into the recruitment process, presenting the data collection process as a collaborative conversation. Participants were positioned as co-creators in a safe, non-judgmental space, facilitating mutual learning and exchange, with the researcher acting as a facilitator.

3.10.Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix A). The study adhered to the ethical codes of practice when researching human participants, in accordance with the ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects in the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2001). The Rhodes University Ethical Review Application System was utilised as an ethical standards protocol. Ethical guidelines were used to ensure safe practice and safeguard participants and the researcher in the research process. The ethical concerns considered while conducting this research included voluntary participation, informed consent, identity protection, potential risk of participation, and the beneficence of the research.

3.10.1 Informed Consent and Autonomy

Informed consent is a precondition for all research involving human participants and is informed by the principle of autonomy in research (Wa-Mbaleka, 2019). This was practised in the second level of the research recruitment phase, where participants were given the research flyer that informed potential participants about the purpose, aims, and expectations of participation and how the research results would be utilised. This further included emphasising voluntary participation and the right to withdraw from the research at any stage without any negative consequences linked to participation withdrawal. The commencement of the involvement in the research was finalised by signing informed consent forms. On the day of data collection, the informed consent form was read out to participants, allowing them to ask questions before participation commenced. This was followed by giving the participants who wanted to continue participation in the research an opportunity to endorse consent through signatures. None of the participants chose to withdraw at this stage of the data collection.

3.10.2 Anonymity and Confidentiality

The principles of anonymity and confidentiality were utilised to protect the participants' identities if any information provided by the participant became publicly available (Wa-Mbaleka, 2019). However, using snowball sampling posed a challenge in maintaining anonymity amongst participants as they were either friends, classmates or residential housemates. The challenge of ensuring and maintaining confidentiality and anonymity is often faced in research with small sample sizes (Wa-Mbaleka, 2019). To

preserve anonymity and privacy, codes (i.e. P01 used to describe Participant 1) were used in transcription, confidentiality clauses were included in the informed consent documents signed by participants, and data was identified for data analysis.

3.10.3. Beneficence and Non-Maleficence

The principle of non-maleficence focuses on ensuring that participants are not exposed to any harm due to the research (Wa-Mbaleka, 2019). Understanding the sensitivity of the research topic, non-maleficence was considered physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Consideration was given to the possibility of having participants directly or indirectly affected by SV as victims/survivors, perpetrators, and loved ones directly affected by SV. Despite this, the participant population group was not categorised as a vulnerable population, which typically includes individuals who are institutionalised or underage and, therefore, unable to provide consent. The study did not aim to recruit survivors or perpetrators of SV specifically. The recruitment materials acknowledged and emphasised the potential psychological impacts of participation, including disclaimers encouraging participants to consider their readiness to engage based on their personal experiences. As such, participants who may have been potential victims/survivors and perpetrators were allowed to decide whether to participate.

Additionally, consideration was given to the possibility of some members experiencing feelings of embarrassment, reputational damage and/or offence as a result of expressing views that may be viewed as problematic by some group members. To mitigate this, the study was designed to provide a non-judgmental learning experience through the use of vignettes without the requirement for sharing personal experiences. Participants were additionally given the option of psychological support and containment in the event of psychological distress post-research participation. This was written in the research recruitment material and verbalised by the researchers both before and after the interviews.

3.11. Concluding Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach employed in this study to explore how first-year university men students construct and make sense of scenarios of SV on campus. The qualitative research design, underpinned by a Social Constructionist framework, allowed for an in-depth examination of the discourses drawn upon by participants in explaining and interpreting vignettes depicting various scenarios of SV.

The use of purposeful sampling, adapted to include snowball sampling due to recruitment challenges, enabled the selection of participants who could provide rich insights into the research questions. Dyadic interviews, facilitated through carefully crafted vignettes, proved effective in creating a space for participants to co-construct meanings and engage in dialogue about sensitive topics. The FDA approach to data analysis aligned well with the study's objectives, allowing for a nuanced exploration of how language, power, and subjectivity intersect in participants' constructions of SV.

While the study faced potential limitations, particularly regarding potential social desirability bias, several measures were implemented to enhance validity and maintain the ethical integrity of the research process. These included researcher triangulation, reflexivity practices, and careful consideration of ethical issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, and participant well-being.

By employing this methodological approach, the study aimed not only to contribute valuable insights into the discourses surrounding SV among first-year men university students but also to achieve the research objective.

Chapter 4
A Presentation of Research Findings, Analysis, and Discussion

4.1. Chapter Outline

This chapter outlines and provides an in-depth exploration of the themes and findings that surfaced in the research. In line with the study's aims to explore constructions of SV and the subsequent discourses participants drew upon to interpret scenarios of sexual interactions, the chapter unpacks the complex ways participants construct and respond to the presented vignettes. Guided by Willig's six stages of FDA (Willig, 2013) and a Social Constructionist lens to exploring the four research sub-questions, the findings progress from participants' constructions of SV to their positioning of victim/survivors and perpetrators to negotiations of responsibility-placing and finally, to the discourses that emerge from these interpretations. The chapter also explores how these discourses function together in shaping participants' constructions of SV, what the effects of these discourses are, and the implications on possibilities for action. Given the alignment between the research sub-questions and the stages of FDA, the findings and analysis are intentionally combined in a single chapter for coherence and depth.

The overarching research question: 'How do participants make sense of and construct explanations for incidents of SV as depicted in vignettes?' guided this presentation of the chapter. This question informed the entire research process and was explored through the four main sub-questions highlighted in Chapter 1. Applying FDA allowed for the identification and analysis of the discourses that emerge from how participants talk about sex and SV. Following Willig's (2013) six stages of FDA, the findings move from exploring the ideas participants draw upon in their talk about SV and progress to analysing the language participants use in their meaning-making processes of SV and what is accomplished by talking about SV in this manner.

It is important to note that the vignettes themselves were not constructed in a vacuum. The researcher carefully crafted the language and talk used in the scenarios to reflect real-world complexities surrounding SV. The vignettes drew from various forms of language and talk that complicate the interpretation and construction of SV, including instances of SV

within relationships, situations involving mutual intoxication, cases of withdrawn consent, and scenarios where the victims/survivors did not conform to the normalised or 'ideal' victims/survivors standards.

This intentional design of the vignettes was used to illustrate how language is not only reflective of but also constructs social realities. The vignettes, thus, were a site where the participants' talk and language could be utilised to reproduce, challenge or negotiate the discourses they drew upon to make sense of SV.

While this approach could be directive and potentially steer participants toward problematic discourses, it was deliberate. The intention was to examine whether participants could identify and critique these problematic discourses and explore the influence of such discourses on their interpretation of SV and their perceived possibilities for action. By incorporating these complexities, the vignettes themselves allowed for an in-depth exploration of how language and discourse contribute to the perpetuation or disruption of ideas and conceptualisations that enable SV to take place.

4.2. Identifying the discursive constructions of SV

The first stage of the analysis focuses on exploring the objects of interest, which, in this research, is SV. Provided that this research's focus is on exploring how SV is constructed and the ideas that contribute to how it is defined, this stage of the FDA explored the concepts from which participants draw to construct SV and, subsequently, interpret the vignettes presented as acts of SV.

4.2.1. Constructions of Sexual Violence

Participants drew from five main ideas that linked to and made up how they constructed SV and recognised it in the vignettes provided. These ideas and constructions are not broken down based on each vignette but present the participants' pattern of responses that form part of the ideas contributing to how SV is constructed. The findings below demonstrate the varied notions and ideas participants draw from to talk about SV and allow them to recognise when SV has occurred conceptually.

4.2.1.1. The Absence of Consent

In defining SV, participants drew primarily from ideas of consent with the disregard for consent or the absence thereof, forming a significant part of how they constructed sexual interactions as SV. In their understanding of consent, participants drew from notions of verbal and non-verbal refusals, mutuality, wantedness and willingness or active participation - constructing sexual encounters that do not conform to these concepts of consent as SV. Further, participants framed consent as ideal - free from blame, judgement and adverse emotional outcomes with an emphasis on equality and shared agency in sexual interactions.

The responses below are participants' interpretations of the vignettes as examples of SV from ideas of the explicit violation of the victims'/survivors' verbal expression of 'stop.'

Extract 1
P03: "It is [sexual violence] basically because she asked him to stop, and he didn't…"

Extract 2
P01: "[...] First they were having sex until Bulelwa told uSamkelo to stop[...]"

Extract 3
P02: "uBulelwa said Samkelo must stop, but then uSamkelo insisted on having them continuing [...]."

The above responses reveal various aspects of how the participants construct and conceptualise SV. First, the participants' responses reveal an emphasis on the verbal expression of 'stop' as a clear marker of SV and non-consensual sexual interaction. Participants constructed this verbal refusal as a clear boundary between consensual sex and SV.

Additionally, the emphasis on the perpetrator's persistence in continuing sexual engagement, despite the victims/survivors' explicit verbal request to stop - highlighted in Extracts 2 and 3 - played a significant role in how participants understood and constructed the acts in the vignettes as SV. This emphasis on persistence reinforced their interpretation of the scenarios as non-consensual and illustrated a shift in how participants attribute responsibility. It places the attribution of responsibility onto the perpetrator, rather than the victims/survivors, for continuing the sexual interaction after being asked to stop. In so doing, the participants' talk emphasises the perpetrator's accountability in the act.

Building on this understanding of persistence despite the overt 'stop,' the second construction of consent is identified in how participants talk about sex and SV, revealing consistency in drawing upon thoughts of mutuality to construct and interpret the scenarios depicted as consensual, with some participants noting:

Extract 4
P01: "It's two parties; there has to be consent by the right, and there has to be consent by the left. Both parties have to agree to what's happening."

Extract 5
P04: "[...] the nodding of the head actually means yes [...]"

Extract 6
P03: "uBrian was willing to go over to uRita's place [...] uRita was even willing enough to give uBrian i-condom."

Extract 7
P02: "[...] they both did what they did together, they kissed [...] they knew what they were doing that time, and to them that time it made sense so to me, I just feel like there is nothing wrong with that-"

These ideas illustrate how mutual willingness and desire were incorporated into the participants' ideas of consent and consensual sex, predominantly drawing from notions of mutual wantedness. This links consent with pleasure and wantedness - findings also highlighted in King *et al.*'s (2020) study of how undergraduate students construct their appraisal of sexual scenarios. Associated with this idea of desire or wantedness was the notion of sexual enjoyment in how participants constructed consent in sexual interactions, as illustrated in these responses:

Extract 8
P01: "Everything just went smoothly" P01

Extract 9
P03: "No regrets [...] They were just fine - it was something they both wanted [...] It's a good experience."

Extract 10
P02: "Both parties were happy about it. No one was like unhappy."

The responses above display the significant positive emotional effect of a sexual encounter on both parties when participants construct the aftermath of consensual sex. In addition to the thought of mutual pleasure - as expressed in Extract 9 - and absence of distress - illustrated in Extract 10 - the above responses illustrate a sense of ease and lack of difficulty in interpreting incidents of consensual sex. Some participants introduced the layer of mutual

awareness and consciousness in constructing sexual encounters as consensual, such as Participant P03, who noted:

Extract 11
P03: "[...] this is kind of the ideal scenario. They both knew what was happening, they were both in a sound state of mind, and both consenting [...]"

This response emphasises the idea of consent being an informed decision, with both parties aware and conscious during the sexual encounter and able to agree to have sex, which aligns with existing constructions of consent (Powell *et al.,* 2013). Linked to thoughts of mutuality and informed decision-making were notions of permission-asking, present in vignette three as indicated in these responses:

Extract 12
P04: "Brian asked Rita if she wants to have sex, so it was consensual."
P02: "uBrian [...] asking Rita if she wants to have sex [...]"

These responses highlight the importance of permission-asking in conceptualisations of consent - thus positioning the presence of this feature of sexual engagement as significant in consensual sex. In addition to constructing SV as the violation of an expressed refusal and the absence of consent, a subtler concept emerged alongside the overt expression of 'stop,' which the researcher termed the 'notions of ambiguity.' In relation to participants' constructions of SV, this concept pointed to ideas that constructed SV as unclear when participants perceived the refusal to continue as ambiguous. One participant, in response to the first sub-question, aimed at exploring participants' constructions of depicted sexual interactions and SV, noted:

Extract 13
P02: "On the contrary [...] if she was determined to stop, she would have told him to stop more than once. So I would say *ukuthi* (meaning *that* in IsiZulu) it can be both, either a sexual offence or not because if she was serious about stopping, she would have said it several times."

This response introduces an additional layer to the notion of overt verbal refusal by emphasising not just the presence of an overt 'stop' but the insistence and repetition of it. The idea that insistence and repetition of refusal are necessary indicators of 'real' refusal aligns with an aspect of the rape myth*; it was not really rape*. This myth suggests that if the individual (the victims/survivors) intended to stop the sexual engagement, they would have repeated their refusal. This implies that a single expression of refusal and resistance is insufficient. From this perspective, because the individual did not resist more *assertively* or repeatedly, they did not genuinely mean or wish for the interaction to end. As such, the act of

continuing to have sex - by the perpetrator - was not considered SV. This participant's response draws on an implicit understanding of what constitutes 'real' rape and what is not, presenting a complex and ambiguous understanding of SV. Corroborating this were ideas of entitlement that may undermine consent in contexts of intimate relationships, with one response highlighting:

> **Extract 14**
> P04: "Jahh [...] because he did not regard her consent, and he basically felt entitled to having sex with her because they are in a relationship."

While this response also aligns with notions of persistence, it presents an additional layer - entitlement to having sex with the victims/survivors due to the existence of an intimate relationship. Specifically, the participant's response pertained to vignette 1, which depicted SV within an existing intimate relationship. This response stresses how entitlement, derived from the context of a relationship, may underpin behaviours that override the victims/survivors expressed lack of consent. Additionally, it aligns with existing discourses that suggest consent is no longer necessary when certain relationship achievements or milestones have been reached (Brady *et al.,* 2018). Furthermore, it points to normalised power dynamics in relationships where one partner may dismiss or ignore the other's consent (Shefer & Strebel, 2012, as cited in Khumalo *et al.*, 2021). This response illustrates that non-consensual sex becomes more complex when relational power imbalances foster a sense of entitlement over one's partner.

In addition to complicated consent in contexts of existing relationships, Extract 13 demonstrates a notion of 'degrees' or 'frequency' of refusal, implying that a single verbal expression may be seen as less serious or genuine than multiple expressions of refusal. This brings to mind notions of the victims/survivors not doing enough to prevent the SV from occurring (Anderson & Doherty, 2008). This view, therefore, links the notion of the victims/survivors' perceived determination to stop, illustrated by the degree to which they refuse the sexual interaction, with the legitimacy of their refusal. This further evokes thoughts about ideas of what constitutes 'real' rape. It not only demonstrates how the legitimacy of SV may be constructed, but it also reflects a more profound scepticism about the victims/survivors' intention and genuine desire not to have sex, particularly in contexts of intimate relationships. This scepticism is referred to as 'token resistance' in literature, indicating that a single expression of 'stop' might not be enough to affirm the refusal and unwillingness to have sex as legitimate for this participant (Harris, 2018).

This introduces the participants' fourth understanding of SV, framed through the lens of violated consent: an unwillingness to engage in sex. Participants described disinterest or absence of *active* participation as central to their construction of SV, emphasising the importance of active participation or interest in defining their understandings and interpretations of the vignettes. They noted:

Extract 15
P02: "They both were kissing, and then uNaya pushed because she was tired and everything, so the kissing part, we can assume that's consent, but then her pushing away, saying she is tired and all; it shows *ukuthi* (meaning *that* in IsiXhosa)she wasn't interested anymore."

Extract 16
P01: "The fact that [...] Samkelo [...] puts on a condom spreads Bulelwa's legs and continues to kiss passionately [...] I feel like he spread uBulelwa's legs without uBulelwa spreading her legs. I feel like that's off-ish [...] Bulelwa's the one that is supposed to spread her legs, but Samkelo did that himself [....] it feels like Bulelwa was not into this- this day."

These responses reveal a nuanced interpretation and construction of SV, illustrating the participants' attention to both verbal and non–verbal cues in determining the characters' interest, and therefore consent, in the sexual encounters. Thus, the basis of the participants' construction of SV was informed by their ideas of non-consent as the absence or lack of active participation.

4.2.1.2. The Use of Force

In addition to notions of disinterest and unwillingness, participants emphasised the presence of physical force in their constructions of SV. This section covers constructions of SV from ideas that draw predominantly from the presence of force and physical coercion in sexual encounters - with participants noting:

Extract 17
P04: "She communicated that she was not interested [...] he forced her into having sex with him."

Extract 18
P02: "Him continuing to force himself [...] it wasn't consent."

Extract 19
P02: "uHloni somehow forced himself onto uNaya."

These responses reveal a link between SV and the explicit use of force and physical coercion, constructing acts that involved one party physically forcing themselves onto another as non-consensual. In contrast to the identification of overt violence and force as central in constructing SV, participants often downplayed the notion of force in the context of mutual intoxication:

Extract 20
P02: "uThato did not force himself onto u-Yolanda; they both were willing participants[...] they were both drunk."

Extract 21
P04: "I don't consider it as sexual violence because nobody forced it or it just happened."

Extract 22
P03: "But I don't think this was forceful or violent in nature."

Extract 23
P04: "I don't consider it as sexual violence because [...] Thato didn't force himself on Yolanda, and Yolanda didn't force herself on Thato[...] it just happened."

The participants' responses reveal how understandings and interpretations of sexual interactions can be complicated when there is no explicit violation of refusal and consent, as well as the use of force. The responses illustrate how participants negated and minimised the potential for SV in scenarios that do not fall into the categories of constructions of SV, framing mutual intoxication as a context in which SV could not occur based on the absence of overt force rather than the potential of impaired consent. This speaks to the implications of party rape culture in complicating the identification of SV and sexually risky behaviours (Anderson & Naidu, 2022).

4.2.1.3. The Exploitation of Vulnerability

While the presence of physical force was a notion participants initially associated SV with, they also recognised other variations of force, including coercion, manipulation and unequal power dynamics, as central to their constructions of SV. These concepts were predominantly rooted in ideas of exploited vulnerability, where SV was understood as involving the perpetrator's *intentional* use of power to undermine the victims'/survivors' ability to refuse or withhold consent due to various vulnerabilities. Exploiting vulnerability in SV was described as involving intentional pressure, coercion, confinement, or manipulation, creating conditions where refusing sexual interaction felt unsafe and thus compromising the

victim/survivor's consent. Participants specifically highlighted the presence of pressure and a lack of viable alternatives for the victims/survivors as indicative of non-consensual interactions, noting:

Extract 24
P04: "[...] She agreed because she was gonna gain something [...] her safety, so I don't think it was consensual."

Extract 25
P03: "[...] telling her to leave by herself and he knows it's late at night, it kind of forced her in a way to just comply [...] for her own safety [..] She only ended up having sex with him because she probably did not feel like she had any other choice [...]."

The above responses, both referring to vignette 4, reveal how participants constructed the scenario as SV based on the lack of choice they perceived the victims/survivors to have in the situation, highlighting the victims/survivors's decision to have sex as driven by fear for safety as opposed to genuine consent. This aligns with the legal definition of sexual assault as per the South African Sexual Offences Act, which speaks to the use of threat or fear to initiate sexual activity (Sexual Offences and Related Matters Amendment Act 32 of 2007). In participants' responses, threat speaks to the indirect threat to safety posed by the perpetrator as a means to have sex with the victim/survivor - leaving the victim/survivor with limited choice to engage freely in the sexual interaction. In addition to the discourse of lack of options or choices, other participants highlighted the combination of confinement in their interpretation of the scenarios as SV, noting:

Extract 26
P02: "It is a case of sexual violence [...] When he locked the doors of the car and when uNaya told him to stop, he was persistent on going on, that's why he had to lock the doors, and then he forcefully kissed her."

Extract 27
P04: "She can't get out of the car. It's either she has sex or gets out of the car, he pulled her [...] Nah, this is rape."

Linked to the descriptions of the victims/survivors' constricted free will and undermined agency in participants' constructions of SV, findings further revealed that participants construct manipulation and power dynamics as essential factors in their explanations of SV, reporting:

Extract 27
P03: "She's a first-year student. He knows that [...] you kinda want your marks to be good as a student, so then he kinda used that to manipulate her, you know."

Extract 28
P01: "uTony was wrong for using the power that he has to manipulate uLibo into sleeping with him."

Extract 29
P02: "[...] there was some sort of blackmail: 'It's either we do this and then your marks will improve, if we don't do this then your marks don't improve."

Participants' responses emphasised the role of individuals' positions of power as status to coerce others in their constructions of SV in a power-imbalanced situation, highlighting how the presence of exploitation, manipulation and threats influenced their construction of this vignette as SV despite overt physical violence.

4.2.1.4. A Traumatic Incident

An additional aspect central to participants' constructions of SV was the idea of SV as having a traumatic aftermath on the victims/survivors. Reflections on the feelings that the victims/survivors may experience as a result of SV were predominantly what participants drew upon to construct, explain, and make sense of the aftermath of SV. Participants' constructions of the aftermath of SV focused predominantly on the victims/survivors's emotional state, behavioural changes and academic consequences. The responses, therefore, drew from ideas of the overall negative impact on the victims/survivors. Participants consistently described adverse emotional, psychological and educational outcomes for the victims/survivors; one such participant was P02, who stated:

Extract 30
P02: "Libo would feel unsafe [...], she would not be happy[...] She would even not attend ama-tutorials"

This participant's response reflects their consideration of the anticipated aftermath of SV on the victim/survivor's emotional and academic functioning. Similarly, participant P01 used strong emotional language to describe their disdain toward the perpetrator for committing SV as a result of its impact, saying:

Extract 31
P01: "I think uLibo wouldn't be okay with uTony continuing being her [...] tutor because une (meaning *she has* in IsiXhosa) trauma [...] if I was Libo, I would literally hate Tony."

The participant's response above illustrates the disdain anticipated by this participant toward SV and the perpetrator in the context of a student-tutor relationship (vignette 4). This not only gives ideas of how SV is constructed in this context as severely traumatic, but it further illustrates empathy and perspective-taking with the use of phrases like "if I was uLibo."

Another participant highlighted the potential mental health implications on the victims/survivors, noting:

Extract 32
P03: "[...] It might affect negatively[...] her marks are going to go down [...], and it's going to affect her mental state, you know[...]."

The participants' responses revealed insight into how they construct SV - from the lens of its aftermath, focusing on emotional, psychological, academic, and social impacts on the victims/survivors. The mentions of 'trauma' and effects on 'mental state' in the participants' responses reflect a focus on the negative emotional and trauma-inducing impact on the victims/survivors with effects on mental health and academics. As indicated in the responses, the constrictions in the victim's/survivor's life indicate participants' speculations on the victims/survivors's sense of agency as a result of experiences of SV.

While the responses mentioned above were participants' responses to a vignette depicting SV by a tutor on an academically disadvantaged student, a similar theme of SV's overall anticipated adverse impact on the victims/survivors was expressed in the discussion of other vignettes. Participants consistently constructed the aftermath of SV as having significant psychological and emotional implications for the victim/survivors. Their responses also highlighted a theme of distress, discomfort and concerns for safety. Below are some responses to participants, the perpetrators and victims/survivors in the vignettes:

Extract 33
P04: "[...] But as for Bulelwa, I think she is not okay since we don't know for what reason she said no. Maybe it is health-related; maybe she is not okay because it is out of her consent."

This response displays this participant's understanding that non-consensual sexual acts can lead to negative emotional states, irrespective of the reasons for refusal. Similarly, Participant P03 emphasised the behavioural changes and long-term effects of SV on the victims/survivors, stating:

Extract 34
P03: “It says here he pinned her down even, so I think it’s going to negatively affect her for a while [...] I think she is going to be uncomfortable around him - maybe even distant [...].”

This response highlights the impact of forced sexual encounters on the victims/survivors. A theme of forced sexual encounters leading to adverse emotional impact was also evident in Participant 03’s (Extract 34) discussion of vignette 5, which highlighted the emotional toll of forced sexual encounters - noting:

Extract 35
P03: “Obviously, Naya is not gonna feel good about it ‘cause the situation was forced on her by him. She communicated that she was not interested and, you know, by physical force, he forced her into having sex with him.”

In addition to emotional impact ideas, some participants mentioned safety concerns and discomfort in future interactions with the perpetrator. One such participant was Participant P02, who said:

Extract 36
P02: “She wouldn’t be happy about it, given that they are found in the same room again. She wouldn’t feel safe.”

This sentiment was echoed by Participant P01, whose brief response illustrated an expectation of continuous and overall negative feelings towards the perpetrator, stating:

Extract 37
P01: “I think uBulelwa will not be okay with uSamkelo.”

These responses collectively reveal a nuanced understanding of the aftermath of SV, indicating that participants construct the aftermath of SV as a period characterised by potential changes in the victims/survivors’ behaviour or comfort levels, negative emotions and safety concerns, especially about the perpetrator. Collectively, participants’ responses provide ideas about how they would expect victims/survivors, in particular, to respond to SV, which forms part of their construction of the scenarios as acts of SV.

4.2.1.5. A Crime or Morally Wrong Event

In the constructions of their response to SV incidents, participants drew from notions of accountability, criticising and not associating themselves with the perpetrator, which gave an idea of the construction of SV as wrong or a criminal event - necessitating redress.

The findings further illustrated that some participants anticipated challenges in knowing how to respond to SV as bystanders, with some participants expressing uncertainty about the appropriate course of action, noting:

Extract 38
P04: “I wouldn’t say she can go to the police station 'cause I do not think there is enough evidence ‘cause it would be like a word situation, so I honestly don’t know what I would say.”

Extract 39
P03: “Sometimes people who experience sexual violence don’t always get help, so even if she reports to the police, we don’t know what could happen, if anything at all.”

The responses above reveal participants’ perceived barriers to responding to and reporting SV. Extract 38 emphasises concerns about the efficacy of reporting to authorities, doubting the viability of reporting to the police. Similarly, Participant 03 highlighted concerns about the effectiveness of the reporting process itself. While these responses emphasise participants' hesitations around the procedural challenges of reporting SV, in their essence - they also reflect a shared recognition of SV as an immoral act worthy of being reported.

One participant noted the perceived absence of guilt or emotional consequences for the perpetrator as indicative of their construction of SV:

Extract 40
P04: “There might be a chance that [...] Tony acts like nothing happened, I guess, but for Libo, I don’t think she’d be able to like forget about it easily.”

This response displays the perpetrator's anticipated indifference, attributed to a lack of guilt, which other participants identified as an expected emotional aftermath:

Extract 41
P01: “[...] it depends on i-conscience yakhe ba ingakanani na if ungumntu obhadlileyo (Translated version: *it depends on his conscience if he is a sensible person* - translated from IsiXhosa), then he will feel bad for what he did, and if he is not, then he would be like: “Okay, that was nice.”

This construction links the perpetrator’s indifference to a lack of conscience. Similarly, another participant stated:

Extract 42
P02: “But to a certain extent, if he is humane enough, then he’s going to feel i-guilty conscience.”

Extract 42 extended this idea of associating the presence of guilt with the perpetrator’s humanness - both these extracts suggest that the expected presence of guilt by the perpetrator highlights an expected restoration of their moral sensibility post-SV. Another participant highlighted the desire to amend wrongdoing as part of the expected emotional aftermath for the perpetrator, noting:

Extract 43
P03: “[...] you can’t, like, do something like that to a person and not feel any kind of guilt or any kind of desire to make things right, you know.”

These responses reveal participants' moral expectations of perpetrators in their construction of SV - emphasising remorse expressed by the perpetrator as an expected consequence of SV. Participants expressed disbelief that someone could engage in harmful behaviour without experiencing guilt or desire to make amends. Therefore, the absence of guilt and remorse was constructed as abnormal and morally wrong by participants following an act of SV. While some participants drew on moral expectations to define SV, others expressed a willingness to confront the perpetrator directly:

Extract 44
P03: “[...] hayi bra (meaning *no bro* in IsiXhosa), that wasn’t right, you have to apologise.”

Extract 45
P04: “[...] Go and apologise, man, what you did was rape, go and apologise [...].”

These responses emphasise peer-driven confrontation and bystander responses that encourage accountability and focus on remedying harm through an apology. They are based on understanding SV as not just a crime but an act of immorality. Beyond confrontation, participants also highlighted the importance of educating the perpetrator:

Extract 46
P01: “[...]I would have made him aware of what he did wrong, where he went wrong.”

This response highlights the role of peer education, constructing SV as an act requiring intervention. In contrast, some participants advocated for more severe social consequences, such as:

Extract 47
P01: "I was Tony's friend; Tony needs help [...] I would advise him with that and *ndingam' cut(a) off* (meaning *I would (socially) cut them off* in IsiXhosa)."

Extract 48
P04: "I would try to push her to hold him accountable in a way, even if it's telling other people that this guy is like this and he doesn't really respect consent, you know."

These responses not only illustrate a focus on broader social accountability, including confronting the perpetrator or viewing intervention as a form of assistance for the perpetrator, but also brings to light a distancing approach, as highlighted in Extract 47, seemingly as a means to hold the perpetrator accountable. While these responses align with ideas of holding perpetrators accountable, they also reflect notions of SV as an incomprehensible act committed by individuals who are to be distanced (Jordan *et al.,* 2022).

In contrast to the ideas of perpetrator accountability, participants also focused on justice-seeking responses for victims/survivors. Some constructed their bystander responses as encouraging victims/survivors to open a case or express their feelings to the perpetrator. These constructions often emphasised psycho-social support for the victim/survivors:

Extract 49
P02: "[...] She must report uTony because [...] we don't know uTony that much. If he can do this to uLibo, which means he's bound to do it again with someone else because we can see *ukuthi* (meaning *that* in IsiXhosa), he is using his power [..]. Going to the extent of reporting Tony is understandable because she was sexually violated [...]."

Extract 50
P01: "[...] she might even open a case… she needs to[...]"

These responses underline the importance of reporting to prevent future incidents, as illustrated in Extract 40. An additional response, which corroborates extracts 49 and 50, involved offering psychosocial and emotional support to the victims/survivors, with participants stating:

Extract 51
P01: "[...] I would tell her she got violated and [...] to seek for therapy or psychology [...]."

Extract 52
P01: "[...] I would be there for her however I can, where I can; Like help where I can because she will need as much support as she can [...] what happened really *ibuhlungu* (meaning *painful* in IsiXhosa)[...]."

In addition to emotional support, Extract 52 illustrates a compassionate response - bringing to mind the idea of the emerging alternative masculinities as identified by Ammann and Staudacher (2021). Another participant highlighted educational interventions for the perpetrator:

Extract 53
P03: "[...] Talk to the guy, like make him understand that what he did was not okay. It was not right; tell him, make it clear that he must listen to you whenever you say no."

While this participant's response focused on notions of perpetrator accountability and victims/survivors' justice-seeking, others revealed complexities in holding perpetrators accountable, particularly in existing intimate relationships. For example, one participant expressed hesitation to seek legal justice in such cases despite recognising the act as morally wrong:

Extract 54
P02: "It would be, at the same time, it wouldn't be [...] it's not like he has done this before [...] like okay it's your first time, maybe if you were doing it for the third time, or for the second time, then I'd be like [...] I have to open a case [...] Maybe they were having dinner, and they had some alcohol, and then uSamkelo had too much of it, so we can assume he was under the influence of alcohol [...] So for uBulelwa to open a case, we have to have some bit of profound understanding of like what really happened at the restaurant for us to place what happened during the sexual scene and after [...] drunk people tend not to listen to instructions and stuff [...]."

This response illustrates the participant's complex anticipated decision-making process, reflecting a tension between recognising SV as immoral and pursuing severe legal consequences. Although the act appeared to meet some of the elements participants earlier associated with SV - such as the absence of consent, use of force, exploitation of vulnerability and the presence of trauma - the ambiguity around the fifth construction of SV as a criminal/moral wrongdoing contributed to the participant's hesitance to respond decisively. This hesitation highlights that while participants may construct SV as a moral wrongdoing, they do not always consider it a criminal act worth reporting.

Collectively, these constructions provide a picture or idea of what informs participants' constructions SV: 1) the absence of consent, 2) the use of force in sexual interactions, 3) the exploitation of vulnerability, 4) an incident considered traumatic, and 5) a crime or moral wrongdoing. This criteria for SV, as highlighted in participants' talk,

implicitly draws from ideas of what constitutes ‘real’ rape - providing a framework for how participants recognise and identify SV.

4.2.2. Constructions of victim/survivors and perpetrators

The responses below address the second sub-question, which aimed to explore the narratives participants used to construct victims/survivors and perpetrators in the vignettes provided. The findings reveal that participants used various ideas about choice, weighted blame, and empathy when positioning victims/survivors and perpetrators. Victims/survivors were generally positioned as vulnerable and powerless, particularly in situations that involved coercion and power imbalances. Despite this, victims/survivors were at times constructed as bearing partial responsibility for the SV. Still, their long-term psycho-social and academic harm was widely acknowledged - constructing them as traumatised individuals in need of support and healing after the encounter.

On the other hand, perpetrators were predominantly viewed as responsible for acts of SV, with notions of entitlement, manipulation and indifference identified as key elements contributing to this construction. Despite this, participants sometimes constructed perpetrators as complex and relatable - acknowledging that while perpetrators were responsible for their actions, an element of understandability in their behaviour was visible. Some participants justified perpetrator behaviour as impaired judgment and miscommunication. This constructed the perpetrator’s behaviour as less malicious, often emphasising the importance of recognising their wrongdoing.

This presents a complex landscape of how participants constructed perpetrators and victim/survivors, drawing predominantly from two main ideas informing their constructions of the subjects: 1) responsibility, blame and choice, and 2) polarised subjective experiences. The following section discusses how these ideas informed participants' constructions of victims/survivors and perpetrators.

4.2.2.1. Attributions of Responsibility, Blame and Choice

Participants drew from notions of choice, blame and responsibility in constructing victims/survivors and perpetrators. Their responses revealed an attribution of blame sometimes based on which of the two parties was constructed as having more control for choice. This presents the variations of control participants drew upon in their constructions of

perpetrators and victims/survivors. Some participants attributed blame to the perpetrator, noting:

Extract 55
P01: "him deciding to continue to force himself to uBulelwa. I feel that was the bad decision."

This response reveals the construction of the perpetrator as responsible, based on their *intentional* act of forcefully having sexual interactions with the victims/survivors. This, however, contradicted other participant's viewpoints which positioned the victims/survivors as responsible, highlighting:

Extract 56
P04: "Bulelwa [..] could have stood up [...] I think it was also a bad choice because [...] it's more like she let him do it [...] she could've gotten away [...]."

The response above highlights the role played by the victims/survivors's perceived agency to avoid or ability to resist SV, highlighting ideas of the victims/survivors not doing enough to prevent the SV. Further, it draws from societal scripts that suggest that victims/survivors have some degree of control over their victimisation and are tasked with preventing their assault (Gqola, 2015). In contrast to ideas of victims/survivors's control and choice were thoughts about sexual urges as mitigating perpetrator responsibility, with one participant expressing:

Extract 57
P02: "[...] after the kissing we can say *ukuthi* (meaning *that* in IsiXhosa) he was sexually turned on and [...] that was controlling him now so if they didn't kiss he wasn't going to be sexually turned on and his, he wasn't going to be controlled by his sexual hunger. "

This response sheds light on the perpetrators constructed as being driven or controlled by internal forces, thus mitigating their responsibility, constructing the victims/survivors as responsible for activating the perpetrator's sexual drive and subsequent behaviour. Implicitly drawing from the *He did not mean to* rape myth, this response constructs the perpetrator as impulsive and biologically driven rather than an individual with agency (Jordan *et al.,* 2022; Payne *et al.,* 1999).

Building on this, reflections and thoughts around how the victims/survivors would feel played a significant role in some participants' assigning of responsibility. In addition to the anticipated aftermath of the situation on the victims/survivors, some participants drew

from notions of care where the presence or lack of care shown by the perpetrator was a factor influencing how they assign blame and responsibility, as illustrated below:

Extract 58
P03: "[...]I think Samkelo made a bad decision 'cause he essentially didn't care [...] what Bulelwa felt."

Extract 59
P01: "For me, the person who made the bad decision was uSamkelo because he was selfish. As I said, he did not think of uBulelwa [...]."
Extract 60
P03: "Hloni forcing Naya into having sex with him would probably make Naya very uncomfortable, and that's not okay. It's a bad choice."

The participants' responses above illustrate how perpetrators are constructed as selfish and uncaring, with their actions being considered as the cause of the victim's/survivors's harm. The victims/survivors, on the other hand, are presented as passive recipients of harm, with little agency or responsibility attributed to them in the situation. Placed firmly on the perpetrator, the blame reflects a distinction between their unjustifiable actions and the victim/survivors' experiences of harm. This framework, therefore, suggests an understanding of SV where the perpetrators are held accountable for their decisions while victims/survivors are seen as absolved from blame.

However, in some instances, participants' responses indicate a shift in the construction of perpetrator blame, particularly when the victims/survivors's past behaviour is considered. For example, one participant suggested that the perpetrator's behaviour might be understood differently in contexts where the victims/survivors have a history of sexual promiscuity, illustrating:

Extract 61
P02: "[...] it is understandable because uNaya has a history of hooking up with every Tom, Dick and Harry so, also 'cause they have hooked up before so [...] in that sense, we could can say *ukuthi* (meaning *that* in IsiXhosa) uHloni was coming in that perspective *yokuthi* (meaning *to say* in IsiXhosa) we have done this before."

The above response illustrates how this participant drew from ideas of the victims/survivors's sexual history to construct and negotiate the perpetrator's behaviour as understandable and justified. It reflects ideas of the promiscuous *whore* in the MWD framework of understanding women's sexuality, constructing SV in this context as a miscommunication (Kahalon *et al.,* 2019). This response further highlights how consent can

be assumed and taken for granted in contexts where parties have a history of sexual relationships together.

In addition to drawing from ideas of blame based on the victims/survivors' sexual history and victim-perpetrator history of sexual relationships, some participants drew upon notions of attraction and sexual hunger to justify and make sense of the perpetrators in the vignettes. Some participants shared that:

Extract 62
P02: "[...] they were still attracted to each other the way I see it. Apart from [...] being drunk, they still have that attraction towards each other, so it's understandable that they had sex."

This response illustrates the construction of mutual attraction as a primary and understandable sexual behaviour, regardless of intoxication. Parallel to sexual attraction was a narrative of sexual arousal as a driving force for sexual behaviour, with one participant reflecting:

Extract 63
P04: "[...] Since Samkelo was already turned on, I think he was being controlled by his emotion, even though it is not all right [...] I don't think it was right that she [...] she actually turned him on [...] I don't know for what reason Bulelwa actually said no [...] but I think he was being controlled by his emotions at the time."

Sexual and emotional arousal were therefore highlighted as significant motivating factors in how the perpetrator's behaviour was justified, as indicated in the response above. As such, in addition to the ideas of absolved responsibility from notions of sexual arousal, this response illustrates a further grapple with positioning the victims/survivors - constructing their refusal of sex after the initial consent as unjustified. In contrast to this, however - some participants' talk criticised the perpetrator's way of thinking, expressing:

Extract 64
P01: "I understand uSamkelo continued because [...] he was turned on [...] and they're used to having sex. So to him, it was like: [...] 'What's wrong, why now 'cause we always do this?' [...] I feel like him having that thinking [...] is selfish of him [...]] he is not thinking of uBulelwa."

While the previous responses focused on constructing the perpetrator's behaviour as understandable and the victim's/survivors's behaviour as unacceptable, this participant's response introduces an additional perspective - where the victim/survivor's actions are

constructed as justified and the perpetrator's behaviour as incomprehensible. Other participants' responses also reflected this stance, with some noting:

Extract 65
P04: "It's not understandable [...] I don't understand why Tony like wanted to have sex with Libo so badly that he would [...] just put her into a corner."

Despite notions of justifying the perpetrator's behaviour from the framework of an uncontrolled sexual urge, participants still positioned perpetrators as entitled, lacking empathy, persistent, exploitative and manipulative - constructing the perpetrator as emotionally detached and sometimes content - mainly in scenarios where they viewed their actions as normal or justified. As such, they often constructed the perpetrators as deserving of accountability - based on blame-worthy behaviour such as lacking empathy, exploitative, manipulative and persistent. The extracts mentioned above, therefore, highlight how participants' constructions of blame and responsibility, as they relate to the victim/survivors and perpetrators, were closely tied to the perpetrator's anticipated level of empathy and regard for the victims/survivors's well-being.

Collectively, these findings highlight a complex interplay of notions surrounding choice, responsibility, and blame, with both perpetrators and victim/survivors being alternately constructed as either in control or being subject to internal and external factors, thus positioning them as 'victims' of these factors.

In addition to the varied attribution of blame between the victims/survivors and perpetrator, some participants drew from an idea of weighted blame, indicating that while both parties made decisions, the perpetrator made more bad decisions than the victims/survivors, noting:

Extract 66
P04: "She shouldn't have agreed to meeting up with him because that is unprofessional of him. He shouldn't have been flirting with first-year students, and most of the bad decisions are on Tony anyway."

This remark acknowledges that both parties made bad decisions, indicating a recognition of agency for both the victims/survivors and the perpetrator. This agency, however, is not equally weighted. While the victims/survivors's actions are critiqued, the perpetrator's actions are framed as more problematic and blameworthy. This aligns with what some participants identified as the premeditated intent to have sex with the victims/survivors,

irrespective of the victims/survivors's desire to have sex. This not only constructs the perpetrator's behaviour as deliberate but positions their actions as more morally wrong:

Extract 67
P01: "if you look at the reasons why uHloni continues to kiss u- uNaya is because: the first reason is, they have hooked before, the second reason is uNaya gets around, the third reason is um he bought her alcohol, and uNaya should do something in return[...] I feel like even if uNaya didn't initially agree, he would have still continued to do what he did."

The findings reveal that an intention to have sex was, irrespective of whether the victims/survivors would consent or not, premeditated by the perpetrator with sexual entitlement and transactional expectations perceived to be constructed as justifications for this premeditated behaviour by the perpetrator. This layer of intention introduced by this participant's construction of the perpetrator highlights the significance of intent in how behaviour is constructed as SV.

4.2.2.2. Constructions of Polarised Experiences

Parallel to the notions of responsibility and blame were narratives of positioning victims/survivors and perpetrators from the framework of being polarised with different subjective experiences as they relate to the depicted sexual encounters. Participants' responses revealed different expected effects on the perpetrator and victims/survivors, with the perpetrator often constructed as content, unaffected or least affected by a SV encounter and the victims/survivors positioned as more affected. For instance, one participant stated:

Extract 68
P02: "I think uHloni was going to be satisfied [...] and then on uNaya's part, she wouldn't be happy with it at all."

In addition to the anticipated contentment experienced by the perpetrator after the incident, some participants further expected feelings of indifference felt by the perpetrator. They anticipated no behavioural changes by the perpetrator post-incident, as mentioned by one participant:

Extract 69
P03: "I don't think Tony is going to act any differently. He has probably done this before, considering like all his other manipulation tactics he was using [...]."

This response not only reinforces narratives that construct the perpetrator as unaffected or unremorseful, but it also reveals how this participant interpreted the

perpetrator's manipulative tendencies as indicators of the perpetrator's history of similar and normalised behavioural patterns - underpinning how this participant explains their anticipation of polarised subjective experiences. This sentiment of normalised behaviour as underpinning the perpetrator's indifference was echoed in other vignettes:

> **Extract 70**
> P02: "uSamkelo is going to have positive perceptions, and then uBulelewa is gonna have negative perceptions of the act [...] because for uSamkelo [...] it was like 'we do this all the time, so it's okay."

In their talk, this participant's response illustrates how the perpetrator's behaviour might be normalised and justified as consensual, especially in a context where there is a history of prior sexual relations. This pattern of talk illustrates the concept of [un]rapebaility, where because there is an existing relationship between individuals, SV cannot occur. This was also highlighted by another participant whose response emphasised a common theme of disagreement between the perpetrator and victims/survivors regarding consent, which contributed to their construction of a polarised emotional aftermath. They noted:

> **Extract 71**
> P01: "[...] I think uSamkelo would have [...] took the situation as if they were having sex because of the fact that he did not even further think about it, meaning that he didn't see anything wrong. It was just normal what they were doing, so I don't think uSmakelo thought about it further [...], but uBulelwa would say they were having sex, and she didn't want to anymore."

> **Extract 72**
> P02: "I noted *ukuthi* uBulelwa was not happy about it, then I would have to like to check on her the following day and be like, 'listen, yesterday I know you said I must stop, but then I was sexually motivated, and I just wanted to continue to blow off some steam so I am sorry about that' [...]."

The above responses reveal not only expected disparities in the experience of SV on the victims/survivors and perpetrator, as indicated in Extract 72 but also the notion of assumed consent by the perpetrator, illustrated in Extract 71. As a result of this assumed consent by the perpetrator, the sexual interaction would be constructed as a casual - and to some degree, pleasurable - sexual encounter.

In essence, the repsonses collectively illustrate how participants' constructions of victims/survivors and perpetrators of SV are informed by weighted and somewhat shared responsibility and blame - with ideas of blame and responsibility being constructed based on

notions of agency, justifiable behaviour and access to choice which informs participants constructions of the vignettes as SV or not.

4.3 Identifying the Discourses of SV and Constructed Social Realities

This section of the chapter presents the discourses that emerged from the ideas and notions that informed participants' interpretations of the scenarios depicted in the vignettes and their constructions of SV as a result. The participants' responses revealed five key discourses that emerged in their constructions of SV, victim/survivors and perpetrators in the vignettes. The identification of the five key discourses was guided by the consistencies found in how the object, SV - as well as the subjects, victim/survivors, and perpetrators, were constructed by participants. These discourses were therefore identified as emerging in notions that informed participants' conceptualisations of the objects and subjects of the topic and are presented below:

4.3.1. The Discourse of Sexual Refusal

The first discourse that emerged from participants' discussions of SV, victim/survivors and perpetrators was the discourse of sexual refusal. Within this discourse, participants linked SV to the act of sexual refusal, exploring the roles of victims/survivors and perpetrators in terms of their perceived agency and autonomy to reject sexual advances. Within this discourse, SV is constructed as a violation of the victims/survivors's refusal to engage in sex, making the refusal of sex a pivotal construct that informs how non-consent is understood by participants.

A key element of this discourse is the concept of "degrees of refusal," wherein participants' talk indicated that a single verbal refusal may not consistently be deemed valid or adequate non-consent. For instance, some participants' narratives indicated that multiple refusals or increased insistence on discontinuing sexual interactions were essential to validate the refusal's legitimacy and, consequently, categorise the act as SV. This notion of 'degrees of refusal' reflects broader patriarchal organisations where entitlement is privileged over sexual autonomy (Clowes *et al.,* 2009). This creates a hierarchy of refusals, complicating the consent negotiation process and placing the onus on victims/survivors to assert their refusals repeatedly. However, this dynamic raises significant concerns about the burden on individuals in such situations. Although the intent may be to clarify consent, it ultimately complicates it -

undermining the victim's/survivor's agency and making refusal a precarious and slippery concept.

This complexity interacts with societal expectations that promote the idea of "playing hard to get." This notion brings to mind a 'chaser-chased' dynamic where sexual interactions are framed as the pursuit of sex. Here, the victims/survivors assume the passive role of being pursued while the perpetrator actively seeks to 'win' access to them. This dynamic implies a particular construction of heterosexuality wherein men are constructed as *active takers* of sex and women as *passive givers* or *gatekeepers* of sex (Gavey, 2005; Gqola, 2015; Haugen *et al.*, 2019). Drawing from notions of 'degrees of refusal,' within the discourse of sexual refusal gives credibility to the giver-taker dynamic in sexual interactions, perpetuating a normalisation of such dynamics in sexual encounters.

The discourse of sexual refusal, marked with ambiguity, therefore, proves problematic because it functions within societal scripts that associate sexual refusal with innocence and virtue. Resisting or declining sexual advances becomes a means to safeguard one's purity while being excessively willing or sexually available is devalued and associated with the "whore" stereotype, linked to societal frameworks such as the MWD that regulate sexuality as discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis (Bareket *et al.* 2018). The refusal of sex in this framework is, therefore, not merely a rejection of sexual advances but also a symbolic act tied to constructions of sexual purity and morality.

This tension reveals the contradictions within the discourse of sexual refusal. On the one hand, the refusal is perceived as symbolic of innocence, while the very act of refusing can simultaneously invite further pursuit within the chaser-chased framework. This places the victims/survivors in a contradictory expectation: they must both maintain their perceived innocence by refusing sex, yet, at the same time, their resistance is often interpreted as part of the sexual pursuit 'game' that legitimises the perpetrator's continued pursuit. This chaser-chased dynamic in the discourse of sexual refusal is not unique to this study but has been identified in other studies on how students construct sex and SV, which illustrated that societal descriptors of sex and sexual dynamics as a *hunt for meat* informed students' constructions of sexual interactions (Treffry-Goatley *et al.,* 2018). This dynamic reflects a predatory construction of sex where the pursuer carries power in the sexual encounter. At the same time, the victims/survivors remain disempowered and are positioned in a perpetual state of vulnerability.

This discourse is further problematic because it shifts blame onto the victims/survivors for not taking sufficient measures to avoid the assault. It insinuates that their failure to refuse "properly" or "enough times" renders them accountable for the SV they experience. These ideas in the discourse are linked to the notion of token resistance that functions not only to question sexual refusal but also to undermine the seriousness of this refusal (Harris, 2018). Drawing from this discourse, therefore, suggests that the participants' talk constructs sexual refusal as a token which can be negotiated. Furthermore, it frames the victims/survivors's efforts to resist as an implicit invitation for the pursuer to continue pursuing, undermining their refusal's legitimacy. In this manner, the refusal of sex becomes a double-edged sword: it is seen as an attempt to uphold innocence. At the same time, it concurrently contributes to the expectation that the victims/survivors are, in some respect, complicit in the sexual interactions. This framework ultimately normalises SV as a predatory act, where the victims/survivors are tasked with preserving their innocence and agency in a context that disempowers them. In so doing, SV - as a manifestation of unequal sexual relations - becomes not only normalised but protected by these social scripts.

At the same time, participants' talk articulated a more progressive discourse within the framework of sexual refusal, one rooted in mutuality. This alternative discourse emphasised shared agency, enthusiastic participation, and the importance of mutual consent in sexual encounters. Within this talk, the refusal of sex was deemed an indicator of non-mutuality, emphasising mutual interest and participation as fundamental to consensual sexual interactions. This talk draws from ideas of respectful sexual interactions and challenges normalised and socially internalised narratives that perpetuate inequality in sexual interactions. Thus, this pattern of talk has the potential to oppose hierarchical dynamics where one party exerts dominance over the other.

However, the understanding of mutuality within discourses of refusal presents its complexities. By constructing consensual sex as an act of mutuality in a society that sustains inequality and unequal sexual interactions, the language of mutuality can obscure these power imbalances. Narratives of mutuality such as "they both knew" and "they both wanted this" imply that both parties involved in the sexual interaction have *equal* power to deny or accept sexual engagement. While this mutuality may accurately describe some contexts where power in the sexual interaction is genuinely balanced, it risks oversimplifying

dynamics in situations where the victim/survivors' autonomy to refuse is compromised or undermined.

This talk then presents complications in the agency to refuse sex, creating a standard that suggests that neither party holds more control over the other in sexual interactions. As Cahill (2001) argues, the very concept of mutuality exists within a broader context of gender relations that cannot be separated from individual sexual decisions. Within a discourse of refusal shaped by traditional sexual scripts, mutuality may inadvertently reinforce problematic assumptions such that refusal should be negotiated rather than received as an affirmative choice and assertion of autonomy. Consequently, the language of mutuality has the potential to conceal not only unequal power dynamics in sexual interactions but also the circumstances under which refusal is disregarded or undermined when not engaged through a critical lens.

While constructions of SV through the lens of mutuality reflect a progressive stance toward equal sexual relations, they remain embedded in regressive societal norms that contribute to the perpetuation of narratives that function to complicate the refusal of sex. This presents a complex landscape in which sex occurs, one that is not only shaped by individual agency but also by societal structures that frame SV in ways that favour perpetrators' desires over victim/survivors' consent. This tension highlights the complex terrain in which SV is understood within this discourse, emphasising the ongoing struggle between progressive masculinity ideals that prioritise sexual autonomy and traditional norms that continue to normalise SV (Khumalo *et al.*, 2021). It reflects what Shefer *et al.* (2015) identify as competing narratives of sexuality in contemporary society. This tension and interplay between progressive consent-focused and traditional rape-supportive norms can be linked to complex and varied social practices, such as performing diverse masculinities in front of other men (Mfecane, 2018). The struggle between these social practices, therefore, highlights what Jewkes *et al*. (2015) describe as the potential for transformative approaches to sexuality, particularly within educational contexts where alternative constructions of masculinity can be fostered.

4.3.2. The Discourse of Justification

The discourse of justification, underpinned by ideas of ambiguity and aftermath, illustrates how participants' narratives rationalised and excused certain sexual behaviours,

thereby normalising specific ideas around SV. This discourse reveals how power dynamics and societal norms intersect to shape participants' constructions of SV, demonstrating the socially constructed nature of what is deemed unacceptable sexual behaviour.

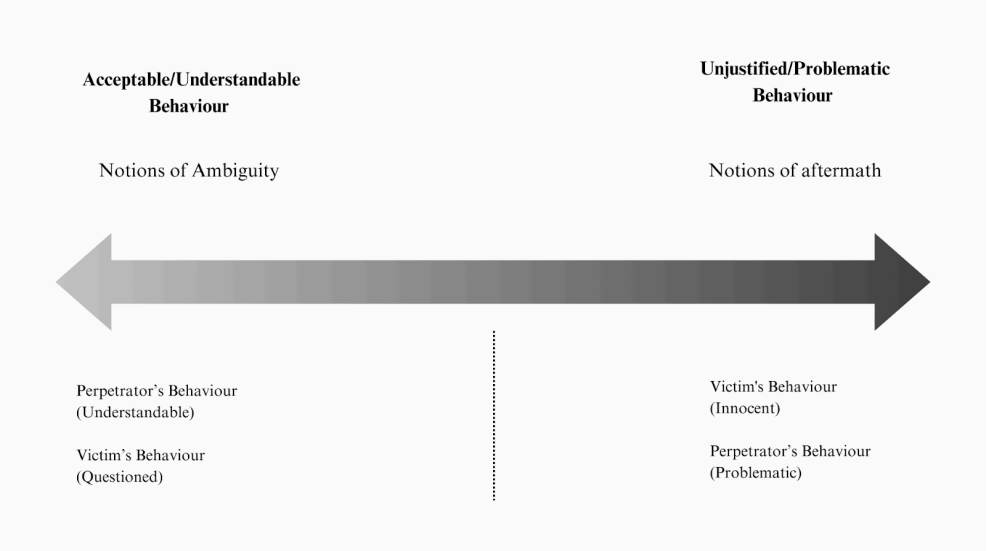
Ambiguity emerged as a critical element within this discourse, framing sexual interactions as spaces where refusal is negotiated and often seen as unclear unless assertively repeated by the victims/survivors. This ambiguity reflects a broader societal tendency to interpret refusal through a lens of doubt and negotiation. The emergence of ambiguity as a mechanism of justification aligns with Foucault's (1977) ideas of *technologies of power,* where societal discourses function to normalise certain behaviours while problematising and questioning others. For example, participants' discourses justified certain behaviours by positioning the perpetrator's actions as understandable or justified within specific contexts. These included contexts of existing relationships or when the victims/survivors' behaviour was perceived as questionable. Such discourses reflect and reproduce rape culture through operationalising societal narratives to rationalise perpetrator actions while questioning victims/survivors (Gouws, 2018). The operation of power through these discourses there exemplifies what Gavey (2005) refers to as the *cultural scaffolding of rape,* where everyday talk serves to minimise and normalise SV.

Conversely, elements of aftermath within this discourse challenged notions that justify perpetrator behaviour - identifying the perpetrator's actions as problematic and inappropriate, worthy of accountability. When participants recognised the clear use of coercion, manipulation, or exploitation of vulnerability, they were more likely to construct the vignette as SV. This reveals the tension between societal narratives that justify SV and those that challenge it, highlighting the socially constructed nature of SV as a social phenomenon (Burr, 1995). It further presents a wrestle between justification and accountability in participants' talk. This shift towards accountability-centred conceptualisations reflects an opportunity towards a reparative justice approach to SV, which focuses on perpetrator responsibility while challenging harmful societal narratives (SVTT, 2016).

This tension is encapsulated in the 'Spectrum of Understandable Behaviour' (Figure 1), which represents how societal norms and power dynamics influence participants' justification or disapproval of sexual behaviours. The researcher developed Figure 1 as a synthesis of the discourse of justification, which was revealed in the participants' talk. Specifically, the spectrum integrates ideas of ambiguity, responsibility attribution,

accountability and societal norms that influence how SV is interpreted. The spectrum of understandable behaviour is informed by Foucault's (1980) conceptualisation of power as reflective of and operating through social norms. It also operationalises Burr's (1995) social constructionist approach - by illustrating how meanings of SV are negotiated through competing discourses. Below is the visual representation of the Spectrum of Understandable behaviour:

Figure 1: The Spectrum of Understandable Behaviour



Positioning understandable behaviour in a spectrum illustrates how power operates and justifies specific actions through societal norms while problematising others. The left side of the spectrum reflects how power, through talk, normalises SV by aligning perpetrator behaviour with rape myths and societal expectations, such as the belief that refusal is unclear unless assertively repeated. Conversely, the right side of the spectrum illustrates resistance to these norms, where accountability discourses challenge the power-laden narratives evident on the left, thus repositioning perpetrator behaviour as exploitative or coercive. Therefore, this dynamic between power and resistance reveals the role discourse plays in sustaining or challenging power imbalances in the constructions of sexual interactions.

The spectrum of understandable behaviour is, therefore, at the core of the discourse of justification and ranges from ideas that justify perpetrator sexual aggression based on rape myths; to frameworks of incomprehensible perpetrator behaviour based on the aftermath of SV on the victims/survivors. The linguistic frameworks ranging from rape myths, power-laden and victim-blaming language to perpetrator accountability-centred frameworks,

therefore, shape the justifications and criticism of sexual behaviour across the spectrum. For example, discourses of justification that refer to 'sexual hunger' and victims/survivors' promiscuity - draw on deeply embedded cultural narratives about gender and morality. The spectrum, therefore, reflects Phillips' (2017) analysis of how SV and rape myths function in a continuum, where certain sexual behaviours are condemned and others normalised. This aligns with Ellis' (1989) conceptualisation of SV as a continuum rather than discrete categories.

This figure illustrates how the discourse of justification in participants' talk about SV varies across the spectrum. Notably, as one moves along the spectrum, the positioning of victims/survivors and perpetrator behaviours inverts. When the victim's/survivors's actions are questioned, the perpetrator is constructed as justified, and SV is less likely to be acknowledged. Conversely, when the perpetrator's actions, often based on the ideas of 'real' rape, are problematised, SV is more likely to be constructed as such. This pattern is mirrored in the treatment of the victims/survivors. When their behaviour is questioned or seen as contributing to the experience of SV, the perpetrator's behaviour is not deemed SV. This emphasises the dangerous power carried by this discourse, in particular, in shaping how SV is constructed, understood and responded to.

4.3.3 The Discourse of Responsibility

Participants' understandings of SV were profoundly shaped by how they attributed responsibility for the act. Their attributions specifically revealed patterns that influenced whether they classified the vignettes as SV or depictions of consensual sex. These patterns of responsibility attribution align with victim-blaming discourses, where cultural frameworks of assigning blame shape interpretations of SV (Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Hayes *et al.*, 2013). When perpetrators were seen as more responsible for the act - often associated with the criteria of SV highlighted in the first stage of the analysis - participants were more likely to identify the vignette as SV in their talk. Conversely, when responsibility was placed on the victims/survivors - based on talk such as 'leading the perpetrator on,' past sexual history, not doing enough to avoid the assault - the vignettes were less likely to be constructed as SV.

This dynamic illustrates a clear dichotomy of responsibility: when attributed to perpetrators, the scenarios depicted in the vignettes were identified as SV, but when attributed to the victims/survivors, SV was less likely to be recognised. Importantly, these attributions

are not made in a vacuum but are influenced by broader societal narratives and power dynamics that regulate how individuals interpret sexual interactions. As constructed in the participants' talk, the discourse of responsibility reflects and reinforces cultural norms that allocate power and blame in ways that maintain gendered inequalities and normalise SV.

Arguably, this dichotomy also draws from the discourse of justification and the spectrum of understandable behaviour. For instance, if a perpetrator's behaviour is seen as 'understandable' or justified, drawing from rape myths and societal scripts such as 'he was too aroused' and 'he was drunk" - the attribution of responsibility, despite not being fully absolved, tends to be less. This discourse effectively positions perpetrators as subject to uncontrollable urges, minimising accountability(Phillips, 2017). Conversely, when the perpetrator's actions are constructed as problematic, blame is more likely to be placed on them.

This pattern is mirrored in the victims/survivors' treatment: blame is shifted onto them when their behaviour is questioned or seen as contributing to the situation. In these instances, blame is attributed based on participants' ideas that draw predominantly from constructions of victims/survivors as 'bad,' promiscuous or seductive, reinforcing the *whore* archetype from the MWD (Kahalon *et al.*, 2018). On the other hand, when the victims'/survivors' actions are constructed as 'understandable' — often based on societal expectations emphasising purity and innocence — blame is placed on the perpetrator. This discourse is, therefore, shaped by societal expectations that construct archetypes of morality in which victims/survivors must fit to be recognised as deserving and legitimate or 'ideal' victims/survivors of SV (Hayes *et al.*, 2013). The invocation of the MWD in participants' talk, therefore, demonstrates how historical constructions of women's sexuality(ies) continue to shape contemporary understandings of SV (Bareket *et al.,* 2018).

Building on the discourse of responsibility, it is clear that as a discourse - responsibility is framed through the lens of control and choice. Participants' narratives around responsibility reflect ideas of blame. This blame-based talk, drawing on narratives like 'she asked for it' or 'she led him on,' positions victims/survivors as partially responsible for their victimisation. These constructions, rooted in societal scripts, suggest that victims/survivors have some degree of control over their victimisation, thus perpetuating harmful scripts in which individuals are tasked with preventing their assault by adhering to rigid societal norms. The framing of responsibility through control and choice reflects a

systematic process where SV is attributed to the characteristics of those who suffer from them. This refers to the acceptance of rape myths where societal scripts function to minimise perpetrator culpability while maximising victims'/survivors' responsibility (Gqola, 2015). Such discourses ultimately serve to maintain systematic patterns of SV where they act as regulators of problematic societal norms (Lonsway and Fitzgerald, 1994).

In contrast, responsibility attributed to perpetrators was often framed in terms of guilt. Some participants' talk constructed guilt as a response reflecting the perpetrator's moral awareness. While this framework appears to hold perpetrators accountable, it often focuses on their emotional experience — particularly remorse — rather than the harm inflicted on the victims/survivors. In some cases, participants' talk emphasised perpetrators' expressions of guilt and remorse as sufficient to absolve them of some responsibility, hypothetically discouraging victims/survivors from seeking justice or holding perpetrators fully accountable. This reveals how the discourse of responsibility with talk underpinned by ideas of guilt, such as 'he should apologise, and they should just continue with their lives,' can function to maintain a social reality that discards SV and turns a blind eye to its occurrence. It further constructs the recognition of SV as disrupting some kind of social order, with the expectation to 'just continue with their lives,' being a means to retain social *harmony.* This talk element highlights a complex interaction between language informed by blame and guilt within discourses of responsibility, which risks prioritising reconciliation over accountability.

The realities produced by these discourses are thus troubling as they contribute to the protection and normalisation of SV as an expected and reconcilable act rather than a systematic issue rooted in a status quo that perpetuates harmful norms. Therefore, The discourse of responsibility demonstrates what Foucault (1980) refers to as the *power-knowledge nexus,* where discursive practices and talk patterns influence the social realities that maintain existing power dynamics. Moreover, the discourse of responsibility reflects and reproduces a culture in which victims/survivors must navigate unrealistic standards to be considered credible or 'ideal,' while perpetrators are granted the privilege of being humanised (Gordon & Collins, 2013). This dynamic reflects broader societal power structures where the credibility of SV is linked to victim/survivors' perceived adherence to societal norms. In this way, the discourse contributes to a social reality that prioritises perpetrators' experiences over victim/survivors' autonomy, reinforcing structures that allow

SV to persist. This presents a need to challenge the very foundations of this discourse by dismantling the societal scripts and norms that perpetuate the cycles of SV.

4.3.4. The Discourse of Trauma and Damage

The discourse of victims/survivors' trauma and damage offered insight into how participants understand, recognise and interpret SV. This discourse was spoken about predominantly from elements of the aftermath of SV, as highlighted earlier. SV, within this discourse, was constructed as a traumatic event with the potential for damage, both long-term and short-term, to the victims/survivors. While this discourse presents participants' talk that deviates from the typical discourses in constructions of SV - talk that moves from victim-blaming ideals to survivors-centred discourses that seem to humanise victims/survivors and their experiences; continuously and unreflectively drawing from this discourse may have significant implications for individual and broader societal constructions of SV.

Firstly, by constructing victims/survivors as generally traumatised, the patterns of talk within this discourse may inadvertently reinforce harmful societal scripts and stereotypes of the 'ideal victims/survivors' as someone who is expected to display visible signs of trauma in response to SV. This brings to mind the idea of the fragile and vulnerable victims/survivors constructed as the 'ideal,' drawing on societal scripts that grant protection to those who perform within socially prescribed ways of being (Kahalon *et al.*, 2019). Drawing from the talk that centres trauma as an automatic response to SV has the potential to 'other' victims/survivors whose responses to SV do not meet the societal expectations of the ideal, vulnerable victims/survivors. This can create a social reality that not only regulates victims'/survivors' responses to SV but also limits them from actively navigating their lives post-violence. In so doing, continuously drawing from this discourse risks erasing narratives that empower victims/survivors to reclaim their lives after SV, thus perpetuating societal narratives that continue to disempower [potential] victims/survivors of SV. Further, it risks overlooking their ability to exercise agency and, importantly, resistance. Here, *performing* victimhood within the frameworks of the ideal victims/survivors leaves limited room for resistance against the very systems that perpetuate victimhood.

Lastly, this discourse's construction of SV risks the positioning of victims/survivors as inherently 'damaged.' While this acknowledges the harm SV inflicts on victims/survivors,

repeatedly drawing from this narrative can perpetuate stigmatising societal narratives that confine victim/survivors' identities to being irreparably harmed or 'tainted.' Such framing has the potential to perpetuate a social climate where victims/survivors of SV feel silenced or discouraged from sharing their experiences - out of the reluctance of being reduced to passive recipients of violence rather than recognised for their agency to resist these narratives. This aligns with problematic assumptions that position victims/survivors as perpetually wounded (Gavey, 2005). This positions both victim/survivors and potential victim/survivors as inactive participants in broader discourses of SV, limiting their ability to resist harmful stereotypes and assert agency.

Constantly drawing from this discourse without critical reflection constructs a social reality that perpetuates the problematic societal norms that this discourse seems to challenge. Fostering nuanced constructions of SV that recognise the diversity of victims'/survivors' experiences - including agency and resilience is crucial in allowing this discourse to reproduce progressive ways of being and constructing SV. This presents opportunities for intervention that do not perpetuate the cycle of disempowering victims/survivors in discourses of SV.

4.3.5. The Discourse of 'Real' Rape

From constructions of SV informed by participants' talk illustrated in section 4.2.1, a discourse of 'real' rape emerges - characterised by talk participants used to determine depicted scenarios as SV. Participants identified five main constructions of SV: 1) the absence of consent, 2) the presence and use of physical force, 3) the exploitation of vulnerability, 4) a traumatic event with adverse effects on the victim/survivors, and lastly, 5) a morally wrong or criminal act. Together, these constructions and ways of talking about SV - construct a discourse about 'real' SV. This discourse provides a clear consensus to recognise SV, presenting opportunities for societal institutions to both identify SV and respond to it. While this discourse allows for a shared framework for recognising SV, it achieves various outcomes and affects the social realities constructed as a result.

Firstly, by emphasising specific elements that constitute 'real' rape or SV, this discourse constructs a framework that differentiates between 'real' and 'not real' SV, where cases that fall outside of the former are generally not recognised as legitimate. The effects of such a discourse lie in the reality and subjective experiences it can create for individuals

whose experiences do not align with the framework of 'real' SV, such as silencing such victims/survivors and absolving perpetrators of 'illegitimate' SV. Drawing from this discourse, therefore, perpetuates harmful realities that 1) perpetuate a cycle of victim/survivor-silencing and perpetrator-absolve and 2) perpetuate a hierarchy of legitimacy within the discourse of SV.

On a broader scale, the narrow construction of SV within this discourse achieves an effect that constructs *legitimate* SV within frameworks that only recognise violence when it is overt, intentional and considered morally wrong. The discourse of legitimate SV brings to mind the idea of definitional struggles that relate to how SV is constructed, where - through societal narratives - hierarchies of legitimacy are constructed (Brownmiller, 1975). This discourse, therefore, supports societal scripts that downplay less overt forms of SV as illegitimate, perpetuating a social reality that constructs SV as a rare incidence. The effects of social realities that construct SV as rare lie within its potential to normalise problematic sexual interactions that fall outside of the 'real' SV (Gavey, 2019). Ultimately, in constructing SV within this framework, the discourse of 'real' rape focuses on incidents of SV as isolated events rather than an issue embedded in societal systems.

The discourse of 'real' rape therefore accomplishes a dual effect. It provides clarity for cases of SV that meet the narrow criteria, allowing for easier recognition of such acts. However, it simultaneously perpetuates a culture that reinforces problematic stereotypes of SV - limiting opportunities for addressing the very systems that enable SV.

Collectively, the discourses reflected and reproduced in participants' talk construct social realities that normalise SV by trivialising less stereotypical forms of SV and absolving perpetrator responsibility. These discourses thus function as tools of power, shaping norms that regulate [victims/survivors] sexual behaviour and reinforce hierarchies of gender, legitimacy, power and control that contribute to a society that is conducive for SV to occur.

4.4. Subject Positioning

As illustrated in the section above, locating key discourses of SV drawn upon by participants within broader societal scripts and discourses reveals recurring themes such as normalised power imbalances, victim-blaming, perpetrator privilege, stereotype-based legitimacy of SV, social norm regulation, and progressive masculinity ideals. These themes, rooted in societal norms, gendered power structures and narratives that perpetuate a culture

that facilitates SV, play a significant role in shaping how sexual interactions and SV are constructed and the social realities that are informed by these constructions.

Participants' constructions of SV, influenced by the language used in the vignettes, aimed to depict complex scenarios of sexual interactions, and broader societal discourses positioned them in varied subject roles that reflected different subjective experiences in their interpretations of the scenarios. Locating participants' patterns of talk about sexual engagements and SV within these broader discourses and examining the subjective experiences that emerge from this meaning-making process provides valuable insight. These insights reveal the aspects contributing to participants' interpretations of SV and their understanding of sexual interactions within broader societal contexts.

In discussing participants' subjective roles within discourses of SV, it is imperative to remember their position as men. While this research focused on one aspect of positionality (men), it is important to acknowledge other factors - such as sexuality, race, socioeconomic status and contextual background - all of which may also shape participants' engagement with the research process and the data produced. Participants' intersecting identities with their positionality as men in a patriarchally organised society positions them as beneficiaries of and constrained by traditional norms that normalise power imbalances and marginalisation (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2016; Gmeiner, 2014). Therefore, this part of the analysis highlights how these participants navigated the complex arena that comes with navigating and circulating discourses of SV.

To address how participants' discourses shape subjectivity and identity and the consequences of taking up different subject positions in discourses of SV, three main subject positions were identified in how participants position themselves: 1) helpless, 2) active, and 3) influential. These positions reflect how participants navigated and internalised broader societal discourses while grappling with their understandings of SV and are discussed below:

4.4.1. Helpless

Participants' expressions of helplessness, particularly in the context of the vignette involving mutual intoxication, revealed discomfort and inability to fully engage with, address or process the complexities of consent under such circumstances. This is evident in their ambiguous responses, which illustrate expressions of uncertainty in their meaning-making processes in this scenario. For example, the comments below:

Extract 73
P04: “I’d be like ‘sorry’ ‘cause [...] I don't know how to - I’d- just say [...] ‘Oh, that happened? Sorry.’[...].”

Extract 74
P02: “[...] it’s either we forget about it, or we act on it, we forgive each other and give this thing one more try, or we just say we had sex [...] let’s just leave it and continue with our lives.”

Extract 75
P02: “I don’t know if maybe extremely drunk means blacking out or drunk means you’re still aware, but you’re choosing [...] I think it depends to the law [...] [as for] Me, I don’t know.”

These extracts illustrate how the discourses used by participants around sex in the context of mutual alcohol intoxication create subject positions of being helpless and ill-equipped to address or intervene in such situations confidently. The helpless subject position reflects a broader ambivalence and inadequacy in dealing with such encounters, limiting participants’ ability to act or advocate effectively in these situations. It aligns with the findings in de Villiers and colleagues’ (2021) study, which illustrated the challenges men university students have in identifying when SV and knowing how to intervene. Further, this subject position can lead to inaction and lack of intervention in situations that involve intoxication and sexual activity (Fenton *et al.,* 2016) - perpetuating harmful norms that overlook problematic or sexual behaviour that has the potential of becoming SV. This ultimately contributes to SV within these contexts being unchallenged and accepted by creating a culture of silence around alcohol and sexual encounters where boundaries of consent may be blurred. Lastly, this subject position contributes to an environment where the responsibilities of bystanders, perpetrators and participants are neither clearly defined nor upheld.

4.4.2. Active Respondents

In contrast to helpless subject positions, some participants take an active subject position, emphasising perpetrator accountability and victim/survivor justice. This stance reflects a resistance to passive narratives around SV and a move towards adopting a proactive approach that aligns with societal discourses of victim/survivor-centred responses to SV or behaviours that contribute to its perpetuation. For instance, the response below emphasises personal responsibility in alcohol-related scenarios and taking on victim/survivor-centred approaches to constructing SV:

Extract 49
P02: "[...] She must report uTony because [...] we don't know uTony that much. If he can do this to uLibo, which means he's bound to do it again with someone else because we can see *ukuthi* (meaning *that* in IsiXhosa), he is using his power [..]. Going to the extent of reporting Tony is understandable because she was sexually violated [...]."

Extract 76
P01: "I would ask them how they feel about the situation. If they regret it, then I would also ask them: 'Okay, what do you think you did wrong?' I feel like the major problem is getting drunk to the point where by you don't know what you're doing."

These responses illustrate an active respondent subject position, with Extract 49 encouraging justice-seeking to support the victims/survivors and prevent future perpetration. Similarly, Extract 76 presents a subject position that focuses on the individual's experience of the sexual encounter while presenting possibilities for exploring the role individuals can play in addressing SV. Taking up this subject position firstly challenges traditional notions of masculinity by positioning men as allies for sexual equity and safe sexual practices. As such, it reflects reflective masculinities that challenge traditional gender norms. Further, this subject position allows for a deepened understanding of sex, the dynamics involved in sexual encounters and other's experiences. Secondly, men taking on this subject position - as illustrated in these extracts - may challenge problematic sexual behaviours in their social circles, which may encourage healthier norms by disrupting harmful peer influence that normalises problematic sexual dynamics (Ricardo *et al.,* 2011). In so doing, stepping into the subject position of an active respondent, men challenge patriarchal norms that position them as perpetrators, passive bystanders and indifferent to SV.

While this subject position presents itself as a possibility for action, without adequate training, support and understanding - men within this position may, unintentionally and without realising, prioritise their role as protectors within traditional masculinity frameworks (Graham, 2013). Cognisant of this role, men taking this subject position may take on a saviour complex, undermining the victim/survivors' agency. This is evident in Extract 49, 'She *must* report,' which illustrates an unintentional perpetuation of a harmful dynamic that falls short of empowering the victim/survivor to decide about their experience.

Ultimately, taking on the subject position of an active respondent to SV as a man has profound transformative possibilities that involve challenging entrenched gender norms, fostering societal change and taking shared responsibility for addressing SV. Having said this, cautious navigation is also required to avoid shortfalls such as overstepping boundaries and

replicating harmful interpersonal dynamics. When done from an authentic and open-minded perspective, this subject position carries a transformational potential on both the personal and societal levels.

4.4.3. Influential

Lastly, some participants' talk revealed a subject position of being an influential voice in discussions about SV as a man. This subject position has significant implications across personal, social, and cultural domains. Firstly, this position encourages those who take it to adopt the ethical responsibility to advocate against and challenge harmful norms - requiring continual learning and self-reflection. This allows for men's personal development within this subject position and shifts how SV is spoken about in men's social circles, where such conversations would otherwise be absent (de Villiers *et al.,* 2021). This position, therefore, highlights the potential men have to become agents of change and capable of challenging harmful norms through critical dialogue and self-reflection (Connell, 2005). The excerpt below illustrates how an influential subject position can invite a reflective and critical dialogue about sex and SV between two men:

Excerpt 1 (Vignette 1)

P02: Okay, so the way I am placing it - saying that he was drunk. It's not that he won't remember. I am saying that 'cause we know drunk people tend not to listen to instructions and stuff- so that's why I say that maybe uBulelwa was like "stop," but then uSamkelo was drunk, he was sexually motivated- he was turned on. So those two coming into combination, he would like throw away i-instruction-

P01: Okay, let's say you ((directed at P02)) are Samkelo, right - and then you are drunk, you are turned on- you did what you did the day before and then today this morning, you remember what you did=

P02: [Yes]

P01: And what actually happened- and now you are sober now- or let's say uBulelwa tells you that: "ABC happened, and I didn't like it," or you just know what happened, and uBulelwa said "stop," and you didn't stop. What would you do after that? How would you feel? Okanye, what would you do; what would you think?

P02: If I was u-Samkelo

P01: [Because Samkelo <u>thinks</u>] now ba he didn't do anything wrong. Because at the end of the day, now they are in a relationship-

P02: = Yeah- if I noted that uBulelwa was not happy about it, and then I would have to like check on her the following day and be like, "Listen, yesterday I know you said I must stop, but then I was sexually motivated and I just wanted to continue blow off some steam so I am sorry about that" yeah check up on her=

P01: [But] Samkelo didn't do that.

The dialogue in Excerpt 1 illustrates how men within this subject position can challenge traditional constructions of masculinity that justify ideas such as discourses of being too aroused to consider consent. This subject position can, therefore, invite other men to not take traditional norms as accepted truths but as constructions that can be challenged and dismantled through critical reflection and engagement in conversations about sex and SV. The excerpt below presents such a dialogue where critical reflection that comes with the participant who has assumed the influential role encourages the other participants' reflection.

Excerpt 2 (Vignette 2)

P01: I feel like they should both ask for permission, but for me, it's mostly Thato's responsibility because in the country that we live in, rape there's a lot of rape cases, and especially women like to be females like to be the ones that experience this a lot, sadly and uYolanda also was extremely drunk, and uThato was drunk=

P02: [MMMM ((expression of an epiphany))]-

P01: We must also not forget that extremely drunk is drunk, drunk, drunk to the fact that you can't even walk. I don't know what extremely drunk is, but yes, I feel like Thato should be the one since he is more sober - he knows what's happening. He should be like: "No man, would uYolanda want to do this, or would I want to do this if I was sober?" Yeah-

P02: I agree with that one (.)

The excerpt above illustrates the potential carried within the influential subject position to inspire engagement that considers the broader context in which SV occurs and the responsibility that men within such context ought to carry. Understanding that discourse is both a tool for power and a site of resistance (Foucault, 1977) - this subject position - while presenting an opportunity to challenge norms that trivialise SV and harmful sexual interactions, can be met with peer resistance (Shefer *et al.*, 2015).

Taking on this subject position as a man in discussions about SV, therefore, has the potential to encourage shifts in the way masculinity is acted out within these discourses and in sexual interactions, thus driving changes that may dismantle deeply embedded harmful norms. However, the impact that may come with challenging the resistance due to this subject position highlights a need for support mechanisms for men within these positions.

4.5. Exploring Possibilities for Action

Informed by the subject positions described above, the progressive potential carried within these subjectivities and areas of constraint within these positions, three main possibilities for action were identified that can be incorporated into potential interventions: 1)

Educational Programmes, 2) Upskilling and Training workshops and 3) Community-Informed or Group Interventions. These interventions would be designed to challenge societal norms, equip men with tools for addressing SV and foster critical dialogues that disrupt harmful discourses surrounding sexual interactions that cultivate SV.

4.5.1 Educational Programmes

Observing the taken-for-granted nature of some societal norms in discourses of SV by participants, the possibilities for action within educational programmes should focus on promoting the critical reflection of the language used to talk about SV. Educational programmes could, therefore, critique societal discourses of SV and sex. In doing so, these programmes could encourage men students to examine the narratives they use when discussing SV, understanding how these reflect and perpetuate border societal inequalities. For example, students could engage in activities that dismantle the 'chaser-chased' dynamic in sexual interactions and discuss how this framework contributes to the normalisation of power imbalances in sexual interactions. This aligns with bystander approaches to SV, which have become popular in SV intervention work with student populations (Banyard *et al.,* 2007; Yount *et al.,* 2020). In particular, interventions such as the proposed intervention speak to the first of the four stages of moving bystanders from inactive to proactive positions by providing individuals with the skills to identify issues that contribute to SV (Fenton *et al.,* 2016), such as problematic sexual behaviour, harmful narratives about sex and the implications of these on the perpetuation of SV.

Secondly, these education programs could emphasise the socially constructed nature of masculinities, inviting men students to explore healthier ways of performing masculinities. This could include role-playing exercises that allow students to practice navigating sexual interactions with an emphasis on healthier constructions of sexual refusal and respectful sexual interactions that promote safer sexual behaviours within which these discourses occur. In so doing, the effects of such discourses on sexual interactions, behaviours and dynamics at the micro-level would highlight the harmful nature of drawing from and reproducing problematic discourses about SV. By fostering critical thinking and equipping men students with tools to challenge societal norms, such critical educational programmes could present opportunities to observe, question, challenge, and shift the structural inequalities that protect and sustain SV.

4.5.2 Upskilling and Training

Informed by findings that suggest some men students may feel ill-equipped to intervene and respond to SV, targeted training programmes should be aimed at upskilling men students' confidence and skills to address SV. This intervention aligns with the second stage of moving from an inactive bystander towards being an active participant in challenging SV, and that is the stage of building efficacy to intervene (Fenton *et al.*, 2016). These training sessions could include the use of workshops that provide students with skills to identify risky and problematic sexual behaviours that could lead to and encompass SV.

Secondly, these training sessions could include workshops that stimulate real-world scenarios of SV through case studies or vignettes to practice intervening safely and effectively in potential SV situations. These workshops could, for instance, include role-plays that focus on intervening in complex sexual interactions and real-world scenarios, such as involving scenarios where power disparities and alcohol-related cases are present (de Villiers *et al.,* 2021).

Further, training sessions could include teaching and raising awareness on how men can navigate reporting systems and structures that support them, as well as victims and survivors within the institutions and communities they occupy. These interventions could, therefore, be structured in steps to promote accountability, support victims/survivors, and encourage self-reflection on their roles as carriers and circulators of discourses that have the potential to both perpetuate and disrupt the current status quo. Further, this training could be focused on training men students to facilitate the training of other men students, thus promoting peer-led training sessions, informed by the significance of men's social practices in front of other men (Mfecane, 2018). By focusing on upskilling men's skills to address SV and encouraging self-reflection - training programmes can empower men to take responsible roles in preventing SV.

4.5.3 Group Interventions

The last possibility for action that the research's findings highlight is the potential of group interventions to create spaces where men can critically reflect on their roles in preventing SV. This aligns closely with community-based prevention interventions (Ricardo *et al.,* 2011) that foster collective accountability for SV prevention. Such interventions could

take advantage of men's reflective groups that promote SV allyship that challenge societal systems that perpetuate this form of violence. These groups could be peer-led and focused on engaging men students in facilitated reflective and critical conversations about societal systems that perpetuate SV.

Furthermore, these group sessions could create non-judgmental environments where students feel safe to genuinely reflect on, share and challenge their assumptions without fear of judgment. This approach allows for genuine [un]learning, promoting GBV and SV allyship, and supportive men networks. Through fostering community-based networks of support and self-reflection, group interventions could encourage a collective shift away from harmful societal norms, promoting healthier sexual interactions.

4.6. Concluding Summary

This chapter effectively highlights the intricate and complex nature of participants' constructions of SV and the deeply embedded nature of these constructions within wider societal discourses. The findings presented in this chapter emphasise the interconnection between societal norms, cultural scripts and power dynamics - which shape participants' understandings of SV and the discourses they draw upon. Participants' constructions of SV largely align with broader *typical* discourses and societal norms around SV, sex, victim/survivors and perpetrators. As argued in the analysis, these constructions have the potential to perpetuate and reinforce existing ways of thinking and talking about SV, which may not always be constructive. Additionally, these constructions are not isolated but reflect broader societal scripts that normalise power imbalances, excuse or justify harmful behaviours and perpetuate societal hierarchies that infiltrate sexual interactions. As such, continually drawing on these typical discourses of SV perpetuates harmful stereotypes about sex, gender and SV - hindering progressive interventions aimed at addressing SV effectively as a social issue.

Despite this, it is crucial to examine where participants generally deviated from these discourses in their constructions - and consider the implications of this on their subject position. In addition to the subject positionings created by participants' discourses, exploring the social realities created by these deviations, which either challenge or perpetuate a harmful status quo, is imperative. In exploring a nuanced understanding of SV and the subject positions that are created; as a result, this chapter emphasises the need to challenge existing

discourses around sex and SV to promote more constructive ways of being and engaging in sexual interactions.

Therefore, this research's findings emphasise the critical role of language and mechanisms of talk in shaping societal discourses and creating social realities. The use of vignettes depicting scenarios that complicate the construction of SV highlights the interplay between language, discourse and social constructions. The fact that participants predominantly drew from discourses that accept the vignettes without problematising them highlights how such discourses can become accepted and taken-for-granted truths that shape the social realities of those who do and do not resist them. Therefore, this uncritical engagement and acceptance of such talk perpetuates further discourses that enable SV when not critically engaged with.

In essence, the findings of this research provide not only a comprehensive understanding of participants' constructions of SV but also present the need to examine, with a critical lens, the existing societal norms and discourses reflected in and reproduced by such constructions. This prompts the reflective question: *How can deeply entrenched discourses serve as a driving force for progressive understandings of SV that encourage transformation?* In continuing to explore this question, *we* move beyond merely understanding SV for its prevalence and pervasiveness and towards envisioning possibilities for transformation that address the systemic roots of SV.

The exploration of possibilities for action identified in this chapter provides actionable insights that could be incorporated into interventions that address SV at Rhodes University from a systemic point of view. Intervention strategies that allow for opportunities to promote healthier ways of thinking and talking about SV and encourage students to take meaningful steps in preventing and addressing it on campus.

Chapter 5

Limitations and Conclusion

5.1. Chapter Outline

This research offers valuable insights into the discourses about SV from which participants draw, the harmful effects of these discourses when circulated without critical reflection, and the possibilities for action and intervention provided by engaging critically with such discourses. In essence, the findings of this research illustrate the powerful influence discourse and patterns of talk about sex and SV have on social realities and societal norms. However, various limitations must be considered, each pointing to possible avenues for future research. This chapter seeks to provide a summary of the thesis findings, examine their alignment with the research objectives and discuss the study's limitations and implications for future research on gendered violence and interpersonal harms, focusing on SV in particular.

5.2 Summary of Results

Informed by the understanding of the power that discourse has not only to produce but also to resist and disrupt social realities (Foucault, 1977; Willig, 2013), the present research sought to explore the discourses that emerged from how participants talk about SV. It aimed to examine how SV is constructed by its participants, four first-year men students at Rhodes University - and the discourses produced and reflected in these constructions. Drawing from a Foucauldian and Social Constructionist perspective and exploring the intersection between language, power, subjectivity and the social realities created, this research explored how discourse(es) interact to shape how SV is understood. Further, it examined how these understandings challenge and/or reproduce knowledge systems about SV that enable it to thrive. Four research questions were explored to address the objectives of this research:

1. How do participants construct SV?
2. How do participants construct victims/survivors and perpetrators in the depicted scenarios?
3. What discourses do participants draw upon to construct SV and position themselves, victims/survivors and perpetrators?

4. What social reality is constructed from the discourses used by participants?

The research questions were answered through the use of vignettes as stimuli material. These vignettes depicted scenarios of sexual encounters that could be constructed as SV, such as SV in the context of existing relationships (vignette 1), mutual alcohol intoxication (vignette 2), the absence of physical violence and aggression (vignette 4), and SV when the victims/survivors could be considered to have a promiscuous sexual reputation (vignette 5). The third vignette was used as a control scenario, depicting consensual sex. The research aims were obtained by exploring participants' narratives and ideas that informed how they constructed SV and sex in their interpretations of the presented vignettes.

The findings illustrate that participants drew from five main ideas and notions in their constructions of SV, namely: 1) SV as the absence of consent, 2) use of physical force, 3) the exploitation of vulnerability, 4) SV as a traumatic incident and 5) SV as a crime or morally wrong act. Collectively, these constructions provided a subtle picture of participants' ideas of what 'real' SV looks like, drawing from ideas of the 'real' rape discourse (Gavey, 2005; Gavey, 2019). Further, participants' constructions of victims/survivors and perpetrators in the vignettes revealed polarised notions of responsibility and blame, drawing predominantly from ideas of choice and control. From participants' constructions and ideas about SV - five key discourses emerged: 1) the Discourse of Sexual Refusal, 2) the Discourse of Justification, 3) the Discourse of Responsibility, 4) the Discourse of Trauma and Damage, and lastly 5) the Discourse of 'Real' Rape. Through the use of FDA, these findings illustrated that the discourses participants drew from to construct SV did not vary or deviate too far from existing societal discourses of SV.

As argued in Chapter 2, drawing upon these discourses reproduces a harmful status quo that perpetuates SV. This was particularly evident in the participants' subjective positions in response to drawing from these discourses. This included a *helpless* subject position, in which some participants illustrated uncertainty and a somewhat lack of confidence in knowing how to respond to and intervene to address the SV depicted in the scenarios. This was particularly in scenarios that did not fit the 'real' rape framework. Despite this position, some participants took on more progressive subject positions, including the *active respondent* and *influential* positions. Interestingly, the latter subject positions also related to ideas of 'real' rape; wherein there was confidence in knowing how to respond to SV when participants drew from the discourse of 'real' rape in their constructions and interpretations of

the vignettes. In the findings, it was argued and illustrated that the use of such discourses, without critical engagement, has dire implications for harmful understandings of SV - despite the apparent progressiveness of some patterns of talk.

In essence, the research's findings illustrate how discourses of SV that draw from traditional societal narratives and scripts about gender and sex not only perpetuate but also protect patriarchal societal organisations and systems that normalise unequal interpersonal relations. Ultimately, these ways of being and relating infiltrate how individuals engage with each other - sexually while also affecting how SV is constructed.

Informed by the highlighted subject positions emerging from participants' talk - potential interventions for challenging rape culture and discourses that enable SV were identified. These included bystander intervention skills training workshops, which would be designed to enhance students' skills to intervene in cases of SV, reflective educational programmes that promote the critical engagement with and challenging of discourses of SV, and group-based interventions aimed at fostering collective learning and building allyship among students to prevent the circulation of harmful discourses of SV.

5.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

5.3.1. Sample Limitations

The study's small sample size, while allowing for in-depth analysis and exploration of each participant's inputs, limits the research's generalisability. It is important to note, however, that the research's aims were not generalisability but rather a critical analysis of discourse and the implications for conceptualisations of SV. As such, future research could magnify the sample size and diversify participants, potentially yielding a more realistic, comparative, and comprehensive illustration of how SV is understood among men students, encompassing diverse gender and sexual identities, years of study, and backgrounds.

5.3.2. Methodological Limitations

While the vignettes proved effective in eliciting participants' constructions of SV, they presented limitations. The scenarios in the vignettes did not overtly describe diverse incidents of SV, such as in same-sex contexts or situations involving more than two parties, such as group sexual encounters - for example. This leaves gaps in how SV is understood, explained and negotiated in contexts outside of binary heterosexuality and traditional dyadic

sexual encounters. As such, future research could aim to diversify the presentation of SV scenarios to encompass a broader range of relational and situational contexts.

5.3.3. Longitudinal Perspectives

Understanding that discourses are socially constructed and evolving, the focus on participants' discourses of SV in a single setting presents a limitation on evaluating the long-term effects of interventions such as this research in disrupting problematic ways of talking about and understanding sex and SV. Longitudinal research aimed at tracking changes in constructions of SV amongst students over their university careers may aid in highlighting how these discourses evolve and what kinds of interventions support the dismantling or reproduction of discourses. Additionally, future research could benefit from interdisciplinary approaches integrating perspectives and understandings of SV from related fields, including Gender Studies, Sociology and Psychology, to allow for a more holistic understanding of SV discourses on campus. Due to resource constraints, the current study could not carry its longitudinal effects.

5.3.4. Practical Implications

Despite the limitations mentioned above, the findings and analyses have practical applications in informing micro-level (bystander) and macro-level (institutional) interventions and prevention strategies on campus. Future research could explicitly explore how these discursive constructions can be integrated into prevention programs, as highlighted in the possibilities for action in the previous chapter, and evaluate the impact of such interventions over time.

While this study effectively enquires and, through enquiry, intervenes against SV amongst students, its focused nature and resource constraints necessitate cautious interpretation. The limitations highlight the need for broader, more diverse research to comprehensively address this issue in HEIs. The study results should be interpreted cautiously as findings of research participants' responses and discourses instead of generalisable conclusions.

5.4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings illustrate the complex ideas and notions that inform participants' interpretations and explanations of SV scenarios and the discourses [re]produced

as a result. This study has effectively illustrated how participants draw upon various discourses to recognise and make sense of SV, including discourses of sexual refusal, responsibility attribution, trauma and damage, SV justification and the discourse of 'real' rape. Employing a Social Constructionist lense, using FDA - this study's analysis and the interpretation of its findings has not only deconstructed participants' constructions of SV but has also provided insights into the discourses that shape their conceptualisations of the scenarios presented. Utilising vignettes reflective of real-world complexities when it comes to SV incidents - this study has allowed for an exploration of how language and discourse contribute to the perpetuation and disruption of ideas that enable SV to take place.

These findings are significant because they highlight how men students may engage with socially constructed narratives of power, control, and consent, which perpetuate harmful understandings of sex and SV - thus contributing to the field of gendered violence and interpersonal harms. The importance of this research lies in its contribution to the field of gendered violence, particularly within the university context, where SV remains a critical issue. The findings emphasise the necessity for more nuanced dialogues around consent, sex, and SV, particularly in challenging discourses that perpetuate a culture that enables SV to persist on campus. By revealing how entrenched societal narratives inform participants' constructions of SV, this study offers critical insights for developing educational programmes, skills training and peer-led group interventions around SV on campus. Such interventions would aim to challenge harmful, widely accepted ways of understanding SV while promoting a deeper understanding of the societal systems of inequality that normalise unequal interpersonal dynamics and infiltrate sexual interactions. By challenging the entrenched discourses that students draw upon and fostering more informed and respectful perspectives on sex and SV through critical dialogues, this research can play a significant role in contributing to gendered violence prevention educational programmes.

Not only does this research become an intervention by providing a space for critical conversations about SV, but it also offers a deeper understanding of the discursive constructions of SV among these men students, shedding light on how power, control, and responsibility are negotiated within the context of making sense of sexual interactions. The study's contributions, therefore, are essential for fostering and supporting a cultural shift on campus. Thus, this thesis has contributed to the extensive knowledge of SV by providing an advanced understanding of how incidents of SV are conceptualised and explained. The limitations and implications for future research illustrate how this study invites continued

exploration and advocacy in interpersonal harms, ultimately striving towards more informed, proactive and empathetic understandings of SV.

5.5. Intervention Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, it is recommended that Rhodes University implements a multi-pronged approach to address and prevent SV on campus. Firstly through the development and integration of critical, discourse-focused consent education programmes - embedded within first–year orientation programmes and academic curricula. This can create sustained opportunities for students to challenge, explore and unpack dominant myths and misconceptions about SV. It is recommended that these programmes go beyond legal definitions of SV, to the exploration of everyday language, assumptions and societal scripts that normalise SV while discouraging accountability. Secondly, it recommended that peer-led dialogue groups and bystander training workshops are established to provide safe, participatory spaces for students - particularly men - to practice pro-social intervention strategies, critically reflect on societal norms that perpetuate SV-accepting environments and cultivate allyship in the prevention of SV on campus. Finally, the university is invited to support ongoing staff development and institutional policy reviews that ensures that those in positions of authority are equipped to not only recognise but also disrupt and respond sensitively to problematic discourses and behaviours relating to SV.

These interventions, grounded in a discursive understanding of SV, have the potential to dismantle and destabilise entrenched rape culture on campus - thus contributing to a better informed university environment.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Approval Letter (Ethics Committee)

Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee
PO Box 94, Makhanda, 6140, South Africa
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https://www.ru.ac.za/researchgateway/ethics/

23 October 2023

Miss Babalwa Zokozo

Email: g22z6316@campus.ru.ac.za babalwazokozo@gmail.com monkhep@gmail.com

Review Reference: 2023-7052-8111

Dear Miss Babalwa Zokozo

Title: Talking about consent and rape on campus: exploring discourses about sexual violence among first-year men university students.

Researcher: Miss Babalwa Zokozo

Supervisor(s): Mr Werner Bohnke, Miss Palesa Monkhe

This letter confirms that the above research proposal has been reviewed and **APPROVED** by the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (RU-HREC). Your Approval number is: 2023-7052-8111

Approval has been granted for 1 year. An annual progress report will be required in order to renew approval for an additional period. You will receive an email notifying you when the annual report is due.

Please ensure that the ethical standards committee is notified should any substantive change(s) be made, for whatever reason, during the research process. This includes changes in investigators. Please also ensure that a brief report is submitted to the ethics committee on the completion of the research. The purpose of this report is to indicate whether the research was conducted successfully, if any aspects could not be completed, or if any problems arose that the ethical standards committee should be aware of. If a thesis or dissertation arising from this research is submitted to the library's electronic theses and dissertations (ETD) repository, please notify the committee of the date of submission and/or any reference or cataloguing number allocated.

Sincerely,

Janet Hayward

Dr Janet Hayward

Chair: Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee, RU-HREC

cc: Ethics Coordinator

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Appendix B - Recruitment Flyer

Are you a male g24 who is interested in talks on consent & sexual violence?

We Are Looking For You!

What are your thoughts about sexual violence? How do you understand sexual consent?

Hello. We are Masters in Counselling Psychology Interns at Rhodes University, supervised and are conducting research on men first-year students' understandings of sexual violence and sexual consent.

Why participate?

1. If you are interested in talking and learning about sexual violence and sexual consent in a space with other students
2. If you would like to find out more about how others think about sexual violence and consent
3. If you would like your thoughts and opinions to assist in developing future awareness and education interventions for students like you.
4. If you would like your inputs to contribute to making campus a safer space for everyone.

Who can participate?

1. Male 1st-Year Rhodes University students over the age of 18.

What will participation require?

1. Active participation in a group discussion about sexual violence and sexual consent with 6-8 other students 90 minutes.
2. You will be asked to discuss a series of cases describing sexual interaction
3. You will not be forced to share any personal experiences or stories that you do not want to. The questions we will ask you to discuss are based on the cases, not on your experiences. You control what you share with the group.
4. You are free to withdraw from the study at any stage and to request for any information that you would not like to be part of the study to be removed.

Venue: Purple Room (Steve Biko Building)

Interested in participating? Contact us on:

Palesa Monkhe: monkhep@gmail.com OR Babalwa Zokoza: babalwazokoza@gmail.com

This advertisement has been reviewed by the Department of Psychology's Research Project and Ethics Review Committee and approved by the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee. Tracking Number: 2023-7052-8111

Appendix C - Information Sheet

Are you a male g24 who is interested in talks on consent & sexual violence?

You Are Invited To Participate In A Research Study!

Researchers: Palesa Monkhe and Babalwa Zokoza

Supervisor: Mr. Bohmke (Psychology Department)

Hello. We are Counselling Psychology Masters Interns at Rhodes University and are conducting research on men first-year students constructions of sexual violence and sexual consent.
We are particularly interested in how men students talk about and make sense of situations involving sexual interactions and the negotiation of consent, as well as why you think sexual violence happens. We want to hear what YOU have to say about this topic.

Participation details:

1. You must be a 1st Year Rhodes University male students (g24)
2. You must be at least 18 years old
3. You must actively participate in a recorded group discussion with 6 to 8 group members, for 90 minutes.
4. You will be presented with a series of cases, describing a scene in which sexual interaction takes place, and will be asked to discuss some questions about these cases
5. You must keep all the discussion held during the focus group confidential, including keeping fellow group members' identities private.
6. You will not be forced to share any personal experiences or stories that you do not want to. The questions we will ask you to discuss are based on the cases, not on participants' experiences. You control what you share with the group.
7. You are free to withdraw from the study at any stage.

Risks for harm involved in participation:

1. Sexual violence is a potentially sensitive topic, and there is some risk that the cases we will discuss might contain details which feel familiar to your own experience, or the experiences of people you know / are close to. This could be embarrassing or even upsetting.
2. Please think carefully about the likelihood of participating in this research leading to you becoming upset before you volunteer. If you think it likely that you will become upset, rather choose not to participate.
3. If at any stage during or after the research you become aware that you are feeling upset about something related to the group discussions you are encouraged to contact the Researchers directly. Both Researchers are Intern Psychologists at the Student Counselling Centre and can provide you with support and referral information to get assistance.
4. All information shared in the group discussions will be treated as confidential. We will protect your identity as best we can by removing personally identifying information and using fake names to refer to individual participants or their opinions.
5. The discussions will be audio-recorded, with your permission. Access to these recordings and their transcriptions of them will be strictly limited to the Researchers and the project supervisor only. More details about this can be provided on request.

What are the benefits of participation?

- You will learn more about issues of sexual violence and sexual consent
- You will find out how others think about these issues
- Your thoughts and opinions will assist in developing future awareness and education interventions for students like you at Rhodes University. In this way you will be contributing to making campus a safer space for everyone!

Venue: Purple Room(Steve Biko Building)

Interested in participating? Contact us on:

Babalwa Zokoza: babalwazokoza@gmail.com OR Palesa Monkhe: monkhep@gmail.com

This research has been reviewed by the Psychology Department's Research Projects and Ethics Review Committee (RPERC) and has received approval from the Rhodes University Human Ethics Committee (RU-HREC). The Ethics tracking number for the research is: 2023-7052-8111

Appendix D - Consent Forms

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT DECLARATION
(To be signed by research participants)

Research Project: A study on how first-year undergraduate men students talk about and make sense of sexual consent and violence in sexual interactions.

Palesa Keneuwe Monkhe and **Babalwa Zokoza** from the Department of **Psychology**, Rhodes University, have requested my permission to participate in the above-mentioned research project.

The nature and the purpose of the research project and of this informed consent declaration have been explained to me in a language that I understand.

I am aware that:

1. The purpose of the research project is to explore the ways in which first-year undergraduate men students talk about sexual consent and violence in sexual interactions.

2. Rhodes University has given ethical clearance to this research project ***(2023-7052-8111)*** and I have seen/may request to see the clearance certificate by contacting the Ethics Coordinator (ethics-committee@ru.ac.za).

3. By participating in this research project, I will be contributing towards knowledge to better understand sexual consent and violence on campus which may inform future interventions thus contributing to a safe and conducive campus experience.

4. I will participate in the project by engaging and sharing my opinions in focus group discussions about presented scenarios of sexual interactions.

5. My participation is entirely voluntary and should I at any stage wish to withdraw from participating further, I may do so without any negative consequences.

6. The following risks are associated with my participation:

   Given sensitive nature of the topic of discussion, risk include potential emotional distress for participants who may have been affected (directly and/or indirectly) by sexual violence and distress as a result of embarrassment and/or reputational damage. With this in mind, emotional containment will be provided for me should I exhibit signs of emotional distress and/or have expressed a need for emotional containment and will be organized by the researchers who are also registered Intern Counselling Psychologists. Additionally, further emotional support will be arranged and referrals made should I indicate a desire for psychosocial and emotional support.

7. Confidentiality and anonymity of records will be maintained, and my name and identity will

not be revealed to anyone who has not been involved in conducting the research ***unless I indicate to the contrary/recognise that as a public figure, my identity will inevitably be/become known in which case I agree to and accept the loss of confidentiality***.

8. Group members' names/comments/discussion that occurs within the group are confidential and will not be shared with individuals outside of this group. I therefore agree to maintain the confidentiality of all members of the group.

9. I **agree/disagree** (circle applicable) to having the researcher audio record my views and engagement during the focus group discussions, understanding that the purpose of this is to ensure the accurate capturing of my responses and engagements.

10. In terms of the Protection of Personal Information Act (No. 4 of 2013) it remains my right to request the Researcher to provide me with a detailed explanation of exactly how confidentiality and anonymity of the data I provide will be maintained and achieved. I also may request to know how exactly my personal information will be stored securely and for how long it will be stored.

11. Since the data collected is geared towards evaluating the effectiveness of possible interventions, I am aware that stored data may be available for reuse for these purposes. Even in this event, my identity will anonymised.

12. In terms of the POPI Act, I possess the right to receive feedback about this research. This will take the form of an executive summary, shared electronically ***unless I elect not to receive feedback.***

13. Any further questions that I might have regarding the research or my participation will be answered by Babalwa Zokoza (babalwazokoza@gmail.com) and Palesa Monkhe (monkhep@gmail.com)

14. By signing this informed consent declaration, I am not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.

I, ……., have read the above information / confirm that the above information has been explained to me in a language that I understand and I am aware of this document's contents. I have asked all the questions that I wished to ask and these have been answered to my satisfaction. I fully understand what is expected of me during the research.

I have not been pressurised in any way and I voluntarily agree to participate in the above-mentioned project.

…… ……

Participants signature **Date**

…… ……

Researchers signature **Date**

Appendix E - Research Vignettes

1. Bulelwa and Samkelo have been seeing each other for some time and their relationship has become sexual. One Friday, after dinner at the local restaurant Micasa, Bulelwa agrees to spend the weekend with Samkelo at his place. As their night together draws to a close at Samkelo's, they start making out while undressing each other. Their activity continues to intensify and Bulelwa asks whether Samkelo has a condom. Samkelo complies, puts on a condom, spreads Bulelwa's legs and they continue kissing passionately. After a while, Bulelwa asks Samkelo to stop. Samkelo insists that they continue since he is highly turned on and has already put on a condom. He continues to kiss Bulelwa, pins her down and moves on to having sex with her. Samkelo does not think any further about it. After all, they are in a relationship and have had sex with each other several times before.
2. Thato and Yolanda broke up a month ago. They are both at a party and are drinking heavily. Yolanda becomes extremely drunk and asks a drunk Thato to walk her home. They both stumble to Yolanda's flat. Once in Yolanda's room, she mumbles something about Thato helping her change into her pajamas. Thato helps Yolanda remove her clothes. They start kissing and go on to have sex with each other. Yolanda wakes up the next morning, naked and confused, with Thato sleeping next to her. Neither of them can remember precisely what happened the night before.
3. Rita and Brian meet for the first time at a bar and they immediately hit it off. Their conversation continues to flow and Rita suggests that they head over to her place for coffee. Brian drives over to Rita's and they hang out on the couch with Rita's head resting on his chest. They start kissing and touching. Things start getting heavier. Rita gets up and walks over to the doorway to her bedroom, asking Brian if he wants to join her. Brian follows her into her room. Once on the bed, they start removing each other's clothes while making out. Brian asks Rita if she wants to have sex with him. Rita smiles, nods her head and hands Brian a condom from a drawer next to her bed. They proceed to have sex with each other.
4. Libo is a first year student who has been struggling to adjust academically. He receives an inbox from one of his course tutors - a postgraduate student, Tony - who confesses his attraction for Libo. Tony suggests that they meet up at the Botanical Gardens to get to know each other better. After spending the afternoon together, Libo accepts Tony's invitation to go over to his flat for a "chill" session. As the night progresses at Tony's, Libo starts flirting with Tony a little bit and starts kissing him. While kissing, Tony reaches for a condom from his pocket. Libo asks that they stop at just kissing. Trying to convince Libo, Tony suggests that he will help improve his marks if they have. He also hints that, on the other hand, his coursework might suffer if they can't get along. Still hesitant, Libo pushes Tony away. Tony tells Libo to leave if they are not going to have sex. It is quite late at night and Libo is not sure how he will get back to his Res on campus. Libo agrees and they have sex.
5. Naya is a second-year student, known for having hooked up with most of the guys in the rugby team. She attends a party at one of the clubs near campus to celebrate the rugby team's victory. One of her exes, Hloni, buys several drinks for her during the course of the party. After the party, Hloni offers her a lift back to her flat. Before dropping Naya off, Hloni leans in for a kiss and they start making out. As their kissing intensifies, Naya pushes Hloni away, telling him that she is tired and wants to go to sleep. Hloni gets angry, mostly because they have hooked up before, and anyway, everyone knows that Naya gets around. Besides, he has bought her drinks all night and driven her home, so it is reasonable to expect a little something in return. He refuses to unlock the car, aggressively pulls Naya closer and continues to kiss her. Naya stops resisting Hloni's advances, and he moves on to penetrating her with his fingers while insisting that she touch him. After Hloni finishes, he opens the car door and lets Naya out.

Appendix F - Interview Schedule

1. How would you describe what happened in the story? Would you call this a case of sexual violence? Why / why not?
2. Is what happened okay? What makes it okay / not okay?
3. Do the individuals' actions/behaviours make sense to you? Can you understand their motivations for acting the way they did?
4. What do you understand by the term "consent"?
5. Was what happened in the story consensual? Why / why not?
6. What does consent from a sexual partner look like? What sort of details tell us if there was/was not consent?
7. Whose responsibility is it to make sure that sexual interactions are consensual? What do you think is the best way to do this?
8. How do you think the people in the story felt about what happened afterwards?
9. How do you think they might behave towards each other afterwards? Would this be understandable?
10. Did anyone involved make bad choices? What were these bad choices? Why were they bad choices?
11. Do you think the people in the story could have acted differently? Who could have acted differently? What might they have done differently?
12. How would you respond to a friend who told you that they had an experience like this?

** Questions for the research project focussing on constructions of *sexual violence*

** Questions the research project focussing on constructions of *sexual consent.*

Appendix G - Participant Information Sheet

Student Number	Student Number