

VICTIM OR SURVIVOR: DO LABELS MATTER? A POSTSTRUCTURAL
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF NORTH AMERICAN UNDERGRADUATE
STUDENTS' BELIEFS ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE LABELS AND THEIR SOCIETAL
IMPLICATIONS

by

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to all of those in my life who have placed confidence in me and my abilities even when I have not seen them in myself. Thank you.

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Abstract

Sexual violence is a public health and human rights crisis that continues to be ignored by society. University students experience sexual violence at implacable rates, causing rape culture and rape myths to engulf university campuses. Few studies have explored the role of language and how labels may contribute to rape culture and rape myths. The purpose of this study was to explore university students' beliefs on the labels "victim" and "survivor" and consider how these beliefs may reproduce discourses on sexual violence. A critical feminist poststructuralist framework was created and employed, allowing an in-depth exploration of beliefs on sexual violence labels. Identity, Resiliency, Self-exclusion, Blame, Control, and Severity were the central discourses on sexual violence labels. Findings are grounded in poststructuralism and identify avenues for change and recommendations for the field of health promotion and beyond that support the reduction of sexual violence on university campuses.

List of Abbreviations Used

RAINN: Rape, abuse & incest national network

PTSD: Post-traumatic stress disorder

CDA: Critical discourse analysis

FPS: Feminist poststructuralist

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Chapter One: Introduction

Sexual assault is a prominent health and social issue in North America that often goes unseen (O’Neal, 2019). In Canada, sexual assault ranks in the top five most violent crimes against women in both severity and frequency (Quinlan et al., 2016; Sinha, 2013). According to Statistics Canada, sexual assault is the only violent crime that has not decreased in the past 10 years (Perreault, 2015). Nearly one in every six North American women have experienced sexual assault (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). It is highly concerning that current statistics only account for incidents of sexual assault that are reported, given that reported cases only account for 5% of actual incidents of sexual assault (Conroy & Cotter, 2014; Halstead et al., 2017). Of particular concern are historically marginalized populations that have been, and continue to be, at a greater risk of experiencing sexual assault and face greater harm and injury from their experiences (women, young people, Indigenous peoples, diverse groups across sexual orientations and gender identities including two-spirited, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer identities [2SLGBTQ+]) (Conroy & Cotter, 2014).

The health implications of sexual assault are severe. People who experience sexual assault often face significant physical, emotional, and psychological effects (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), 2020). Sexual assault may lead to an array of negative mental and physical health outcomes. Negative mental health outcomes are a particular concern, as research has found that people who experience sexual assault are highly susceptible to anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Tarzia et al., 2017; Pegram & Abbey, 2019). A recent study found that 33% of women who had been sexually assaulted were later diagnosed with PTSD (Millon et al., 2018). In

Canada, the high rates of sexual assault have been labelled an epidemic, causing a significant human rights problem that needs to be addressed through systemic improvements (Benoit et al., 2015).

Sexual Violence and University Campuses

University campuses have been identified as one of the most prevalent settings for sexual assault to occur (Quinlan et al., 2016). Approximately one in four women in North America will experience sexual assault during their time at university (Senn et al., 2014). Women enrolled in university between the ages of 18-25 are three times more likely to experience sexual assault, compared to women of the same age range who are not enrolled in university (Fantasia et al., 2015; McDaniel & Rodriguez, 2017). These rates have been virtually unchanged since the 1980s, when the first major study on sexual assault on university campuses was conducted by Koss et al. (1985), with rates of sexual assault remaining at staggering levels today (Potter et al., 2018). University campuses perpetuate an environment that is conducive to sexual assault as they institutionally support rape culture through inadequate responses to sexual assault and a failure to situate their institutional responses within their socio-cultural context (Garcia & Vemuri, 2017).

Rape Myths and Sexual Assault Labels

Universities' facilitation of rape culture and failure to address sexual assault contributes to university students' high levels of rape myth acceptance (Lewis et al., 2018; Jozowski et al., 2014). Rape myths are social norms that normalize and support instances of sexual assault. Rape myths were first described by Burt (1980), who defined the phenomenon as false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and perpetrators. Burt (1980) theorized that rape myths primarily serve to justify sexual assault by shifting the blame

from the perpetrator to the individual (Burt, 1980). Combatting the sexual assault epidemic on university campuses requires addressing the cultural and social norms that support sexual assault (Potter et al., 2018; Moynihan et al., 2014).

Prior studies have suggested that the labels used to refer to someone who has experienced sexual assault can reveal beliefs about sexual assault and support rape myths (Papendick & Bohner, 2017). Despite this, research on these topics remains scarce. In the past, society has commonly referred to someone who has experienced sexual assault as a ‘victim’ (Papendick & Bohner, 2017). Recently, the term “survivor” has emerged, shifting contemporary sexual assault discourse (Papendick & Bohner, 2017). The implications associated with self-labelling as either a “victim” or “survivor” among women who have experienced sexual assault have been explored, revealing that both terms carry specific and differing connotations. The label “survivor” is associated with positive characteristics such as strength and recovery, while the label “victim” is associated with negative characteristics such as weakness, powerlessness, and vulnerability (Thompson, 2000). The socio-cultural implications of sexual assault labels are less explored. There is a need for research to inquire beyond how those who have experienced sexual assault interpret and use these labels to deepen our understanding of "outsiders" perceptions of sexual assault labels to understand their potential societal implications (Papendick & Bohner, 2017). The goal of this qualitative research study was to explore undergraduate university beliefs on the labels used to refer to someone who has experienced sexual violence.

Brief Overview & Purpose

To improve our knowledge on the impact of sexual assault labels and to address the sexual assault epidemic on university campuses, the purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore undergraduate university beliefs on the labels used to refer to someone who has experienced sexual violence. Specifically, this study focused on undergraduate students' beliefs on using the labels "victim" and "survivor" to describe someone who has experienced sexual violence. This study strived to examine undergraduate students' language and uncover their beliefs and values on sexual violence label labels. Specifically, this study aimed to examine the potential interrelationships between language and the reproduction of greater social and institutional discourses on sexual violence such as rape myths and rape culture on university campuses. The goal of this study was not to examine specific institutional policies or programming and identify the discourses that they produce and the continuities and discontinuities between institutional discourses and discourses deployed by participants' responses. Instead, the focus of this project was to address institutional conditions by focusing on participant responses and consider how discourses on sexual violence labels situated in participants' responses may contribute to, reproduce, or rupture broader discourses on sexual violence such as rape myth acceptance and rape culture.

In brief, this research was conducted as a sub-study of a larger research project that investigated undergraduate students' beliefs, values, and practices of sexual orientation, gender, and sexuality. Participants in this sub-study were retroactively recruited through the larger study and include two cohorts of undergraduate students attending separate Canadian and American universities. In the larger study, qualitative

and quantitative data was collected electronically at both universities through students' online interactive textbooks, hosted by the online medium Top Hat. I analyzed one of the open-response questions posed to students: *What is your view about the use of the word "survivor" instead of "victim" to describe those who have experienced sexual coercion or sexualized violence?"*. While the data for this study was previously generated, the responses from this question had not been analyzed as part of the larger study because it was distinct from the other questions centering sexual consent. For this study, data retrieved from the open-response question was analyzed using critical discourse analysis (CDA), and feminist poststructuralist theory (FPS), guided by a transformative paradigm. Approaches from both the CDA and FPS frameworks were adopted to create an analysis framework I titled Critical Feminist Poststructuralism. These methods were chosen to examine participants' personal beliefs on sexual violence labels and consider how these beliefs create discourses that could influence social understandings of sexual violence. This sub-study aimed to advance current knowledge of undergraduate students' perspectives of using the term 'survivor' instead of 'victim' to describe someone who has experienced sexual violence and consider if sexual violence labels may influence broader beliefs on sexual violence, including rape culture and rape myth acceptances.

Research Questions

The purpose of this project was to explore how language is negotiated and steeped in social, cultural, and political influences that shape beliefs and discourse on sexual violence labels amongst undergraduate university students. Three research questions were developed to support the overall purpose of this research and to explore discourses on sexual violence labels. The questions were created based on the methodologies and

methods that guided this research project, specifically through the lens of a transformative paradigm, FPS theory, and CDA.

1. What are undergraduate students' beliefs about the term's 'survivor' and 'victim' to describe someone who has experienced sexual violence?
2. What are the language and linguistic patterns used by undergraduate students to discuss sexual violence labels?
3. What are the potential interrelationships between beliefs on sexual violence labels and wider social discourses on sexual violence among undergraduate students?

Key Terms

The terminology that will be used is defined and given context to situate the research project. Key terms for this study include sexualized violence and sexual assault, in addition to the associated terms needed to understand FPS and CDA and how these approaches were applied to this project. I also outline how findings will be described throughout this thesis for ease of understanding.

Sexualized Violence and Sexual Assault

Sexualized violence is an overarching, non-legal term that is used to describe a wide range of sexual misconduct that includes any unwanted sexual contact that targets sexuality and is physical and/or psychological in nature (Victoria Sexual Assault Centre, 2014). Sexual violence may refer to sexual abuse, sexual assault, rape, sexual harassment, intimate partner violence, stalking, indecent exposure, degrading sexual imagery, sharing sexual photographs without permission, and unwanted sexual comments or jokes (Victoria Sexual Assault Centre, 2014; RAINN, 2020). In the World Report of

Violence and Health (2002), The World Health Organization defines sexual violence as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work” (World Health Organization, 2002, p. 149). By contrast, in the Criminal Code of Canada (1985) the legal term “sexual assault” is used. The Criminal Code (s.271) describes sexual assault as “an assault committed in circumstances of a sexual nature such that the sexual integrity of the victim is violated”. Sexual assault occurs when sexual consent is lacking in sexual encounters. According to the Criminal Code of Canada (1985), sexual consent is defined as “the voluntary agreement to engage in the sexual activity in question”. The law emphasizes that sexual activity is only legal when all parties consent and are in a state capable to provide consent (Criminal Code of Canada, 1985). The literature review presented in Chapter Two frequently uses the term sexual assault because that is the legal term and the term most used in the academic literature. By contrast, the question posed to undergraduate students for data collection used to term sexualized violence, to encompass all forms of sexual misconduct and to provide a comprehensive term inclusive of all experiences. When discussing labels, the term “sexual violence labels” is used throughout to ensure constituency.

Beliefs and Values

Discourse analysis aims to examine one’s practice in relation to their beliefs and values. This study adopted elements of key discourse analysis frameworks to form its data analysis approach. Approaches from Weedon’s FPS and Fairclough’s CDA will be

combined to form a critical FPS approach to discourse analysis. Below are key terms used in each approach that are central to this research.

FPS is used to examine the meaning of experience that is personally, socially, and institutionally constructed through relations of power (Ollivier et al., 2018). Beliefs and values are key considerations when employing discourse analysis from an FPS approach. Foucault, a developer of the poststructuralist theory that centers around ideas of power, knowledge, and institutional influence, states that attitudes, opinions, and beliefs are ways to understand a persons' experience (Aston, 2016). Beliefs are personal opinions that one holds towards a particular topic. Similarly, a value is a personal perspective from a particular point of view (Aston, 2016).

Discursive Threads and Sub-Threads

Examining participants' beliefs and values allowed for the identification of threads of discourse also referred to as discursive threads. Discursive threads are presented as the main findings of this study. I used the term discursive threads to describe the discourses I identified in participants' responses because my analysis framework allowed for multiple analytical points of entry, allowing me to examine the interconnection of discourses, as well as complexities and tensions between discourses. The term discursive threads are meant to capture these ideas of discourses mutually informing and conflicting with each other and examining them individually while also considering how they are a part of a wider collective. These concepts are explained further in Chapter Four, where I present an analogy for how readers should think about the discourses presented in the findings. Sub-threads are also presented in each discursive thread to organize the findings. Sub-threads were identified by examining the multiple ways of knowing that constructed each

discursive thread. Participants' responses contained many complexities and tensions, these ideas constructed the overall discursive threads on participants' beliefs of sexual violence labels and are outlined using sub-threads.

In the two Finding's chapters, I frequently use the term dominant discourse to describe beliefs that appear most prevalently within participants' responses. According to Foucault, all discourses are competing for dominance, creating tensions between what is known and what is said. Tensions in this study describe the conflicts that appear within participants' responses. These tensions were specifically identified in the second step of the Critical FPS framework (Table 1). When analyzing the data, I identified these conflicts and considered how they reproduced or ruptured social order within the dominant discourse and theorized what the potential consequences or benefits are of these tensions. Often, participants were contemplating what beliefs were helpful and what beliefs may be harmful, causing many tensions to arise within the existing discourses. Additionally, many participants discussed the consequences of dominant discourses, or what is currently known about “victims” or “survivors”. It is important to note that participants may not hold these beliefs personally, however, they are pointing to dominant social discourses on sexual violence, and victims and survivors specifically, giving insight into dominant social discourses that continue to prevail today.

Linguistic Patterns

Complementary to FPS, CDA examines the relationship between language, knowledge subjectivity, power, and social practices (Blommaert & Bulcen, 2000). CDA uncovers discursive practices, which are social practices through which texts and language are produced and consumed. This shapes the way these practices are considered

common-sense and makes other ways of thinking unfeasible. The findings describe the analysis of participants language using CDA using the term linguistic patterns. The term linguistic patterns were chosen to reflect how the reproduction of language, or the patterns within our language and linguistics, creates discourse. Specifically, participant responses were analyzed for specific linguistic patterns to uncover how participants speak and write about sexual violence labels, demonstrating what can and cannot be said about a specific topic, showcasing the existing discourses. Linguistic patterns are displayed within each discursive thread as word clouds and highlight how participants language forms discourse. Additional information about the use of word clouds and their function is presented in Chapter Four.

These core concepts guided the exploration of sexual violence labels using discourse analysis to deconstruct what is known and identify participants' beliefs and values and discursive threads and linguistic patterns among undergraduate students. An in-depth explanation of post-structuralism and core concepts of discourse analysis are described in Chapter Three.

Study Implications

Using poststructuralism and discourse analysis provided an opportunity to discover prominent discourses among university students surrounding sexual violence labels that contribute to beliefs about rape myths and rape culture. This study could have significant implications in the combat against campus sexual violence. Literature on the role of sexual violence labels on personal beliefs and attitudes about sexual violence is significantly lacking. Understanding how the labels we attribute to those who have experienced sexualized violence can help us better address the issue and begin to shift the

discourse to improve outcomes, reduce rape myths, and combat the rape culture that exists in our society. In addition, this study is an initial investigation into an under-researched area, thus, the findings of this study can serve as foundational for future research and lead to increased knowledge of this topic and the formation of updated legislation, health policies, and programming to better assist those who have experienced sexual violence, making this study transformative by design.

Chapter Summary

This research study sought to better understand undergraduate students' beliefs on sexual violence labels and how sexual violence labels may provide useful insight into the reproduction or resistance of discourses centering rape myth acceptance and rape culture. This chapter served to provide a brief over-view of this project and describe the larger study that this thesis is a sub-study. A brief overview of the methodology and methods that will be employed in this study was introduced, followed by the research questions that will be guiding this research. Key concepts for this study were also introduced and defined. The significance of this study concluded Chapter One to provide rationale and potential implications of the findings of this research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

A review of the existing literature was conducted to gain current and historical perspectives of sexual assault, rape myth acceptance, rape culture, and sexual violence labels. This literature review examined studies that had previously explored the impact of sexual violence labels, the impact the specific labels have on those who have experienced sexual assault, and how they shape beliefs and societal understanding that enable rape myth acceptance and rape culture.

Rape Culture

In Canada, health and social policies have repeatedly failed to respond to sexual assault, shown by the unrelenting high rates of sexual assault over the past ten years (Conroy & Cotter, 2014). This neglect is argued to be caused by society's complacency toward sexual assault, contributing to rape culture (Hocket & Saucier, 2015). Rape culture is a theoretical construct that describes a social system where rape is condoned, normalized, excused, and encouraged through normative attitudes, beliefs, and practices (Hermann, 1988, Hocket & Saucier, 2015; O'Neal, 2019). Rape culture facilitates the false belief that sexual assault is an unavoidable part of everyday life (Buchwald et al., 1993; O'Neal, 2019). Herman (1988) argues that rape culture fosters a false belief that the aggression shown in sexual encounters by men is natural, causing sexual assault to be accepted in our society and viewed as a common and inevitable experience.

Rape culture exists at various levels: individual, interpersonal, and institutional (Barnett et al., 2018). Institutionalized support of sexual assault is illustrated by the legal system, as rape culture has a direct impact on the institutionalized disregard of sexual assault (O'Neil, 2019; Nason et al., 2018). Sexual assault cases are typically handled

inadequately in the criminal justice system, resulting in maltreatment from law enforcement that contributes to underreporting of sexual assault and low prosecution rates (O’Neil, 2019; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010; Ullman & Townsend, 2007; Nason et al., 2018). As a result, perpetrators of sexual assault rarely receive a legal sentence, and when convictions occur, they are minimal compared to the long-term negative impacts to the person (Government of Canada, 2017; RAINN, 2020; Fantasia et al., 2015; Hermann et al., 2018; Krause et al., 2018). In a recent survey by Statistics Canada, one in five people who experienced sexual assault felt blamed for their victimization (Cotter & Savage, 2019). In 2014, a Statistics Canada’s self-report survey revealed that 83% of instances of sexual assault that year were not reported to police (Government of Canada, 2017). Equally troubling, less than half of sexual assault cases that are reported in Canada result in the perpetrator receiving a guilty verdict (Government of Canada, 2017). The underreporting and under sentencing of sexual assault is linked to society's normalization of sexual assault and rape culture (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010; Ullman & Townsend, 2007).

The consequences of our society being engrossed in rape culture have been examined through previous research. Rape culture normalizes sexual assault, causing many people who have experienced, by definition, sexual assault to not label their experience as such (Wilson & Miller, 2016). Instead, they tend to use phrases that rationalize their experiences, like “drunk sex”, “miscommunication”, or “bad sex”, with this phenomenon now labeled as unacknowledged sexual assault (Wilson & Miller, 2016). Research suggests that unacknowledged sexual assault is experienced by 40-70% of women (Littleton et al., 2008; Wilson & Miller, 2016). Unacknowledged sexual assault is associated with rape culture, resulting in internalized self-blame, related to

intoxication levels, for example (Wilson & Miller, 2016). Rape culture facilitates the belief that sexual assault is a normal, unavoidable experience (Wilson & Miller, 2016; O'Neal, 2019)

The institutionalized support of rape culture can also be seen on university campuses. Universities' institutional response to sexual assault has received unprecedented scrutiny in recent years for supporting rape culture in their institutions (Quinlan et al., 2017; Ricci & Bergeron, 2019). Universities' responses to sexual assault have been subject to valid criticisms due to their lack of proactiveness and the inadequacy of institutional policies (Ricci & Bergeron, 2019). There is a demand for social norm transformation and strategic resistance against the ongoing sexist social norms among university students' social life (Lewis et al., 2018). Scholars have argued that sexual assault needs to be addressed as a “cultural, political, and historical problem that pervades the same legal, social, and educational institutions seeking to eliminate it” (Garcia & Venmuri, 2017, p.3). Put differently, universities create institutional responses that attempt to reduce sexual violence while being the setting that continues to facilitate sexual violence through normalized social behaviours. For example, Muehlenhard et al. (2013), outlines the aspects of the university experiences that increases the risk of sexual violence and complicate sexual consent communication amongst students. These socio-cultural complexities include high levels of rape myth acceptance amongst university students such as intoxication level and dressing in a way that is deemed provocative, hypermasculine norms and an over-reliance on non-verbal sexual consent communication (Muehlenhard et al., 2013). University responses have failed to address these

complexities and socio-cultural norms within their institutional responses to sexual violence, making them inapplicable and often ineffective.

Rape Myths

Rape culture facilitates the acceptance of rape myths (O'Neal, 2019). Rape culture and rape myths shape and shift attitudes and beliefs about sexual assault. Previous research examining attitudes, opinions, and beliefs of sexual assault has predominately focused on rape myths. Most of the prior research in this area has been quantitative, involving vignettes or scenarios displaying various characteristics of victims and perpetrators to observe how variables influence perceptions of sexual assault (Untied et al., 2020; Nason et al., 2019; Ben-David & Schneider, 2005; Davies et al., 2008; Mazelan, 1980). These studies have found that intoxication level, relationship status, sexual orientation, level of physical resistance, gender, race, and socioeconomic status all influence perceptions of sexual assault (Untied et al., 2020; Nason et al., 2019; Ben-David & Schneider, 2005; Davies et al., 2008; Mazelan, 1980).

Research has overwhelmingly found that men are typically more empathetic toward perpetrators of sexual assault, while women tend to be more empathetic towards the person who experienced sexual assault, suggesting gender plays a prominent role in the endorsements of rape myths (Hockett et al., 2014; Canto et al., 2014; Emmers-Sommer, 2017). Hostility towards women, sexism, and misogyny have also been linked to high rape myth acceptance (Rollero & Tartaglia, 2019). Despite this, research has shown that both men and women are less likely to empathize with a person who has experienced sexual assault if they were described as intoxicated or did not physically resist unwanted advances (Lynch et al., 2013; Grubb & Turner, 2012; Romero-Sanchez et

al., 2087). Overall, people who hold higher endorsements of rape myth acceptance hold more empathy for the perpetrator, and less empathy for the victim, viewing sexual assault as an individual fault (Nason et al., 2019; Lonsway & Fitzgerald; 1994).

While men tend to exhibit higher levels of rape myth acceptance than women, most university students have shown prominent beliefs supporting common rape myths (Powers, 2014; Emmers-Sommer, 2017). Rape myths change and adapt to cultural and societal norms (O'Connor et al., 2018). While explicit and blatant rape myths such as the "she lied" narrative are becoming less socially accepted in society, subtle rape myths prevail, particularly among university students (O'Connor et al., 2018; McMahon & Farmer, 2011, Burt, 1980). Subtle rape myths are often described as 'situational aspects' including intoxication level, accepting a drink, flirting, dancing, and dressing provocatively, which are all commonly cited rape myths supported by university students (Carroll et al., 2016; McMahon; 2007).

Sexual Violence “Victims” and “Survivors”

There is an ongoing debate in society and amongst scholars about how to refer to someone who has experienced sexual assault (Schwark & Bohner, 2019). The term “victim” is well situated in the media and is the common term used in existing academic literature (Schwark & Bohner, 2019). Despite the term's popularity, using "victim" to describe someone who has experienced sexual violence has been criticized. Scholars believe that the term “victim” is associated with negative personal characteristics and is affiliated with victim-blaming (Schwark & Bohner, 2019; Franiuk et al., 2008; Hockett et al., 2014). Because of this, it has been suggested that using the term “victim” can have

negative effects on those who experienced sexual assault (Schwark & Bohner, 2019; Franiuk et al., 2008; Hockett et al., 2014).

In response to these criticisms, the term “survivor” emerged, which was first described within feminist discourse by Kelly et al. (1996). In their paper, Kelly et al. (1996) emphasized the need to shift viewing women who have experienced sexual assault as passive victims and refocus to seeing them as active survivors (Kelly, 1996). This perspective aligns with feminist theorists’ typical rejection of framing the oppression of women in terms of victimhood to highlight women’s resistance and agency instead (Convery, 2006). The labels “victim” and “survivor” have different connotations, which influence the perceived identities of the people who have experienced sexual assault (Setia et al., 2020; Van Dijk, 2009; Hockett & Saucier, 2015). This is crucial because language is not neutral. Language reflects our perceptions, biases, and prejudices, particularly when describing someone who has experienced sexual assault (Petemelj-Taylor, 2015). Thus, the language we use to talk and write about sexual assault has inherent and often hidden influence (Bohner, 2001). Through a poststructuralist lens, discourse moves beyond individuals’ words to include things that are not spoken. Scott (1991) theorized that a person does not have experiences, but that historical discourses shape one’s beliefs, values, and practices. Put simply, a person’s beliefs and attitudes about sexual violence labels are exemplifying the various discourses within the societies that they live.

While the literature on sexual violence labels is limited, prior studies have sought to examine the importance and effects of our language when discussing sexual assault. Bohner (2001) examined how the language used when describing sexual assault is linked

to victim-blaming. Participants watched a vignette of a sexual assault scenario and wrote a description of what they saw. Bohner (2001) found that the use of the passive voice when describing sexual assault normalizes the perpetrators' actions, compared to the use of an active voice in their descriptions. Further, Bohner (2001) found that the use of passive voice was linked to rape-myth acceptance and victim-blaming. Sexual violence labels used in media has also been shown to influence societal perceptions on rape myths and promote victim-blaming, highlighting how the language we use can have significant implications at a societal level (Franiuk et al., 2008).

Sexual Violence Labels

Some research has examined the specific influence of labels assigned to people who experience sexual assault. A recent study conducted by Schwark & Bohner (2019) studied the impact of photographs illustrating either victims or survivors on the implicit judgement of sexual assault. Their findings revealed that women shown in 'survivor' pictures were viewed more positively than women appearing in the 'victim' pictures (Schwark & Bohner, 2019). This finding is supported by the research of Hockett et al. (2014), who found that people associate the term "victim" with more negative characteristics, such as having fewer coping skills, compared to the term "survivor". Another study by the same author found that while the term "victim" is often associated with negative characteristics, labelling someone as a victim of sexual assault often facilitates more compassion and empathy (Hockett & Saucier, 2015). A recent study by Setia et al. (2020) recognized this complexity and examined whether sexual violence labels contributed to a gendered double standard. The study found that adjectives associated with survivor including dominant, confident, active, brave, and strong, were

seen as positive characteristics for men, but considered negative when these characteristics are held by women, further highlighting the complexity of the term “survivor” (Setia et al., 2020).

Previous research has also aimed to understand what influences self-labelling as a victim or a survivor, after experiencing sexual assault. A prominent study conducted by Thompson (2000), interviewed women who had recently experienced sexual assault and did not seek professional support to understand self-labelling as either a victim or survivor and their associated implications. Labels resulted in different meanings for different women and were conflicting (Thompson, 2000). To minimize the impact sexual assault had on their lives, some women preferred to be called a victim (Thompson, 2000). Thompson (2000) also found that women commonly refer to themselves as a survivor to people they know and trust and refer to themselves as a victim to an unknown man, showing that women may change their self-label depending on the situation. The term “survivor” was associated with recovery, making women feel unable to talk about their experiences (Thompson, 2000). Thompson (2000) argued that for women to speak about their experiences, they must assume the role of a victim, however, they risk being viewed as weak and vulnerable. In comparison, a recently published study by Levy & Eckhaus (2020), found that self-labelling as a survivor after experiencing sexual assault was positively correlated with faith, religiosity, improved wellbeing, and functioning over time.

Sexual violence labels have also been thought to influence the perceived severity of the sexual assault. Papendick & Boher (2017) sought to examine how the terms “survivor” and “victim” influenced the perceived severity of the sexual assault in both

men and women. Participants were asked to read various vignettes and rate the meaning of the label it contained, either victim or survivor (Papendick & Boher, 2017). Their findings revealed gendered differences among the perceptions of the two labels. Men were more influenced by labels than women and perceived “survivors” to be associated with the increased severity of the sexual assault. Conversely, women perceived the term “victim” to be associated with increased severity of the sexual assault compared to using the term “survivor”. This finding demonstrates that like rape myth acceptance, perceptions of sexual violence labels may also be influenced by gender.

Critique of the Literature

While several studies explore sexual violence labels and their implications, more research is needed to provide a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon. First, the existing literature is overwhelmingly quantitative (Setia et al., 2020; Hockett et al, 2014; Schwark & Bohner, 2019; Bohner; 2001; Franiuk et al., 2008; Levy & Echhaus, 2020; Papendick & Bohner, 2017). There have also been systematic reviews and meta-analyses regarding sexual violence labels (Hockett & Saucier, 2015), however, there remains a lack of studies collecting primary data, particularly qualitative data. Only one study reviewed used a qualitative approach; however, it was published more than twenty years ago (Thompson, 2000). This is a significant gap in the existing literature, which this study aims to address by employing a qualitative methodology of post-structural discourse analysis.

This study aimed to understand the current discourses on sexual violence labels among undergraduate students. In addition, rape myth acceptance and rape culture have previously been linked to personal beliefs about sexual violence labels, but more research

is needed to understand the associated implications further (Papendick & Boher, 2017; Schwark & Bohner, 2019). This study provides a strong addition to the existing body of literature in this field. Contemporary qualitative studies are needed on sexual violence labels as literature has shown beliefs on sexual assault shift based on fluid socio-cultural norms (O'Connor et al., 2018).

While the reviewed research provides insight into the topic, a more in-depth exploration of beliefs and values is needed. Several studies only focused on the media's use of victim and survivor and the implications of labelled photographs (Schwark & Bohner, 2019; Franiuk et al., 2008). Others focused on factors associated with self-labelling with either victim or survivor by those who have experienced sexual assault (Thompson, 2000; Levy & Eckhaus, 2020). There is a need to understand the attitudes and beliefs on this topic outside of those who have experienced sexual assault, to understand how society views and supports sexual assault (Papendick & Bohner, 2017). This study employed a Critical FPS approach to examine beliefs on sexual violence labels, and consider the potential personal, social, and institutional consequences of language.

Current research focuses primarily on women's self-labelling, excluding the experiences of men, non-binary people, and other gender-diverse peoples' who have experienced sexual assault (Thompson, 2000; Setia et al., 2020; Levy & Eckhaus, 2020). Similarly, academic literature has focused on those who identify as heterosexual, failing to acknowledge the sexual experiences of LGBTQ2S+ people. This exclusion is a significant limitation as it is known that persons who identify as LGBTQ2S+ are nine times more likely to experience sexual assault compared to non-LGBTQ2S+ people in

Canada (Simpson, 2018). Because this group is overrepresented in sexual assault statistics, we should not be eliminating their voice and excluding them from studies that aim to reduce sexual assault. The exclusion of LGBTQ2S+ creates a gendered and heteronormative view of sexual assault, supporting the common rape myth that sexual assault can only be experienced by heterosexual, cisgender women and perpetrated by heterosexual, cisgender men (Tarzia et al., 2017). Therefore, there was no exclusion criteria based on demographic information in this study.

Chapter Summary

Existing literature indicates that rape culture exists in our society, resulting in sexual assault being normalized and supported in various institutions, including university campuses. Rape culture on university campuses facilitates the acceptance of rape myths, a set of beliefs that view sexual assault as an individual fault. Previous studies have found a link between people's beliefs of sexual assault based on whether the person is labelled as a “victim” or “survivor” in the media or in personal conversations. Additionally, prior studies found that people who have experienced sexual assault have different beliefs about their sexual assault and their recovery depending on if they self-label as a “victim” or as a “survivor”. The literature supports that sexual violence labels can impact people’s beliefs of sexual assault and those beliefs can contribute to rape culture and rape myth acceptance. This chapter concluded with a critique of the existing literature, providing rationale for this research study and how this study contributes to advancing current knowledge on this topic.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods

This chapter details the methodology and methods that will be used to answer the following research questions:

1. What are undergraduate students' beliefs about the term's 'survivor' and 'victim' to describe someone who has experienced sexual violence?
2. What are the language and linguistic patterns used by undergraduate students to discuss sexual violence labels?
3. What are the potential interrelationships between beliefs on sexual violence labels and wider social discourses on sexual violence among undergraduate students?

This chapter begins by describing the researcher's positionality in the study, leading into the researcher's interest in the study topic. Following this, the chapter will describe the conceptual framework that will inform this study, such as the paradigm (transformativism) and strategy of inquiry (poststructuralism). Next, the chapter will provide an overview of the study, including the study population, inclusion criteria, and recruitment. The procedure for data collection is then described, followed by the techniques of data analysis using discourse analysis. The steps to ensure the quality and rigor of the study and the ethical considerations that have been taken to ensure the confidentiality and informed consent of study participants are then outlined.

Positionality in the Research

Qualitative philosophical underpinnings encourage the researcher to conduct the study in the field to "minimize the distance between himself or herself and those being researched" (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 21). This meets the participants where they are,

provides context to what participants say, and gives the researcher insight into the existing social and cultural norms. This was achieved through my positionality in the research. I recently graduated with an undergraduate degree and am now a graduate student; I have first-hand knowledge of the socio-cultural complexities that exist regarding sexual violence on university campuses. My position to the researcher and my interest in the research topic will be discussed further in the next section of this chapter.

Qualitative research advocates for the researcher to bring their values based on their social position and personal experiences to the forefront (Creswell & Poth, 2016). As a white, cisgender, heterosexual woman pursuing higher education, I recognize that my privilege and lived experience influenced how I interpreted the data. Likewise, using discourse analysis, I understand how my position in a professional and academic discourse shapes my way of thinking, and ultimately my understanding and analysis of the data. While this is acknowledged, it is not a limitation of the study, as qualitative research recognizes that the researcher's presence is inherent in the text as much as the subject of study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The researchers' positionality can be mediated through the disclosure of the researcher's role, and how prior experiences, perceptions, and beliefs may influence the interpretation of the findings. Positioning yourself in the research and recognizing how your previous knowledge and experiences can influence your perception can be a strength while conducting poststructuralist discourse analysis (Aston, 2016). Throughout data analysis, I was conscious of how my experiences, opinions, biases, and assumptions influence my interpretation of the results to achieve confirmability. In addition, evidence from participants written responses was used to support my interpretation of the data.

Researcher's Interest in Topic

As a child and into my adolescence, when asked what I wanted to do when I grew up, my response of wanting to enter the health field was unchanging and confident. This enthusiasm for health resulted in me pursuing my Bachelor of Science in Health Promotion degree at Dalhousie University. I became passionate about the field of health promotion and eager to be involved in my department and on campus. I was an active member of multiple student societies, where my interest in social justice and advocacy for students flourished.

I began a position with Keep it Social, a campus harm reduction initiative aimed to decrease harms associated with student drinking, attempting to shift the current drinking culture on university campuses. As part of this role, I promoted and had discussions with students about safe sexual consent practices, and the complexities of sexual consent and alcohol consumption, and provided condoms as a form of harm reduction to reduce unintended sexual health outcomes such as sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy. These conversations with students highlighted the need to promote sexual health on university campuses to shift the cultural norms relating to sexual consent and sexual violence. Many students did not believe that obtaining clear sexual consent was required during all sexual encounters and thought that it was the responsibility of the other party to stop the encounter if they were not comfortable, demonstrating support for common rape myths and the presence of rape culture. Here, I began to become interested in the common discourses on university campuses pertaining to rape myths and rape culture.

During my undergraduate degree, I began an Honours thesis with Dr. Matthew Numer, a sexual health and gender researcher in the Department of Health and Human Performance at Dalhousie University, concurrently with my role in Keep it Social. My role with Keep it Social encouraged me to request Dr. Numer to supervise my honours research, because I wanted to pursue my interest in sexual health further. My honours thesis explored undergraduate university students' attitudes, opinions, beliefs, practices, and conceptualizations of verbal sexual consent. My honours thesis revealed many socio-cultural norms that exist on university campuses about sexual consent and sexual violence. I wanted to understand these norms further. Having been an undergraduate student at Dalhousie University, I am personally aware of the socio-cultural norms that exist surrounding sex, sexual consent, and sexual violence on campuses. This first-hand knowledge also contributes to my interest in this research topic. My goal for conducting this research was to improve the outcomes of other university students and contribute to making university campuses a safe place for students to learn and grow.

Conceptual Framework

The paradigm that I chose to situate myself with is the transformative worldview. The transformative worldview arose in the late 1980s when scholars' felt that traditional worldviews did not address the needs of marginalized people in our society, nor issues of power, social justice, discrimination, and oppression (Creswell, 2014). Mertens (2009, P.3) describes the transformative paradigm is an “overarching metaphysical framework” adopted by researchers who feel that traditional research methodologies lack focus on social justice and social change”. There is no specific body of literature that characterizes this worldview, but it draws upon groups of researchers and overlaps with other

worldviews such as feminist theories, Marxist theories, and those conducting participatory action research (Creswell, 2014). Researchers situating themselves within a transformative paradigm view research as political and aim to examine how experiences of oppression and inequities relate to power (Creswell, 2014). The research must engage in active and political change (Mertens, 2009). This was the goal of this research project. Sexual violence is inherently a political issue and needs political response to make meaningful change.

I believe that a transformative worldview is the best paradigm for this research examining sexual violence and sexual violence labels because these topics are important social issues that continue to be ignored by our society, causing those who have experienced sexual violence to experience inequities, oppression, and alienation. Using this worldview allowed me to observe why these problems exist and how personal beliefs reinforce these discourses. This worldview is an ideal fit for this research because it aligns with poststructuralism, the strategy of inquiry for this research. Both the transformative paradigm and poststructuralism aim to examine how power influences experiences and knowledge (Creswell, 2014; Downing, 2008; Hesse-Biber, 2007). Using both approaches allowed me to examine university student's beliefs on sexual violence labels and examine the link between these beliefs and institutional systems, with the goal of creating knowledge to foster change within those systems.

Ensuring this work was transformative was a top priority. The study design was created with the belief that knowledge is political, and recognizing that experiences are shaped by existing social, political, and historical discourses. This research lays an important foundation for future work in this field that will generate increased

understanding and knowledge that is needed to produce political movements and political change. To ensure the information gained from this study will assist social inequities and produce change within the university institutional systems, a knowledge translation plan was created to disseminate the findings of this study through university and community collaboration. The complete knowledge translation plan is presented in Chapter Six, the discussion chapter of this thesis.

Strategy of Inquiry – Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism was chosen as the strategy of inquiry of this study.

Poststructuralism examines people as a subject of discourse. Poststructuralism is broadly defined as the study of how knowledge and knowledge systems are produced and reproduced (Doering, 1992.) Poststructuralism aims to examine, disrupt, and deconstruct discourses between subjects and power (Weedon, 1987). To achieve this, poststructuralism focuses on several central domains: language, discourse, subjectivity, and power (Downing, 2008). This study was situated based on these core elements of Foucauldian poststructuralist theory and are outlined below.

Language.

Language is shaped by our understanding of the world based on our social, historical, and institutional contexts, which shape meaning (Weedon, 1987).

Poststructuralism argues that language, or the words we use, do not have permanent meaning (Arslanian–Engoren, 2002). From this point of view, language has different meanings depending on our position in society. Meaning is consisted within our language and is created through our everyday communication and conversations (Davies, 1997). The different ways that meaning is produced through language is commonly referred to

as discourse in poststructuralist thought. Poststructural research aims to examine the way that language and discourse work to construct reality (Agger, 1991; Aston, 2016; Cheek 2000). This was the goal of adopting this strategy of inquiry.

Discourse.

Discourse can be described as a set of beliefs that are created, understood, and reinforced through the daily practices that frame our daily actions (Barrett, 2005; Weedon, 2004). Foucault describes discourse as the intersection between knowledge and power and the language that they form in different spaces (Downing, 2008). For example, what can be said in one space cannot always be said in another. Discourse is shaped through the reproduction of language which causes specific ways of knowing to become normalized. Discourse provides significance to the meaning we attach to our language and the words we use. Discourse shapes our values, beliefs, thoughts, and actions through language practices (Barrett, 2005). In other words, discourse is the collection of thoughts about a particular topic that produces people's experiences.

Identity and Subjectivity.

From a poststructural perspective, the concept of a person's identity is challenged. Poststructuralism does not view identity as fixed, but ever-changing as discourses change and shift, causing people to be constantly produced from the influence of discourse (Foucault, 1995; Weedon, 1987; Davis, 1997). People's identities are produced through various social and historical contexts known through discourse, framed by societal norms (Weedon, 1987). Given the nuance poststructuralism offers to the concept of identity, the term is redefined as subjectivity or subjectivities. Through this lens, we seek to

understand how specific language, and, in turn, discourse can produce different subject positions based on the term's "survivor" or "victim" of sexual violence.

Poststructuralism views meaning and subjectivity as negotiated through language and scripted within a cultural, social, and political context (Numer & Gahagan, 2009). Subjectivity refers to our sense of self and ways of understanding our relationship with the world (Weedon, 1987). Subjectivity is determined based on our view of the world and society based on societal powers that give meaning to ideologies, such as language (Weedon, 1987; Arslanian–Engoren, 2002). For example, people who have experienced sexual violence have historically been labelled a victim, based on existing discourse. Some people could not find subject position in the term "victim" causing the term "survivor" to emerge to form new subjectivities. Subject positions illustrate how discourse creates categories of identity for people to occupy (Weedon, 1987; Davis, 1997). In some instances, those who have experienced sexual violence do not find subject positions in either of the term's "victim" or "survivor", which causes tension in the discourse on sexual violence labels.

Power.

Power is central to poststructuralist theory. Power is relational and is always being negotiated (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Power is not possessed by one person or group, but is situational and constantly shifting (Downing, 2008). Foucault argues that power is elusive and therefore suggests we focus on knowledge and how it is created, as he suggests that knowledge forms the creation of power (Foucault 1980, 1995). Identifying power relations using poststructuralism allows for the examination of language, and the social factors that create knowledge (Agger, 1991; Cheek, 2000; Weedon; 1987).

Because discourse is formed based on existing knowledge, if we determine how knowledge is curated, we will understand how power is working in different contexts. Examining power relations has the potential to identify strategies for change and disrupt the dominant discourses and power relations that influence social knowledge. Using poststructuralism in this study may help challenge the societal norms surrounding rape myths and rape culture that are exacerbated by sexual violence labels. For example, institutions influence our knowledge about a subject, and thus, influence what is both known and knowable about subjects and experience.

Social & Institutional Discourses.

Discussions of sexual assault take place in various institutions, but often with competing discourses. As previously mentioned, institutional responses to sexual assault in various domains including universities, criminal justice systems, and health care have repeatedly been found to be inadequate and often harmful (Conroy & Cotter, 2014; O'Neil, 2019; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010; Ullman & Townsend, 2007; Nason et al., 2018). Policies are examples of institutional discourse, created based on available information. Policies outline what can or cannot be done or said within an institution, based on existing discourse. People within these institutions try to understand, follow, and compete with these discourses. Institutional agendas influence the knowledge being circulated into the public, which impacts what is known and creates dominance within discourse. For example, university campus policies have competing discourses on sexual violence. In the past, universities have ignored and failed to respond to the sexual violence occurring in their institutions. This created discourses in support of rape culture to normalize and condone sexual violence (O'Connor et al., 2018). People began to resist this discourse,

causing universities to respond by incorporating renewed sexual violence policies on university campuses, such as affirmative consent policies, more commonly referred to as the ‘yes means yes’ sexual consent movements (O’Connor et al., 2018; Jozkowski, 2015). While a notable attempt to address rape culture on university campuses, it does not address the existing discourses centering how university students communicate sexual consent (Jozkowski, 2015). For example, in a traditional heterosexual sexual encounter, to avoid a refusal to their sexual advances, men will often not ask direct permission, removing the opportunity to for a woman to say “yes” (Jozkowski, 2015; Willis & Jozkowski, 2018). This supports the common rape myth that an absence of a verbal no constitutes consent (Bogle, 2014).

These examples illustrate tensions among common discourses on university campuses among students regarding sexual practices. Employing a poststructural approach provided the opportunity to further explore the existing societal and institutional discourses on sexual violence labels, and the tensions within those discourses. This study analyzed how beliefs on sexual violence labels influenced beliefs on rape myth acceptance and rape culture and examined how institutional agendas are generating knowledge and discourse in North American universities.

Critical Feminist Poststructuralism

Participants’ responses were analyzed using a blended approach to a Foucauldian conceptual framework of discourse analysis, adopting from both Weedon FSP and Fairclough’s CDA approaches (Fairclough, 2001, Fairclough 2013; Weedon, 1987). Foucault rejects the notion of conducting a systematic method to discourse analysis, and avoids prescribing a specific method (Graham, 2005). Instead, the researcher is free to

interpret Foucault's work and adopt facets of various frameworks. This allows the researcher to replace the search for a singular truth and explore the effects of discourse (Graham, 2005). As such, I combined elements from multiple discourse analysis methods, creating a blended approach which I labeled "critical feminist-poststructuralism", herein referred to as Critical FPS.

Combining discourse analysis frameworks provided reflexivity to this research project because using one fixed approach may contribute to inaccurately interpreting the data. For example, in the feminist post-structuralist framework to discourse analysis, Aston (2016) examines how a participant's beliefs and values on a topic influence their practice. For the purposes of this study, identifying participants' practices does not align with the data because the prompt did not ask participants for their practices, but insighted discussion around their perceptions, beliefs, opinions, and attitudes. Because of this, participant's practices did not emerge from the data. Speculating or theorizing participants' practices based on students' perceptions of sexual violence labels can create researcher bias and negatively impact the findings of this study, making this step in Aston's approach non-applicable.

Alternatively, CDA examines language through broader social and political significance to explore how language reflects and creates realities (Poole, 2010). Fairclough's (2001, 2013) CDA framework holds that discourse is created from the (re)production of language (Boutain, 1999; Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). CDA encourages researchers to assess how participants speak and write about a topic and consider how the re-production of language informs and shapes wider processes within society, creating discourse (Boutain, 1999; Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Because the

data were previously generated and collected electronically, this element of Fairclough's approach to CDA fit well with the structure of this study. Examining participants' language from their written responses highlighted existing discourse. Language is a form of social practice that is tied to specific historical contexts that reproduce social relations and relations of power (Janks, 1997); Thus, repeated phrases, words, and structures reveal the current knowledge of sexual violence labels.

Creating the critical FPS approach ensured that methodological congruency was achieved and allowed me to tailor my analysis to my research questions and achieve the overall purpose of this study. I included 5-steps to the critical FPS framework, which brought forth multiple points of analytic entry and provided the opportunity to examine interconnections of how discourse on sexual violence labels is produced and reproduced among undergraduate students. A detailed explanation of the analytic process using critical FPS discourse analysis is discussed in a later section of this chapter.

Larger Research Study

This research project used previously generated qualitative data that had not yet been analyzed. The original project titled, *Educational Technology and Research Design: An exploratory mixed-methods study on predictors of undergraduate students' attitudes, opinions and beliefs on sexuality* was led by Dr. Matthew Numer and explored undergraduate university students' attitudes, opinions, values, beliefs, and practices about sex, gender, and sexuality. Data were collected from undergraduate students attending two similar-sized universities, one located in Canada, and one located in the United States. In the larger study, data was collected using a mixed-methods approach, employing two survey instruments and ten open-response questions to generate written

qualitative responses. One survey collected quantitative data on students' beliefs of sexual consent and sexual violence, and the other collected students' demographic information. The open-response questions were posed to students at the beginning of the sexual assault and sexual orientation chapters in the Top Hat textbook, respectively. Each chapter in the Top Hat textbook began with several open-response questions to allow students the opportunity to reflect on their personal beliefs and attitudes on a wide-range topics focusing on sexual health, sexuality, and gender. These questions were only for participation marks and were not graded or reviewed by the instructor or teaching assistants. Students' responses were submitted electronically within the Top Hat textbook; however, students could not view other students' submissions, making their responses anonymous. Additional information about the recruitment, consent, and structure of collecting data will be discussed in later sections of this chapter.

Current Study

Of the 603 students who consented to participate in the larger research project, there were 101 students from the American university and 117 students from the Canadian university who responded to the prompt about sexual violence labels. The 218 participants' responses comprise the data analyzed in this study. This research is a sub-study of the larger research project. I analyzed the undergraduate students' written responses to one open-response textbook question: *What is your view about the use of the word "survivor" instead of "victim" to describe those who have experienced sexual coercion or sexualized violence?* This question was not analyzed nor included in the original study. Researchers on the original study perceived this question to be distinct from the other questions posed to students in the sexual assault chapter because the other

questions focused specifically on students' beliefs, values, and practices of giving and getting sexual consent. It is true that sexualized violence and sexual consent are inextricable because sexual violence is defined as the absence of sexual consent during a sexual encounter, however, there are differing institutional and social discourses surrounding these topics, causing students beliefs and values of sexualized violence and sexual consent to be distinct. For this reason, the question that was not analyzed and removed from the data set from the original project, allowing for it to be analyzed and used for the purposes of this study.

Because this is a sub-study, I used previously collected data collected by the larger research team. Using previously generated data is a cost-effective and feasible approach to answer timely research questions, and capitalize on existing resources, making it an ideal fit for a master's thesis (Heaton, 2008; Pullishy, 2016).

Population

At the beginning of the semester, the 623 students participating in the larger research project completed an online questionnaire with prompts about their age, gender, sexual orientation, and relationship status. Quantitative data were collected to broadly view and summarize attitudes and opinions, and qualitative methods were used to acknowledge researchers position and bias more thoroughly and explore university students' beliefs, values, and opinions. Beliefs and values are created based on who we are and what we experience, thus, quantitative data gave unique insights into specific characteristics of the population of this study, highlighting certain social determinants that may have a role in the development of participant's beliefs and values towards sexual violence labels. Once descriptive statistics were collected, they were anonymized, so

specific demographic information about the 218 participants included in this study is unknown.

Project participants' ages ranged from 17 to 50, with a median age of 20 and an average age of 20. Participants identified as female (n = 381; 63.2%) and male (n = 222; 36.8%). Most identified as heterosexual/straight (n = 493; 81.8%), though others identified as bisexual (n = 42; 7.0%), gay/lesbian (n = 29; 4.8%), asexual (n = 7; 1.2%), queer (n = 3; 0.5%), and other (n = 28; 4.6%). Over half were single (n = 354; 58.7%), while the rest were in a relationship (n = 249; 41.3%). Participants self-identified their race and selected all options that applied, so the following percentages are greater than 100. Participants identified as White (n = 316; 52.4%), Asian (n = 267; 44.3%), Hispanic/Latin American (n = 29; 4.8%), Pacific Islander (n = 28; 4.6%), Black (n = 21; 3.5%), Arab/Middle Eastern (n = 13; 2.2%), Aboriginal (n = 10; 1.7%), and other (n = 4; 0.6%).

The study population was undergraduate students enrolled in sexuality courses at two separate universities. Students from a Canadian university sample were enrolled in a fourth-year Human Sexuality course, and students from the American university sample were enrolled in a second-year Psychology of Sexuality course. Both courses are considered electives, meaning that all students are eligible to enroll, and allowed for a diverse undergraduate student population of varying disciplines, years, and backgrounds. Both courses provide students with a comprehensive understanding of human sexuality, including elements of biological, cultural, ethical, historical, psychological, and religious aspects of sex and sexuality. Each course enrolls large numbers of students, reaching upwards of 500-700 undergraduate students.

It is important to note that while undergraduate students enrolled in a Canadian and American university may not identify with those nationalities (e.g., international students), this study is focusing on the discourses that emerge in participants' responses that attend North American universities. The goal of this research was not to evaluate or examine the continuities or discontinuities of institutional discourses and participant discourses, but to examine participants' beliefs and values on sexual violence labels which could then give insight into societal discourses, as beliefs are a construct of the spaces in which people occupy. I provide my own theorizations of the potential societal impacts and consequences of the threads of discourse presented in participants' responses, steeped in my own beliefs and understandings, what is known from past research, feminist theories and poststructuralist thought. Poststructuralist studies aim to move beyond only identifying dominant discourses, but also serve to explore the complexities within them, and how they inform experience and consider alternative discourses (Numer & Gahagan, 2009).. Further, the purpose of this study was not to compare the two data sets, but to have a holistic view of North American university student's beliefs and values and examine the emergence of discourse in the large student sample.

Inclusion

Students were eligible to be included in this study if they were enrolled in the Human Sexuality course or Psychology of Sexuality course at their respective university. Students must have also been registered for the online learning platform Top Hat and must have been using the Top Hat class textbook, which was a requirement for all students enrolled in the courses. A detailed explanation and rationale for this inclusion

criterion will be described in the data collection section. To be included in the study, participants must have provided informed consent for their survey responses or open-response answers to be used for research purposes. Participants could choose whether they wanted to answer either of the surveys, the open-response questions, or both. Consent was sought separately for both the survey and open-response questions; thus, inclusion criteria did not require students to complete all components. These criteria will be described in detail in the data collection section. Finally, to ensure that all undergraduate student's beliefs, perceptions, and conceptualizations were captured, all participants who were registered in their respective courses were eligible to participate, regardless of the demographic information they provided.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited as part of the larger research study. Recruitment was conducted by the lead teaching assistants in each course. The research project was first introduced to the students in the course syllabus. Verbal recruitment was also done by the lead teaching assistant twice throughout each course. Electronic participant recruitment was also conducted through online announcements on each course learning management system (e.g., Brightspace, Blackboard). To show appreciation for students' participation in the research, students were eligible to enter a draw for one of three \$100 Visa gift cards. To be eligible for the draw, students were required to have completed both the surveys and the open-response questions.

Data Collection

Data were collected electronically using the Top Hat system that houses the course's required textbook. The open-response questions were part of the course load for each

class. Students were obligated to answer the questions for course participation marks; however, they were not obligated to have their responses used as part of the research study. As part of the requirements of the courses, open-response questions are placed at the beginning of each chapter, requiring students to reflect on their beliefs and critically respond to each prompt before reading the chapter contents. The open-response questions that were used for research purposes for the larger study were situated in the sexual assault and sexual orientation chapters of the textbook. Because both courses use the same online textbook, the same open-response questions were embedded in each chapter. Students enrolled in both the Canadian and American university samples are included in this sub-study. The larger study collected data from a total of ten open-response questions across the two chapters at both locations. This study used data collected through the open response question: “*What is your view about the use of the word "survivor" instead of "victim" to describe those who have experienced sexual coercion or sexualized violence?*” situated in the sexual assault chapter of the online textbook. The question was phrased in this way to have students reflect on their beliefs of both labels. This way, I was able to view the discourses that exist for each distinct label.

Because students were not obligated to have their responses used for research purposes, informed consent was collected. A detailed explanation of consent and ethical considerations taken in the larger project to ensure the ethical collection of data will be detailed later in this chapter. Ultimately, 118 Dalhousie students and 101 Washington students provided consent to have their responses used for research purposes. Together, 219 students’ responses from the one open-response textbook question were analyzed in this study. Data are not stratified by university, as the goal of this study was not to

compare the two data sets, but to examine the emerged discourses about sexual violence labels from a large group of undergraduate students.

Data Analysis

Undergraduate students' written responses to one open-response textbook question about sexual violence labels was analyzed using a critical FPS approach to discourse analysis. This approach was used to answer the posed research questions guiding this study:

1. What are undergraduate students' beliefs about the term's 'survivor' and 'victim' to describe someone who has experienced sexual violence?
2. What are the language and linguistic patterns used by undergraduate students to discuss sexual violence labels?
3. What are the potential interrelationships between beliefs on sexual violence labels and wider social discourses on sexual violence among undergraduate students?

Discourse analysis is a methodology used for the purpose of analyzing text to interpret how language, at a given time and place, is used to reflect reality and construct it to be certain way (Gee, 2005). Discourse analysis was used to discover beliefs, values, and power relations that were present in the data set, moving beyond common-sense and challenged everyday realities (Aston et al., 2014; Aston, 2016; Cheek, 2000). This analysis approach is underpinned by the notion of "language as a meaning constituting system which is both historically and socially situated" (Cheek & Rudge, 1994, p. 59). Discourse analysis situates texts in social, cultural, political, and historical contexts

(Cheek, 2000). Discourse analysis is ideal for text analysis, as its purpose is to analyze how language reflects reality and understand the conditions in which different perspectives and experiences are produced to challenge everyday realities (Gee, 2005; Harper, 1995; Aston, 2016). Data was analyzed using a multi-method approach that I created by adopting elements from CDA (Fairclough, 2001; 2013), FPS (Weedon, 1987) and Aston’s (2016) guide to discourse analysis informed by FPS. I labeled this approach as Critical FPS. See Table 1 for the guide I created to analyze the data using Critical FPS, outlining the steps of data analysis.

Table 1

A guide to Critical Feminist Poststructuralism informed by Discourse Analysis.

1. Analyze the Text as Discourse	Read the transcript and highlight/make notes of how the text is put together linguistically. Make notes on features of the text e.g., participants grammar, vocabulary being used, flow of ideas (where they start and where they end), and associations. Consider how discourse is activated through the text.
2. Identify Important Issues	Read the transcript and mark quotations you feel represent an important issue. Name the issue as you see it.
3. Identify Participants Beliefs & Values	Provide the quotation (cut and paste) and write something about the Belief & Value presented with the quotation.
4. Discursive Practices	Write about the discourses the author relies on (social and institutional discourses) to create the text. Consider how this this informs the important issues you identified.
5. Responding to Relations of Power	Identify any conflicts you see in the text. How does the discourse reproduce social order and how does it cause a rupture in it? Consider how it restructures social order and what the social consequences of this are.

Below, I outline each step of Critical FPS, and the analytic process I took to accomplish them. To create this framework, I adapted from the Feminist Poststructuralist framework created by Aston (2016). I removed several steps of this framework, including

steps to identify participants practices, and participant's subjectivity. These steps were removed because the collected data from the one open-response question did not yield enough information to gain these insights, making these steps inapplicable. Instead, elements of CDA were included to analysis the text as discourse and discover linguistic patterns to uncover discourses about sexual violence labels.

Discourse analysis was chosen because it allowed me to examine the texts to view the intended and “unintended” messaging, both contributing to dominant discourses (Poole, 2010). Fairclough describes this as looking at the text as discourse in his framework of CDA. The “text” for this study was the participants written responses to the open-response question. Unlike the Aston (2016) framework, CDA does not have a specific framework outlining the steps to conduct a CDA study. Because of this, I reviewed literature on CDA to inform the first step of my analytical process. To examine the text as discourse, I read participants written responses and made notes on how the text is put together linguistically, such as participants grammar, vocabulary, flow of ideas, and associations. During this step, I looked for repeated patterns, statements and words that gave meaning to issues related to my research questions to gain my own understanding of how the linguistic structure of the data, this resulted in specific linguistic patterns being identified and used for the findings of this study. This step is steeped in the belief that discourse and what is known about a topic is created from the re-production of language (Boutain, 1999; Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Fairclough describes this as considering the larger social influence by analyzing the assumptions and selective language that would perhaps go unnoticed and are considered “common-sense” in the contemporary world to reveal discourse (Poole, 2010). The linguistic patterns inform the threads of

discourse outlined in the findings chapters by highlight the language used by participants. Linguistic patterns are presented using word clouds under each discursive thread, organized by sub-threads, and separated by sexual violence label. This structure was chosen to easily view the distinct language used for each label. Additional information about word clouds is presented in Chapter Four.

After critically analyzing the text linguistically, I explored what was known about sexual violence labels to further examine the dominant discourse among undergraduate students. To achieve, this I drew from the Aston (2016) FPS discourse analysis framework. The first step in Aston's framework is for the researcher to identify important issues in the data. Aston suggests placing quotations around important issues as they emerge and naming the issue as the researcher sees it (Aston, 2016). This step allowed me to extend beyond how the text was formed linguistically and explore common threads of discourses among participants to reveal their beliefs and values around sexual violence labels.

Beliefs and values are central domains of post structural theory (Aston, 2016). In poststructural philosophies, individuals' beliefs and values are shaped by experiences that are illustrative of historical and social discourses. From this standpoint, beliefs and values about sexual violence labels are formed by the dominant discourses of the society that individuals occupy. NVivo (version 12.6) was used to code important issues in the text. Once the data was coded, participant, quotes were then organized in Microsoft Excel where the specific beliefs and values that comprised each quote were theorized.

In Fairclough's CDA framework, researchers are urged to write about the institutional and social discourses the author (i.e., participant) relies on to create the text

and form their written response. CDA is anchored in the belief that language derives social meanings (Boutain, 1999). In this project, I discovered the interrelation between language and social and institutional discourses through discursive practices used in participants written responses. Linguistic patterns are significant and hold specific functions in the world. These patterns work to standardize and normalize certain ways of thinking, speaking, and being, and make others seem improper. I examined repeated statements that indicate a way of knowing about sexual violence and sexual violence labels that inform the important issues that had been identified within participants' responses. From this standpoint, it was crucial to consider how existing social, political, and institutional discourse on sexual violence and sexual violence labels shape how the topic is described, and thus, understood, by undergraduate students. For this step, I used a flexible approach, as to not restrict meaning too quickly. Based on the review of the literature in Chapter Two, rape myths and rape culture stems from the social and institutional discourse on sexual violence, impacting what is known and said about sexual violence labels. I reviewed the data for instances when students relied on the dominant social and institutional discourses, such as rape myths or rape culture, to inform their responses on sexual violence labels, or to bring tensions to dominant discourses, and made notes within the data. This step was done using the coded data from NVivo and was organized using a table in Microsoft Excel.

Discourses are always contending with each other. Discourse makes knowledge possible, but also limits what can and cannot be said. In addition to framing my analysis around identifying specific ways of knowing, I examined the text for participants responding to relations of power, also known as competing discourses. Competing

discourses will present as conflicts within the text, disrupting the social order and yielding potential social consequences. While analyzing the data, I examined participants' responses for competing discourses that went against the institutional and social ideologies that form what is known about the topic. This was the final step of the analysis and was conducted to provide a comprehensive view of the dominant and competing discourses present among undergraduate students about sexual violence labels.

Quality and Rigor

By using discourse analysis, I was interested in participants' beliefs and stories that form discourse. Establishing credibility of those stories is not a priority in this research. The objective of this study was not to find a singular "truth", but to interpret prominent discourses among participants. It should be noted that while another researcher could conduct this study in the same context using the same methods, the participants cannot be replicated. The overall credibility of this research study was achieved using open-response questions. Open-response questions employed through online mediums, such as the Top Hat textbook, have been shown to reduce desirability bias often associated with interviews (Kelly et al., 2013). The open-response format allowed participants to speak freely, which will allow participants' perceptions to be accurately described and represented (Milne & Oberle, 2005). The open-response textbook question also uses inclusive language, such using the phrase "someone who has experienced sexualized violence" compared to "a woman who has been raped" to promote inclusivity. Participant responses to the open-response questions are presented in the findings chapters and used as evidence through direct quotes to ensure that the participants voices

were captured. This also ensured the accuracy and reliability of the findings (Bradshaw et al., 2017).

The intent of research studies using discourse analysis and poststructural frameworks is not for the research to be generalizable (Aston, 2016), however, because the findings of this study comprised of two samples (American and Canadian undergraduate students), the findings encompass a North American perspective, increasing the likelihood that the findings are transferable to a wider population. Transferability focuses on the extent that the findings of a study can be applied and transferred to other settings or contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Examining discourses among two populations provided a deeper understanding of the existing discourses on sexual violence and sexual violence labels among undergraduate students at North American institutions. Based on existing discourses, changes can be made to improve the health outcomes of university students and institutional response to campus sexual violence.

Ethical Considerations

The larger research project had received ethical approval from the Dalhousie Research Ethics Board. To conduct this sub-study, I submitted an amendment to the existing ethics application. Because the larger research study was approved in 2018, according to Dalhousie's Ethics Board guidelines, the study is now considered closed. Analysis of study data and writing is permitted after a study is closed, meaning that I was permitted by the Dalhousie Ethics Board to conduct this research (Appendix A). Below, I will describe the ethical considerations that had been taken by the larger project to ensure

the safety of participants and the ethical collection of data and outline my ethical responsibilities throughout the sub-study.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all students who participated in this study. Clicking on a link embedded in the sexual assault and sexual orientation chapters in the Top Hat textbook brought students to the Qualtrics system, which housed the two validated surveys. Before the surveys, students were brought to the informed consent statement. Students provided their informed consent by clicking the “YES” box at the end of the informed consent statement. The same consent form was used twice, once for the survey embedded into the sexual orientation chapter, and once for the survey embedded into the sexual consent chapter. If students wished to participate in both chapters, they were required to provide their informed consent twice. If a student did not check the informed consent box, they were not able to advance to the surveys. Ongoing consent was also considered. Before submitting their survey responses, students were asked to provide ongoing consent to confirm their participation in the study. This provided participants with the opportunity to withdraw from the study after they have read and answered the questions. If a student checked the “NO” box or left the ongoing consent question blank, their responses were not used for research purposes.

Risks

The broader research project focused on a wide range of topics relating to sexuality. The researchers recognized that these topics were sensitive, and discussing topics related to sexual assault has the potential to trigger students if they have had

negative experiences. For this reason, resources were provided to participating students based on their university and location that they could access if they experienced adverse reactions or emotions to the questions. Resources were provided to students on the informed consent statement before they responded to the questions. The risk of students feeling obligated to participate in the research was mitigated by informing the students that participated in the study was completely voluntary and would not influence their success in the course. The instructor did not know who participated in the research. The students' responses to these open-response textbook question was for participation marks only and were not reviewed by the course instructor or teaching assistants. Students could not see other students' responses to the questions, also minimizing any potential harm or identification.

Benefits

There were no direct benefits to students from participating in the study, besides the opportunity to win a gift card. Despite this, participating in the study may have provided students with a sense of contribution to improving knowledge of sexual violence on university campuses. Likewise, participating in this study may have allowed students to gain insight into their attitudes, opinions, and beliefs related to sexual violence and sexual violence labels allowing the opportunity for self-reflection.

Confidentiality

Students who agreed to participate in the study were required to include their student ID with their responses. This was to connect their demographic survey responses with their written response for the broader research project. After the final grades for the

courses were submitted, student IDs were replaced with anonymous participant IDs. Before this point, students had the option to withdraw their information from the research project. After the course was over and participant IDs were assigned, students could no longer withdraw their data as the information had been anonymized. Data analysis only took place after student IDs were removed and participant IDs had been assigned. Because the data was previously generated from the larger study, I only received the de-identified qualitative data of the one research question that I analyzed. I do not know the identities of those who participated in this study. Despite this, when describing research results, I was cautious to not include any identifying information. Direct quotes will be used to describe the results of this study; however, the informed consent statement informed students on the use of direct quotes. The large-scale size of each class will also help to mediate the risk of participants being identified.

Because the data was previously generated from the larger study, the data were anonymized before I received the files for analysis. The anonymized data were uploaded to the qualitative data management software NVivo (Version 12.6) to be analyzed.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the methodology and methods of this study. The chapter began by describing the qualitative nature of the project, and the researcher's positionality and interest in the topic. The transformative worldview was then described followed by an in-depth description of poststructuralism theory that guided this research project. Next, the chapter discussed the methods of the study including the study population and inclusion criteria, recruitment, and data collection methods. Critical FPS was then described and rationalized as the data analysis method. To ensure the credibility

of the study, the steps to ensuring the quality and rigour of the research were discussed. Finally, all ethical considerations for this study were outlined and described.

Chapter Four- Findings: Identity, Resiliency & Self-exclusion

The next two chapters present the findings of this project. The findings of this study were discovered by examining participants' written responses using critical FPS. I theorized six threads of discourse based on participants' beliefs about sexual violence labels, constituted through social and institutional discourses. This chapter outlines 3 threads of discourse, with the other 3 being presented in Chapter Five. Table 2 shows a visual representation of the organization of the findings presented in Chapters Four and Five.

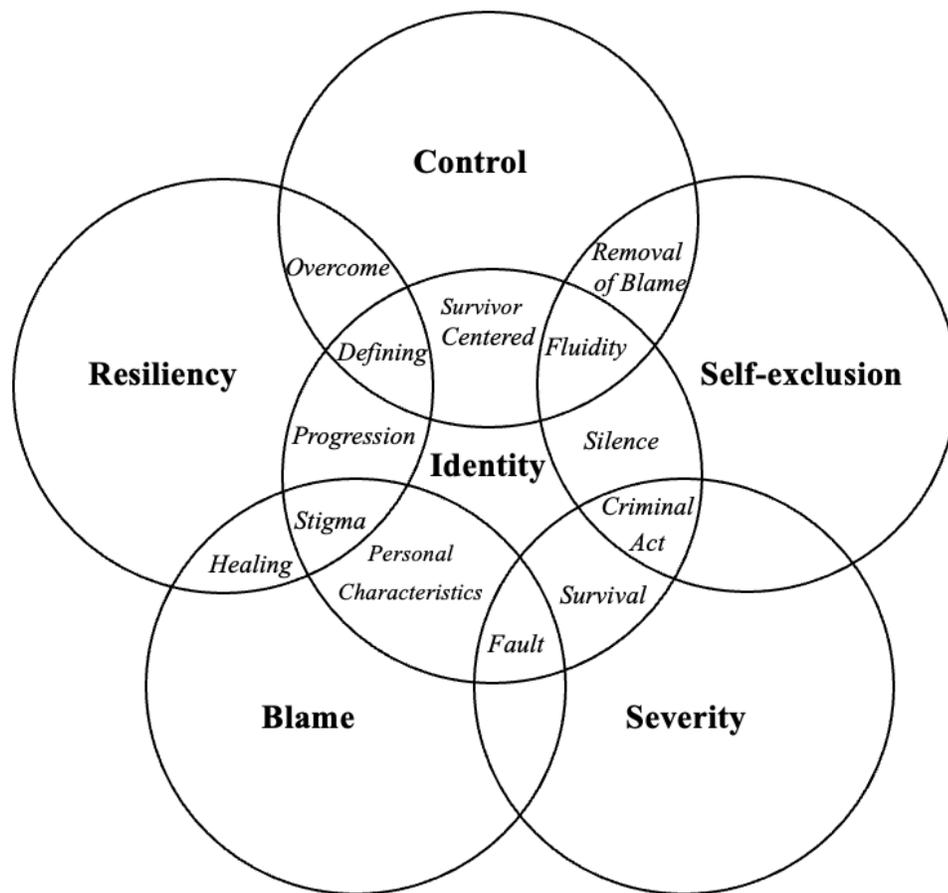
Table 2

Table demonstrating findings by chapter, discursive threads, and sub-threads

Findings	
Chapter 4: Identity, Resiliency, Self-exclusion	Chapter 5: Blame, Control, Severity
<p>Discursive Thread: Identity Sub-threads:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal Characteristics - Defining 	<p>Discursive Thread: Blame Sub-threads:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fault - Stigma
<p>Discursive Thread: Resiliency Sub-threads:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Overcome - Healing - Progression 	<p>Discursive Thread: Control Sub-threads:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Survivor Centered - Removal of Blame
<p>Discursive Thread: Self-exclusion Sub-threads:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Silence - Fluidity 	<p>Discursive Thread: Severity Sub-threads:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Criminal Act - Survival

All discourses mutually inform each other. Throughout the findings chapter, I will be discussing the interconnections of the discourses and how they are co-constructed to give meaning to each other. In Chapters Four and Five, I will discuss the inter-dependences of discourses to give meaning and to display that discourses over-lap and mutually inform ways of knowing. Figure 1 demonstrates another way to visually conceptualize the findings of this study and attempts to demonstrate the interconnected nature of the findings, and of discourses generally. The large circles with bolder text represent the six discursive threads identified in the study data, and the small italicize text represents the sub-threads.

Figure 1 *Interconnection of discourses*



While there is more overlap and interconnections in the discourses than is possible to demonstrate, Figure 1 serves as a more reflexive way to consider the findings. I am bound by the tools available to me to demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of the discourses, however, another way to visually conceptualize the findings is to visualize a ball of yarn that has become unravelled. The yarn is likely to become tangled and interwoven, while still being connected. Likewise, you can cut the yarn into pieces and examine and use them individually, and despite this, it is still part of a larger collective. You can also think of discourses in this way. All discourses mutually inform and give meaning and purpose to each other. While you can separate discourses and examine them individually, it is part of a collective and can lose meaning and purpose if you restrict them and fail to acknowledge the interconnections that exist. You can also think of the tangles and knots in the yarn as tensions within the discourse, causing disruptions in how we examine, approach, and understand topics at a given place and time. Readers are encouraged to use the display shown in Figure 1 and the above analogy to frame the way they think about the findings presented in the next two chapters.

Participants held varying beliefs and values about sexual violence labels, often in tension with one another. Sexual violence labels were believed to both re-produce and disrupted current societal and institutional discourses around sexual violence, rape myth acceptance, and rape culture. Participants used the socially constructed knowledge to form their beliefs about sexual violence labels, often re-producing these discourses. Other participants sought to challenge or disrupt these dominant discourses.

Discourses on sexual violence labels were often centred around personal attributes that were associated with “victims” and “survivors”. This chapter will discuss the

discursive threads of *Identity*, *Resiliency*, and *Self-exclusion*. The discursive threads and use of language that I observed in participant quotations will be used to support each discourse presented in the next two chapters. Because this research is rooted in CDA methodology, word clouds are presented in each discursive thread, organized by sub-thread, to demonstrate the specific linguistic patterns used by participants that constitute discourse and ways of knowing. Word clouds are also organized by sexual violence labels to demonstrate linguistic patterns used when discussing “victims” and “survivors”, often in direct contradiction to one another. In one discursive thread, *Self-exclusion*, and one sub-thread *Removal of Blame* participants discussed sexual violence labels collectively, not comparatively, thus the word clouds are not separated by the labels in these instances.

Word clouds were chosen to visually depict the language used by participants and give insight into the frequency of each word within each discursive thread. The size of each word in the word cloud indicates the number of times that word was used in participants' written responses, with larger words being used the most frequently. Word clouds were generated by taking the quotes that comprised the sub-thread of each discursive thread and pasting them into a word cloud generator. The generator then created word clouds that represented the language and phrases that participants used that formed the discourses. This method greatly aligned with CDA. Creating word clouds allowed for a systematic way to analyze participant language and examine how the language they used shaped their understanding of sexual violence labels, thus giving meaning to the discourse.

Discussions and interpretations presented in the finding's chapters will focus on participants' responses to their beliefs about sexual violence labels, and theorizations of how participants' beliefs and the societal understanding of sexual violence and sexual violence labels that participants discuss in their responses may contribute to or combat broader discourses such as rape myth acceptance and rape culture. It is important to note that participants' use of specific language does not always reflect poststructuralism theory or discourse analysis. For example, participants' use of words such as "power" "control" or "identity" are typically disparate and do not align with how poststructuralist scholars understand and use these ideas. As such, it is important to note that the quotes used demonstrate the participant's understanding and interpretation of specific language, and not necessarily my understanding of that language using a poststructuralist lens. Poststructural implications of the findings are presented in the discussion section of this these, presented in Chapter Six.

Identity

Participants' beliefs about sexual violence labels were often centered around personal attributes that were associated with "victims" and "survivors". The discourse of *Identity* suggests that sexual violence labels either supported or disrupted the belief that a person's identity is linked to their experience of sexual violence. Notably, participants valued using labels as a tool to identify, characterize, and define people, and held specific connotations based on the label an individual chooses to identify with.

Personal Characteristics

Participants personified the labels and associated sexual violence labels with specific characteristics. Participants discussed how people who identified with each label

held specific personal attributes that were in tension with one another. Overwhelmingly, participants believed that a “survivor” held greater positive qualities and characteristics comparatively to a “victim”. Participants frequently used positive language such as *strong, resilient, powerful, and brave* to describe the label “survivor” and those who identified as survivors. Figure 2 outlines the linguistic patterns used in participants’ responses that comprised the sub-heading *Personal Characteristics* when describing a “survivor”.

Figure 2

Linguistic patterns for the label “survivor” in sub-thread Personal Characteristics



Greatly contrasting the personal characteristics of a “survivor”, participants believed that “victims” typically held greater negatively qualities. Language such *weak, powerless, helpless, and pitiful* frequently appeared in participants’ responses about “victims”. Figure 3 outlines the linguistic patterns used in participants’ responses that comprised the sub-heading *Personal Characteristics* when describing a “victim”.

and not be viewed by society as someone who is weak or in distress [sic]” Another participant noted how victims were typically viewed negatively by society:

The use of "victim" when it comes to describing people who have experienced sexual coercion or violence makes it sound like they should be pitied, treated as if they're made of glass, unable to function properly, and makes them sound weak.

Participants’ responses demonstrated that the discourse of “victims” seeking pity and sympathy from society was still prominent today. While participants may not hold those specific beliefs themselves, they were aware that it was a dominant way of knowing, which influenced the language they used and the beliefs they held about each label. Similarly, participants’ responses pointed to the discourse of survivors being respected and admired because they are perceived to be strong and reject pity and sympathy from society. For example, one participant wrote:

I think [survivor] places greater emphasis on they have gone through a hardship, and that they should be respected for that. Being a victim implies you must feel sorry for this individual, but I believe the respect means much more to them than the pity.

These stark contrasts in how participants discussed people who had experienced sexual violence and described societies view and understanding of sexual violence based on solely on the labels is considerable. Participant responses suggest that society values people who are strong and stigmatize people who are believed to be seeking “pity”. One participant, for example, wrote: *“The term survivor allows society to view these individuals as fighters without feeling pity for them”*. These quotes highlight how society continues to condemn being forthcoming with emotions and encourages toughness to

gain respect. These quotes provide insights into how rape myths and rape culture are continuously constructed through language, and the societal implications of labels.

Many participants recognized the negative perceptions that society holds towards “victims” and acknowledged that because of this, they held unconscious negative biases towards that label. One participant described their predisposed idea about sexual violence labels and wrote: *“I unconsciously associate the word "survivor" with strength and empowerment, and the word "victim" with weakness and sympathy”*. Participants understood that the label “survivor” emerged to challenge societal views of sexual violence and of “victims”. Wrote one participant: *“I think it’s a small change in language that can make a very big difference in how people think and feel about people who have been involved in sexual assault”*. These quotes demonstrate that participants hold internal awareness and acknowledgement of the implication language has on experience, and how this shapes the ways of knowing about sexual violence labels and their societal implications.

It has been shown that the stigma and biases held by society about sexual violence can result in negative personal views, or self-stigmatization (Deitz al., 2015). Sexual violence labels were not only believed to cause tensions in the ways that society views people who have experienced sexual violence, but how people viewed themselves. This was described by one participant, who wrote: *“I think survivor gives the person that experienced the sexual coercion or violence more self-esteem or empowerment because survivor sounds like the person is a strong person and can continue living their lives like normal”*. Another participant noted that the perceptions that the label has in society could influence personal perceptions: *“The word "victim" makes people feel smaller, weaker,*

and more powerless. However, the word "survivor" makes people feel stronger and more important". Another participant shared that because of societies perceptions, they would not want to be referred to by the label "victim": *"I think if I was [sexually assaulted], using the word survivor would make me feel like a strong person for enduring such a terrible experience, while the word victim would make me feel worthless or weak".* This participant was able to put themselves in the situation of another person and sympathize with their perspective and recognize the negative beliefs that society holds towards "victims", and how this can have a direct impact on self-image and self-esteem. This quote presents a counter-discourse to the discursive thread "self-exclusion", presented in Chapter Five. The notion of recognizing that sexual violence can happen to anyone, and not excluding yourself from the conversation of sexual violence is important, and necessary to make meaningful change. This is discussed further in Chapter Five and Chapter Six.

Before the emergence of "survivor", "victim" was the prevalent label used to refer to someone who had experienced sexual violence. Historically, sexual violence has been neglected, dismissed, and stigmatized by society (O'Neal, 2019), and those who have experienced sexual violence received minimal support while being stigmatized and blamed for their experience (Anderson & Overby, 2021). While society has made strides to combat sexual violence and provide appropriate supports and justice, the findings suggested that the historical institutional and social discourses surrounding the label "victim" attribute to the negative and stigmatizing beliefs still being held today. Participants responded to relations of power which caused tensions to emerge in this discourse. Specifically, some participants acknowledged that victims are not weak or

powerless, but society views them as such to demoralize them. For example, one participant wrote: *“Being a “victim” does not make you less of a person, and it is not an identity feature, it should not make you feel less than”*. Here, participants acknowledge that sexual violence labels are linked to how society perceives people and are attempting to disrupt this discourse. Regardless of label the person uses or identifies with, participants believe that we must work to remove these unjust predisposed societal beliefs associated particularly with the label “victim”.

This tension highlights the belief that shifting language should not be the objective, rather shifting the narrative we attribute our language. One participant who supported this claim wrote:

In reality, I think victim is a fair term for individuals who have experienced sexual coercion or sexualized violence, as concerning the judicial system, they have absolutely been victims of a crime – they have been unjustly attacked and drawn into a situation they should not have been in. Rather, I think it is the victim narrative that should change; people need to realize that victims are not weak. They are strong and stand together to work towards change.

Throughout participant responses, the label “victim” was believed to be important for the judicial process of sexual violence, and removing this label was anticipated to support rape culture. This complexity and the belief that the label “victim” should be reclaimed and reframed more positively is discussed again in Chapter Five.

The sub-thread of *Personal Characteristics* illustrated that society attributes individual values, characteristics, and worth based on sexual violence labels. This discourse builds on previous research that has found that victims are perceived to be weak and powerless,

while survivors are strong and courageous (Schwark & Bohner, 2019; Franiuk et al., 2008; Hockett et al., 2014). While this initially may be interpreted as positive, beliefs centring on the label ‘victim’ often re-produce rape myths and rape culture. This discourse also brought forth underlying hostility towards ‘victims’ due to ongoing beliefs that they use their experience of sexual violence as leverage in society to receive pity, sympathy, and influence. This hostility towards victims may be contributing to support for using the label “survivor”, however, people may choose to label themselves as a victim, or may choose to identify as both depending on circumstances due to the fluidity of identity. The complexities of these beliefs and the tensions they bring forth to the discourse will be explored throughout the next two chapters.

Defining

Within the discourse of *Identity*, participants discussed sexual violence labels to either promote or deter the ideology that a person’s identity is defined by their experience of sexual violence, creating the sub-thread titled *Defining*. Participants discussed how sexual violence labels can promote the distinction of self and the experience of sexual violence, which many participants felt to be beneficial. The label “victim” was believed to reinforce the idea that an individual’s identity or self-worth is grounded within their experience of sexual violence. Figure 4 outlines the linguistic patterns used in participants' responses when describing a “victim” in the sub-thread *Defining*.

Figure 4

Linguistic patterns for the label “victim” in sub-thread Defining.

being someone's victim". I just feel that if you are going to define someone, the word survivor is more empowering for the individual.

Further, because the label “victim” carries significant negative associations, participants discussed how having to position one’s identity within that label is unjust and harmful: “*It is unfair for people who have gone through such a traumatic experience to now have a lifelong label such as victim that has a negative connotation*”. Another participant believed that centering one’s identity around being a victim could hinder their ability to recover and heal:

Victim implies that they are still healing, or hurt and stigmatizes what happened to them, they are still people who had a bad experience and to make that their whole identity does not let them find peace and move on.

As exemplified by this quote, participants saw value in separating one’s identity from their experience of sexual violence and believed that the label “survivor” allowed people to do so. Figure 5 outlines the linguistic patterns used in participants’ responses when describing a “survivor”.

Figure 5

Linguistic patterns for the label “survivor” in sub-thread Defining.

The discursive thread of *Identity* demonstrated participants' beliefs on the multi-faceted nature of people's identity and the idea of self. Participants valued using language and sexual violence labels that reflected this notion. Using the label "survivor" was believed to empower people to disconnect their identity and view themselves distinctly from their experience of sexual violence.

Resiliency

Sexual violence labels were believed to discern a person's resiliency following an experience of sexual violence. This discourse presented several beliefs about sexual violence labels, including labels being used to indicate whether a person had overcome their experience of sexual violence, the role of language in the healing process, and the progression of victimhood to survivorship. The term "resiliency" was specifically chosen to reflect this discourse because of the tensions surrounding the term. Specifically, resiliency is used to describe one's ability to adapt, cope, and tolerate social injustice (Powell, 2019). While resiliency is an important trait to possess, too much resiliency can make people overtly tolerant to adversity, marginalization, and stigmatization (Chamorro-Premuzic & Lusk, 2017). Additionally, praising those who experience social injustice, such as sexual violence, and citing them as resilient can cause normative behaviour and failure to address the societal structures that continue to oppress them (Varnun, 2021; Prowell, 2019). Prowell (2019) explained that poststructuralist theory provides an understanding of how resiliency is constructed, and how resiliency is constructing the social positions of vulnerable populations. The framing of resiliency as a means of praising those who experience injustice while disregarding the social systems in place that caused their injustice in the first place underpins the ideas presented in this discourse.

violence. For example, one participant wrote *“My view is that the word survivor is used for someone who has ascended past their experiences and does not let it affect them as much as a victim would”*. Comparatively, another participant wrote that a “victim” cannot move beyond their experience and suggested that a “victim” does not *“move forward with their future, as if they are stuck in the past and can't seem to move on or want to move on with their lives and learn from the experience”*. These quotes demonstrate that participants perceive sexual violence to be an opportunity to grow, a life lesson, or a learning experience. Another participant added to this belief and asserted that after a person’s survives sexual violence, they can choose to reconstruct oneself: *“I think survivor is a more powerful term because it shows that they have gone through the situation and come out of it a better person”*. Further, participants suggested that “survivors” were stronger than “victims” because survivors were perceived to be actively overcoming adversity, while victims were perceived to be continually affected by their experience and choosing to not persevere. For example, one participant wrote *“Survivor implies that the person can move on from such an experience while victim implies that the person will forever be affected and won't be able to move on”*. Similarly, another participant stated: *“Survivor also signifies strength, that the person overcame the ordeal, while victim sounds like they never will”*. Viewing one’s ability to overcome their experience of sexual violence as an individual choice ignores the societal structures in place that continue to oppress specific groups, causing greater harm and marginalization than other people in different social positions. These groups include women, people of colour, and 2SLGBTQ+ people who are over-represented in sexual violence statistics and gain less care and recourses because of their positionality.

Tensions arose when participants described that the discourse of overcoming sexual violence is used by society to construct a narrative that supports rape culture and attempts to frame a traumatic experience positively. One participant shared their views on the term “survivor” based on their personal experience *“Personally, as someone who has been raped, I hate being called a survivor. I didn't survive anything, I simply was victimized. Society uses that word to sort of say people who have been raped are stronger than those who haven't”*. Additional concerns about the label “survivor” and its implication towards the discourse of *Overcome* were described. Participants believed that this discourse could re-produce rape culture by reducing the perceived severity of sexual violence and pressuring those who have experienced sexual violence to *“move on”*. Specifically, one participant voiced their concerns and wrote *“Personally, I feel that “survivor” pushes people to move on and leave the incident in the past, which is really not so simple and can lead to further problems”*. Responding to these tensions, one participant suggested using the labels “victim” and “survivor” to describe different elements of sexual violence to recognize both the infringement of human rights and the strength needed for recovery:

I guess I would prefer to use survivor when in terms of the person who experienced the act and the term victim in terms of the experience itself. Like a person who experienced sexual assault is a survivor but sexual assault victimizes people.

Elements of this discourse re-enforced the normalization of sexual violence in society and noted that adversity, such as sexual violence, is viewed as an opportunity to practice

This quote is connected to the ideas presented in the discursive thread *Identity*. Post structuralist theories argue that identity is multi-faceted, and constantly shifting. Individuals form different subject positions based on where they are in a specific place and time. Because of this, people may not find subjectivity within the label “survivor” due to the discourses that centers it and that have been presented above, including *Overcome, Healing, and Resiliency*.

Shifting the language centered around sexual violence was also believed to shift how individuals viewed themselves and their ability to heal. As articulated by one participant: “*Words are very important and by putting it in a more positive light then that person can start viewing themselves more positively*”. Participants noted that using the label “survivor” could assist with the healing process. Wrote one participant: “*Personally I think survivor is more empowering for the individual and may help the healing process*”. By comparison, one participant noted that the characteristics that society associates with the term “victim” could be detrimental to the healing process:

I think that "victim" carries a certain connotation with it, that the person who has experienced the sexual assault is weak or broken, which are not words that promote a healing process or empowerment of any kind to the person who has been assaulted.

Other participant’s perceived labeling as a “victim” or a “survivor” to be a personal choice. One participant noted that regardless of the label they choose, they will remain a victim because they have experienced a crime:

If a victim or survivor of sexual coercion or sexualized violence wants to be called a survivor then they have the freedom to express that. Although they are still

victims of a crime just as any other, being called a survivor might help with their healing process.

Other participants disputed this belief, and suggested that labels could not influence healing or recovery:

Honestly to me, I don't really know if the use of these different words makes any difference, as these experiences are so horrible that the damage that is inflicted on these victims/survivors cannot be resolved by using sugar-coated words, but if it helps people move past their experiences than I am not opposed to using survivor than victim.

This participant suggests that shifting language might not be an effective tool for shifting societies view of sexual violence. The quotes presented within this thread demonstrate the nuanced nature of sexual violence labels, and the need to explore these topics further to understand their personal and societal implications.

Progression

Sexual violence labels were described as a linear progression. Participants suggested that a person would begin by labeling themselves as a “victim” and would then transition to a “survivor” based on several factors. Figure 10 outlines the linguistic patterns used in participants’ responses when describing a “victim” in this sub-thread.

Figure 10

Linguistic patterns for the label “victim” in sub-thread Progression.

likely make prosecuting, advocating for themselves, telling their story, and recovering difficult, meaning that they may never find subject position in the label “survivor” because society does not provide opportunity for progression past the “victim” narrative.

Ideas of moving on and being healed from the trauma of sexual violence were central to whether participants believed a specific label should be used. For example, one participant outlined the distinctions of a “victim” and “survivor” based on mentality and where a person was within their recovery process:

I think it is all about the mentality. If the word survivor is used then that means the person who was once a victim has sort of moved on and got the help they needed. The word survivor can also be used to indicate that it was a horrible experience that they managed to escape or survive

Another participant described how the different labels can be beneficial at different times, rationalizing the belief that labels should be a progression:

I believe that survivor- or victim-hood is a state of mind and a state of being. I believe that the time after initially experiencing sexual violence definitely feels like a state of being a victim. The person may be powerless and preyed on and damaged... after some time of healing has gone by, it may be strengthening to be referred to as a survivor, because even though they were initially a victim for something awful, they can survive it and gain strength.

Participants perceived labels to be a progression, asserting that a person begins as a victim and becomes a survivor based on the period of the sexual violence, and the level of healing the person has done. This belief re-produces the discourse of *Resiliency*, and that a “survivor” is no longer affected by their experience of sexual violence and has healed or

is not as affected as a “victim” would be. This discourse acknowledges society's discomfort with sexual violence and stigmatizes people who acknowledge their traumatic experiences while commending people who are perceived to be no longer impacted by sexual violence.

Self-Exclusion

The discourse of *Self-Exclusion* surfaced from participants' beliefs that people who have not experienced sexual violence should not have a voice in determining what label someone should use, excluding themselves from the conversation. Many participants stated that they could not hold beliefs about sexual violence or felt that because it did not impact them personally, they had no opinions about the topic. Participants dismissing and separating themselves from the topic of sexual violence created the discourse of *Self-exclusion*. Participants also described sexual violence labels as fluid and an individual choice that they did not have the right to assert themselves. Participants' quotes are displayed, and I discuss my theorizations of the potential implications and societal consequences of these beliefs. Note that in this thread, participants discussed sexual violence labels collectively, not comparatively, thus only one word cloud is displayed in each sub-thread.

Silence

Many participants did not provide their beliefs on the topic of sexual violence labels because they had not experienced sexual violence themselves. For example, several participants did not provide full answers to the question, stating that they did not have an opinion on the topic. Examples of these responses include: “*I don't have much of an opinion on it*”; “*Doesn't make a huge difference to me, personally*” and “*I have no*

person base on what they see it and how they feel about it because I am not in their shoes, and I believe I shouldn't tell how someone should feel or what they are because of what had happen to them.

This participant acknowledges that choosing to identify with a specific label is a personal choice and felt that they could not provide an opinion about how someone should identify after experiencing sexual violence.

Other participants also believed that it is inappropriate for those who have never experienced sexual violence to decide what label someone should be used: *“I believe that the choice of word should be up to the individuals who have faced sexual coercion or sexualized violence and not up to others who report their stories”*. Similarly, another participant wrote: *“I think that labeling of people who have experienced sexual coercion or sexualized violence should be left up to those who have experienced it themselves.”*. Participants believed that they did not have the right to tell people who how to identify. For example, participants wrote *“I think that labeling of people who have experienced sexual coercion or sexualized violence should be left up to those who have experienced it themselves”*. These quotes illustrate that participants believe that we must consult people who had experienced sexual violence for their opinion and intel on what labels they use, and what labels society should use when referring to them. One participant described *“using whatever term the majority of the group prefers”* suggesting that one label should replace another, and that decision should be left to the group in which the labels are referring to.

It is important to note that these beliefs are not inherently negative or harmful. These beliefs can be viewed as survivor-centered and trauma-informed, as participants

were privileging how someone chooses to identify as a personal choice, understanding a person's subjectivity and that people who have experienced sexual violence may prefer one or neither of these terms. Despite this, I believe the discourse of self-exclusion could bring forth potential societal consequences. According to poststructuralism, a person's beliefs about a topic influences society's views, creating dominance around what is known and said about a topic, forming discourse. A person's position within society can re-produce or create tensions within or countering prominent discourses, as described by (Boutain, 1999; Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). From this point of view, deferring the authority and responsibility to speak or spearhead advocacy around a topic to the people who have experienced it fails to acknowledge our position and role in creating discourse. The discourse of *self-exclusion* points to an important theoretical domain in poststructuralism about who has the authority to speak about societal topics. The theoretical implications of all discourses displayed in the finding's chapters will be explored in the discussion chapter, presented in Chapter Six.

Fluidity

Participants believed that people who have not experienced sexual violence should not have authority to determine the adoption or rejection of specific sexual violence labels because of the fluid nature of self-labelling. Figure 13 outlines the linguistic patterns used in participants' responses that formed the sub-thread fluidity.

Figure 13

Linguistic patterns in sub-thread Fluidity.

This discourse brought forth the idea that adopting one label into society may not be beneficial and could potentially alienate and further stigmatize people who choose to identify with another label. Participants acknowledge that labels are a personal choice and may choose to position themselves within a specific label for different reasons. This thread contradicts previous beliefs that one label is superior to another in terms of characteristics, recovery, and resiliency. Participants' beliefs within this thread overlap with their beliefs in the *Identity* discourse, which suggests that identity is fluid. People are constantly changing based on their experiences; thus, identity is not fixed.

The *Identity* discourse presented earlier in this chapter informs this discourse, however, participants used their beliefs about personal identity as a rationale to exclude themselves from discussing their beliefs about sexual violence labels. These ideas will be revisited and further explored in the Discussion Chapter, presented in Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the first section of the findings of this study. This chapter explored the way sexual violence labels shape beliefs and values, often aligning and reproducing, and acknowledging the continued existence of rape culture and rape myth ideologies. “Victim” discourse positioned people using negative personal characteristics and defined their identity to their experience of sexual violence. Participants describe how society typically views the label “victim” to be a personal failure to move beyond their experience of sexual violence. Society was believed to privilege people who identified as a “survivor” because survivor discourse praises those who can move on from their experience and their ability to disconnect their identity from their experience of sexual violence. Tensions within these threads were highlighted and discussed. These

findings made evident the complexity of sexual violence labels and their ability to shape societal beliefs about sexual violence and those who have experienced it.

Chapter Five: Findings - Blame, Control & Severity

The previous chapter presented the first set of discursive threads presented in this study: *Identity, Resiliency, and Self-Exclusion*. This chapter will present the remaining discursive threads: *Blame, Control, and Severity* and their associated sub-threads, as shown above in Table 2. Like the previous chapter, each discourse will be supported by participant quotations and repeated language to keep in line with the CDA methodology. Word clouds will be presented in each sub-threads of the discursive threads to display the linguistic patterns that emerged.

Blame

Overwhelmingly, participants' responses resulted in a discursive thread of *Blame*. Sexual violence labels were believed to amplify or resist victim-blaming ideology. Elements of this discursive thread included *Fault* which was the idea that both labels brought forth different ideas of responsibility, criticism, and the reproduction of rape myths. Next, labels were discussed in terms of *Stigma*, for their role in removing embarrassment and shame associated with sexual violence which in turn could encourage people to come forward with their experiences without fear of stigmatization.

Fault

Fault was a central focus of the discursive thread of “Blame”. Participants discussed how the label “victim” promoted or re-produced victim-blaming ideology within society. Figure 14 outlines the linguistic patterns used in participants’ responses for the label “victim”.

Figure 14

Linguistic patterns for the label “victim” in sub-thread Fault.

word victim to me sounds like they were a wounded or an easy target.” This participant describes their concern with the term victim, and how it may contribute to ongoing rape myths about those who experience sexual violence.

Common rape myths were present within participant responses. Participants discussed that sexual violence labels not only influences societies acceptance of rape myths, but also shift how people view themselves and their experience, and place blame onto themselves. Participated noted that the label “victim” suggested that a person’s actions or characteristics resulted in their victimization, for example: “*Victim is more demeaning and makes it sound like it was their fault*”. Participants believed that being labelled a victim would also cause the individual to cast blame onto themselves, causing them to feel at fault for their experience. This was described by one participant who wrote: “*[Victim] brings that someone down and make them feel at fault for what has happened to them.*” Similarly, another participant wrote: “*Victim implies that they are succumbing to this injustice and may feel as though it was something they deserved*”. Participants typically did not hold these beliefs, but they acknowledged that these discourses continue to exist within society, and because of this, we should use alternative language to contradict and respond to relations of power. For example, one participant wrote: “*I think the word survivor rather than victim. Victim kind of makes it a negative thing and that its their fault when that’s not the case.*” This discourse re-surfaces the idea that society holds negative beliefs and casts negative personal characteristics towards “victim” presented in the *Identity* discourse in Chapter Four.

The discursive thread of *Blame* suggests that the negative characteristics held towards the label “victim” not only stigmatizes the individual and characterizing them as

“weak”, “damaged” and “frail”, but also normalizes blaming the person for experiencing sexualized violence. Interestingly, other participants held opposing beliefs about the label “victim”, creating tensions in this discourse. Contradicting what was presented above, the label “victim” was believed to re-enforce the belief that a person cannot be blamed for their experience of sexualized violence. One participant, for example, wrote: *“In my opinion, I think the term victim is important to use to enforce the fact that they are not at fault and have been wronged.”* Another participant supported using the label “victim” to remove ideas around individual blame:

At this stage it may actually be reassuring to be referred to as a victim because the person is in the midst of surviving it and has not yet survived it and it may actually introduce an element of sympathy for oneself and reassurance that the event was the abuser's fault and the victim is in no way responsible.

While the label “victim” was frequently believed to be associated with negative societal implications and negative self-image, these quotes advocate for the opposite, and assert that the label may be beneficial for someone to remove any sense of blame they may inflict on themselves after experiencing sexual violence.

While participants typically held more positive views towards the label “survivor”, beliefs on individual fault were also present in that label, too. Figure 15 outlines the linguistic patterns used in participants’ responses for the label “survivor”.

Figure 15

Linguistic patterns for the label “survivor” in sub-thread Fault.

sense of embarrassment towards the affected individual, and may actually cause more harm than good.”. Ultimately, participants sought to combat dominant discourses of sexual violence, particularly discourses that stigmatize people who have experience sexual violence. Participants emphasize the need to normalize conversations about sexual violence to remove ideas of shame, embarrassment, and guilt.

Language and labels were believed to have a crucial role in reducing societal stigma around sexual violence. For example, one participant highlighted how the importance of language when discussing sensitive or stigmatized topics such as sexual violence: *“Our use of words is important when talking about topics such as sexual assault. Using the word survivor may allow people who have experienced sexual assault to feel more empowered and able to move forward.”*. Participants highlighted that using labels that empower people instead of stigmatizing them could increase reported cases of sexual violence, something that continues to be a significant concern in Canada (Conroy & Cotter, 2017; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010; Ullman & Townsend, 2007). One participant described how the stigma associated with sexual violence may cause people to not report their experience:

There is a lot of stigma around the word "victim" and putting blame on the victim, or victim shaming. It can be extremely hard to come forward about sexual assault cases, and to be labelled as a survivor rather than a victim could potentially make this process less of a burden and relieve part of this stigma.

This participant suggests that the societal implications of the label “victim” may be contributing to the lack of reporting of sexual violence due to the discourse surrounding the label. Another participant suggested how using the label “survivor” could combat the

societal discourses on sexual violence, and cause people to feel more comfortable with sharing their experiences and seek justice.

Being known as a victim may make someone less likely to come forward in fear of being embarrassed, but being identified as a survivor may give it a different connotation in which they are not weak, silenced, and their perpetrator does not have a victory over them.

These quotes demonstrate the significant implications of sexual violence labels, and highlight how discourses are shaped through language, and meaning is produced through interaction with multiple discourses. It also illustrates the prominent societal implications of sexual violence labels.

While removing stigma from sexualized violence was something that many participants valued, some participants believed that it is the role of “survivors” to use their lived experience to educate and advocate for the de-stigmatization of sexual violence. For example, one participant wrote:

“Survivors” can turn their experience with sexual coercion into something more positive and use it to educate others and realize their deep internal strength.

“Victims” remain frightened by their experience with sexual coercion and carry the negativity around with them in everyday life; they don't grow from the experience, it actually hinders their lives in the long term.

Again, this belief is not inherently problematic. I believe this participant is attempting to note that “survivors” are in the right place in their recovery to speak about their experience and advocate for change so that sexual violence does not continue to impact countless lives. Despite this, this belief could have potential problematic societal implications.

For example, the idea that individuals who experience sexual violence must use their experience to benefit others may inherently excuse people who have not experienced sexual violence to advocate for change, when advocacy for human rights and public health concerns should be a societal responsibility, and not cast to individual people or groups. This sub-thread relates to the discursive thread of *Self-exclusion* presented in Chapter Four. This belief may contribute to the ongoing stigma of sexualized violence and reduce potential dialogue and advocacy that could be done around this topic.

Control

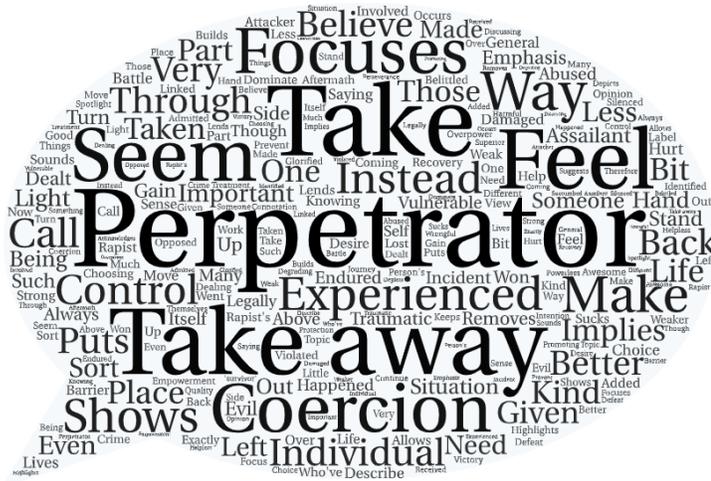
The discourse of *Control* surfaced from participants' beliefs that sexual violence labels can "give" control to either the perpetrator or the individual. Complexities and tensions arose in this discourse based on what was perceived to be beneficial. Participants described using the label "survivor" to focus on the needs of the person who experienced the sexual violence rather than the perpetrator, creating the sub-thread *Survivor Centered*. Concerns about this discourse arose and created the sub-thread *Removal of Blame*. In sum, participants believed using the term "survivor" only focused on the individual, and ultimately removed accountability from the perpetrator.

Survivor Centered

Using the label "victim" was believed to give "*control*" and "*power*" to the perpetrator. Figure 18 outlines the linguistic patterns used in participants' responses for the label "victim" that formed the sub-thread *Survivor Centered*.

Figure 18

Linguistic patterns for the label "victim" in the sub-thread Survivor Centered.



One participant wrote that the label “victim” gives the implication that there is a winner and a loser: *By using the word "victim", it almost seems as if the perpetrator has won the battle and belittled the victim.* This participant suggesting that a “victim” has lost against their perpetrator further highlights the discourse surrounding victims being weak and powerless presented in Chapter Four. The belief that a “victim” has already lost may also provide additional insights into the low reporting rates of sexual violence. Another participant noted that using the label “victim” supported the perpetrators desire to control and dominant others:

If you use the word "victim" you're almost giving in to the rapist's desire to dominate. However, "survivor" gives the person who experienced sexual coercion more power as opposed to the word "victim" which sounds weaker and that could be exactly what the rapist wants.

Participants believed that shifting focus from the perpetrator to the individual could have many benefits and believed that the label “survivor” promoted that change.

Figure 19 outlines the linguistic patterns used in participants’ responses for the label “survivor”.

“power” in this discourse refers to people regaining their sense of self and renouncing the perpetrator of any perceived authority over them. For the findings of this study, I will continue to use language that reflects participant understanding, and the FPS implications of these findings are discussed in Chapter Six.

Removing power from their perpetrator was perceived to be crucial for personal recovery, as described by one participant:

I think it is very important to use the word survivor because it places the power back in the hands of the person who was abused and that can be a very important part of their recovery because many people that have been sexually assaulted often feel that the power of choice and power in general was taken away from them.

This participant suggests that the label “survivor” points to the individual’s strength without focusing on what happened to them, allowing them to process and recover. As said one participant: *“Calling themselves a survivor acknowledges that work, that strength, that journey, and places the focus on the person they are now rather than what happened to them.”* This shift to being survivor centered was important to participants, and central to the discourse of *Control*. Sexual violence is used as a mechanism to control, dominant, and regulate people (Victoria Sexual Assault Center, 2014).

Participants recognized this and argued that sexual violence labels can serve to shift these ways of knowing and combat these discourses that continue to discount, belittle, and marginalize people who have experienced sexual violence.

be shifted from the perpetrator, while the burden of their actions will likely affect a person for a lifetime. The participant's quote also allows for consideration of how failing to use the label "victim" removes blame from the perpetrator, normalizes sexual violence, and re-enforces rape culture.

Some participants disclosed that they have experienced sexual violence and highlighted their concerns with the label "survivor" grounded in their personal experience. For example, this participant describes how the label "survivor" allows the perpetrator to feel no remorse for their actions because the person has "*survived*" the experience:

My personal view on this wording is probably different than most. I have experienced sexual coercion and violence, and I was absolutely a victim. The perpetrators were the offenders. I was victimized. They offended and hurt me. My life survival has nothing to do with them, and the sexual violence against me. If I say that they are correlated then they don't get to keep that title of someone who victimized someone. They instead get to remove some of the guilt because I have "gotten over it" and survived what they did to me. To clarify, I was a victim to a crime, they are guilty of that crime. I am a strong person who can grow and survive what ever happens to me, with no credit to them.

Interestingly, this participant brings forth tensions to the discourses outlined in *Survivor Centered* with many participants stating that the label "*survivor*" allows for separation from the perpetrator and promoted agency of their experience and recovery. Another participant shared that using the term "survivor" was detrimental to their personal recovery after they had experienced sexual violence:

Being someone who has been through this, my view of "survivor", or "victim" is different. I think survivor brings a whole other level of trigger to the word. survivor is more intense bringing back feelings one may surpress [sic]. Victim is more subtle and I prefer it. As for others, whatever they identify as is great.

Again, we see that this participant's beliefs conflict with the beliefs of other participants, those of whom did not disclose that they have experienced sexual violence or were speaking on behalf of people who have. The *Self-exclusion* discourse displayed participants' beliefs that people who have experience sexual violence should decide which label to use and which label society should adopt. Despite this, we see in this discourse that those who have experienced sexual violence are also deferring to other people who have experienced sexual violence. In the two quotes presented above the participants wrote "*My personal view on this wording is probably different than most*", and "*As for others, whatever they identify as is great*" This suggests that people may believe they do not have the authority to make this decision or speak about this topic, despite having experienced sexual violence themselves. Again, this demonstrates the complex notion of who has the authority to speak about this topic, and how this relates to personal identity and perception of their experience. These ideas will be revisited in the Discussion chapter of this thesis.

Throughout analysis, participants who identified as someone who has experienced sexual violence often presented beliefs that were in tension with the dominant threads of discourse. This suggests that there is a discrepancy between beliefs held by those who have experienced sexual violence and those who have not. While some participants may have chosen to not disclose their experience of sexual violence, those who did often

disrupted dominant beliefs. This points to additional opportunity for future research and further exploration.

Severity

Participants held varying beliefs about the perceived severity of sexualized violence, which influenced what label they felt was appropriate. Sexual violence was discussed in the legal sense and created the sub-thread *Criminal Act*. Participants highlighted that the label “victim” was still necessary and appropriate to illustrate that sexual violence is a criminal offense that should be taken seriously. Many participants held conflicting beliefs about which label influenced a greater sense of perceived severity. This chapter concludes with participant’s beliefs about the appropriateness of the label “survivor” due to perceived severity and implications of sexual violence, forming the sub-thread *Survival*.

Criminal Act

The label “victim” has traditionally been used to describe someone who has experienced sexual violence. This label has continued to be used in the judicial system because sexual violence is a criminal act, where there is typically a single “victim” and a “perpetrator” (Criminal Code of Canada, 1985). Many participants believed that if society stopped using the label “victim”, it may reduce the perceived severity of the sexual violence. Figure 21 outlines the linguistic patterns used in participants’ responses for the label “victim”.

one must survive. For example, one participant said: *“I think the word “survivor” raises the seriousness level of sexual assaults.”* Other participants asserted that the label “survivor” ensures that sexual violence is not discounted and is taken as seriously as any other criminal act. One participant stated: *“By using the word survivor it helps emphasize how big of a deal sexual violence is compared to just using victim. People who have experienced sexual violence are survivors.”* This quote suggests that because the label “victim” is commonly used in society, people do not consider the meaning behind it. In contrast, the label “survivor” encourages people to consider what the label means, and why it has surfaced, potentially increasing the perceived severity.

Additional tensions surfaced within this discourse. Some participants suggested that the label “survivor” only serves to accommodate society's discomfort of sexual violence. For example, one participant described their preference for the term “survivor” due to the label “victim” being “harsh”: *“Victim sounds more harsh, like a murder victim. A rape victim doesn't sound as nice as a sexual abuse survivor.”* Other participants condemned this belief, and noted that “survivor” is a term that society has created to frame sexual violence positively, instead of combatting rape culture:

I think that rape victims should identify themselves however they like, but I do think words pertaining to rape should not be romanticized in any way. I think that the word “survivor” kind of is a euphemism and that no light should be brought to the topic of rape as it is a horrible thing.

Here, the label “survivor” is again described as removing the severity and seriousness of sexual violence and contributing to rape culture. In this participants’ response, we again see the discourses or *Self-exclusion* and *Identity*, including the belief that people do not

have the ability to speak on sexual violence and that people who experience sexual violence should decide how they are labelled. The findings of this study demonstrate how discourses mutually-inform each other, and how knowledge and meaning is produced through interactions with multiple discourses (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

The complex and often contradicting beliefs outlined in this discourse were mediated by other participants who believed that both labels served an important role in society. For example, one participant wrote: *“I think victim seems to be more of a legal term that would be used in a case, whereas survivor is more of a societal term for people who experience sexual assault.”*. This participant acknowledges that the term “victim” holds an important role in terms of the criminal nature of the sexual violence and suggests that the label continues to be used as such, while the label “survivor” could have a more colloquial or self-identifying use to gain the benefits of both labels.

Survival

Beliefs on the appropriateness of the labels were based on perceptions of survival. Many participants believed that sexual violence is non-life-threatening, thus making the label “survivor” inapplicable. Figure 23 outlines the linguistic patterns used in participants’ responses for the label “survivor”.

Figure 23

Linguistic patterns for the label “survivor” in the sub-thread Survival.

These quotes could be argued to be contributing to rape culture, due to the failure to acknowledge the severity of sexualized violence. These beliefs may also be a result of the historical use of the label “survivor”. One participant described how they associate the label with major historical events, and because of this, does not believe the term is appropriate when discussing sexual violence. The participant wrote:

When I hear "survivor", I think about atrocities such as the holocaust, 9/11, or Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Unless I am mistaken, most sexual assault victims do not die.

This participant seems to suggest that using the label “survivor” for people who experience sexual violence is disrespectful to other people who, they believe, are more entitled to the label. Other participants believed that cases of sexual violence are only life-threatening in some circumstances, making the term “victim” more generally applicable. One participant wrote: *I guess it depends on the situation. "Survivor" seems more extreme and implies the possibility of death, which might apply to some cases of sexualized violence, but not all. I think "victim" can be applied in more cases.*”.

Similarly, another participant discussed how sexual violence is a spectrum with varying levels of perceived severity:

I view these two terms as completely different things because when I see the word "survivor", I think about people who have nearly died because of sexual violence. On the other hand, when I see the word "victim", I believe it is someone who experienced some kind of sexual assault that isn't very extreme to the point of rape and abuse, but rather sexual touch.

These beliefs may be stemmed from the knowledge that sexual violence is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of sexually violent behaviour (Victoria Sexual Assault Centre, 2014; RAINN, 2020). This knowledge may be informing beliefs that some instances of sexual violence are minor or less severe than others. Again, we see the interconnections of discourses and how they mutually-inform. A person's perceived severity of their experience of sexual violence influences their sense identity. This, in turn, could relate to whether a person acknowledges their experience, feel that they have the authority to speak about it, and how they choose to label themselves, relating back to the literature on unacknowledged sexual violence ((Wilson & Miller, 2016). The theoretical implications of these ideas will be re-visited in Chapter Six.

Tensions arose in this discourse when participants believed that using the term “survivor” was disrespectful to people who have lost their lives to sexual violence. One participant, for example, wrote:

Survivor can be considered insulting to individuals who have been killed due to sexual coercions and sexualized violence. It implies that these individuals did not fight their attacker; it implies that they lost a battle and were failures. This is not the case; individuals can still fight their attacker, and try their absolute hardest, while still being murdered in the process. Just because they did not survive, does not mean that they are not deserving of the heroism associated with the term 'survivor'.

This, again, demonstrates the complexity of sexual violence labels. Participants were conflicted on what would be deemed helpful and useful, and what would be deemed

harmful. The discursive threads of *Identity* and *Self-exclusion* mutually informs this discourse.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the final section of findings from this study. Findings presented in this chapter showed participants navigating their beliefs around *Blame, Control, and Severity*. Like the findings presented in Chapter Four, participants' beliefs were often in tension with one another, with the complexities and relations of power within the discourse being presented and examined. Victim discourse in this chapter removed fault from the perpetrator and reproduced the appointed stigma onto those who have experienced sexual violence. Survivor discourse emphasized personal strength and removed personal blame. Contradictions on how the labels influenced perceived severity were discussed. The next chapter will outline the conclusions of this study based on the findings presented and discuss the theoretical implications drawing from poststructuralist and feminist literature.

Chapter Six – Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore undergraduate university perspectives on labels used to refer to someone who has experienced sexual violence. Specifically, this study focused on undergraduate students' beliefs of the sexual violence labels “survivor” and “victim”. This study aimed to examine undergraduate students' language and uncover their beliefs and values on sexual violence label labels and theorize how they may rely on and reproduce greater societal discourses on sexual violence such as rape myths and rape culture. The purpose of this study was achieved by answering the following research questions:

1. What are undergraduate students' beliefs about the term's 'survivor' and 'victim' to describe someone who has experienced sexual violence?
2. What are the language and linguistic patterns used by undergraduate students to discuss sexual violence labels?
3. What are the potential interrelationships between beliefs on sexual violence labels and wider social discourses on sexual violence among undergraduate students?

Using a critical FPS approach, the analysis of the 218 participants' written responses aligned with the overall purpose and objectives of this study. Six discursive threads were theorized, and presented in two findings chapters: *Identity, Resiliency, Self-exclusion, and Blame, Control, and Severity*. This chapter will summarize the findings and discuss the theoretical significance and underpinnings of the discursive threads, drawing on poststructuralist and feminist scholarship. Next, the broader societal implications that the findings may provide for the field of health promotion will be interpreted and discussed.

The study's limitations are then examined, and the chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and overall conclusions.

Identity

The discursive thread of *Identity* presented the idea that sexual violence labels can be conceptualized as defining a person's identity after experiencing sexual violence. The findings of this study align with previous literature, highlighting the dissonance of the two labels in terms of positive and negative associations (Hockett et al., 2014; Schwark & Bohner, 2019), which can influence the experiences of those who have experienced sexual violence (Setia et al., 2020; Van Dijk, 2009; Hockett & Saucier, 2015).

Poststructuralist theories aim to examine the role of language in the production and maintenance of discourse (Weedon, 1987). Studies that situate themselves within a poststructuralist theory analyze the discursive practices and discourses as embodied experiences (Weedon, 1987). The discourse of *Identity* suggests that the labels "victim" and "survivor" hold distinct discourses about the perceived identity of those who experience sexual violence, which in turn, can be exemplified in negative experiences caused by these dominant societal structures. Participants' responses highlighted the societal belief that shared experience equates to a shared identity. Put differently, participants in this study suggested that society views "victims" of sexual violence to possess the same identity characteristics and "survivors" to share the same identity characteristics, distinct from "victims".

In poststructuralist thought, it is believed that people do not have experiences, rather their experiences are exemplified through the dominant societal, institutional, and historical discourses within the societies in which they live (Scott, 1991). Here, it is

evident how bodies are produced through discourse, and how these discourses are shaped by personal beliefs and values; this allows us the opportunity to challenge these dominant structures (Barret, 2005; Numer & Gahagan, 2009). Poststructuralist theory view subjectivities and agency as being produced through language and discourse (Weedon, 1987). From this viewpoint, poststructuralist theories assume that identity is not fixed, but fluid and ever-changing, embedded into broader social, cultural, historical, and political systems that produce experience (Scott, 1991). Emerging as a disruption to the dominant structures of fixed identity experiences, the discourse of *Identity* pointed to this idea of subjectivity. Participants acknowledged that identity is constantly mediated and can be altered or shifted over time. This was also presented in the *Self-exclusion* discourse, which shows the pattern of people believing that those who experience sexual violence should chart the path of identity; this will be re-visited later in this chapter.

Resiliency

The discursive thread of *Resiliency* was named to recognize the term's history of being used to commend people for living within the societal structures that continue to oppress them, while failing to address the discourses and social structures that contribute to their experiences, such as in the case of sexual violence. In this discourse, participants presented their views on the progression of experience. Connecting to the identity discourse, participants described the two sexual violence labels to be distinct in terms of resiliency and progression. Prior research has yielded similar results and noted how this idea of resiliency may be harmful. Thompson (2000) found that women who had experienced sexual violence found that they were unable to speak about their experiences

when they assumed the role of a “survivor” due to the association with recovery and progression past their experience. Further, a person who is labelled a “survivor” has been shown to yield less compassion and empathy compared to a “victim” (Hockett & Saucier, 2015).

Poststructuralist studies aim to move beyond only identifying dominant discourses, but also serve to explore the complexities within them, and how they inform experience and consider alternative discourses (Numer & Gahagan, 2009). The discourse of progression is likely idealized due to society's discomfort with sexual violence; thus, dominant discourses give power to those who find subjectivity within the discourse of resiliency and progression. Weedon (1987) describes subjectivity as our ability to understand ourselves in relation to the world. Subjects may align themselves into available subject positions that are in relation to dominant discourses while having thoughts and actions reflective of societal power relations (Numer & Gahagan, 2009). Discourse creates categories of identity for people to occupy, and as such, poststructuralist argues that opportunities for subjectivities are only available to some, and not to others (Nelson, 2008). By giving opportunities to only those who find subjectivity within this discourse, we may be removing people's authority to discuss and acknowledge their experiences and the societal discourses that contribute to them. These discourses have the protentional to silence the experiences of those who do not fit the dominant discourse.

Employing poststructuralist theories, particularly in health promotion, allows researchers to examine how dominant discourses influence health and consider the potentially harmful outcomes to bring forth the consideration of alternative discourses

(Numer & Gahagan, 2009). Examples of this are presented in this discourse, as some participants acknowledge some of the unintended consequences of this discourse, noting that pressuring those to move beyond their experience before they received help and support could yield significant health implications. In addition, this discourse promotes the normalization of sexual violence (i.e., rape culture), and further stigmatizes sexual violence.

Self-exclusion

The discourse of *Self-exclusion* can be theorized to show the ongoing stigmatization of sexual violence, and the discomfort our society has towards speaking about the topic. Foucault argues that knowledge is produced by and dependent on history (Downing, 2008). Sexual violence has historically been supported by society and used to create power positions to dominate and oppress, typically women. In this way, how people think and speak about sexual violence is dependent on the social and historical contexts at a particular time and place (Downing, 2008). People shape their sense of self by engaging and interpreting these discourses based on their subjectivity (Scott, 1991). In this case, people use their subjectivity and experiences to consume discourse about sexual violence and sexual violence labels based on their histories and social circumstances. Despite sexual violence being a prevalent and significant health concern in our society, dominant discourses continue to ignore and suppress the issues, leading to stigmatization and rape culture. Dominant discourses create social norms by influencing what can and cannot be said about a topic. People who step beyond what is deemed the norm are then subject to micro-punishments by society (Downing, 2008; Weedon, 1987; Barret, 2005). Participants who did not want to speak about the topic or felt that they could not speak

about the topic may be the result of the normalization of silencing sexual violence, and the taboo nature of discussing the topic due to dominant structures in our society.

Ideas of who has the authority and power to speak about topics were also present in this discourse. Many participants described how they felt they could not speak about sexual violence or give their beliefs about sexual violence labels because they had never experienced sexual violence themselves. This idea may yield potential consequences within the discourse, such as only people who have experienced sexual violence have the authority to speak about it. At the same time, society continues to oppress and silence people who have experienced sexual violence, and as discussed in the previous discourse *Resiliency*, encourages people to progress past their experience of sexual violence, likely encouraged by society's suppression and discomfort with the topic. Deferring the role of advocacy and responsibility towards those who experienced sexual violence also reduces opportunities for change. The dominant discourses in society continue to oppress people who have experienced sexual violence compared to people who hold significant positions of power.

Blame

Ideas of rape myths and rape culture underpin the findings of this study. This is especially true for the discourse of *Blame*. Connecting back to the history of sexual violence in our society, sexual violence was justified because people were blamed for their victimization. These ideas continue to be present and dominant today in the form of rape myths. In this study, participants' responses demonstrates that discourses of *Blame* were still present in society today. Participants discussed how the label "victims" may cause people to be faulted for their experience of sexual violence, while

“survivors” are often viewed as strong, and admired due to preserving in the face of unjust adversity. Participants were critical in how society may use these labels to shape discourse that undermines the seriousness of sexual violence and shift blame towards the individual.

The societal belief that victims are at fault for their experience of sexual violence could be argued to be due to the historical context of the term. The label “survivor” recently emerged because people could no longer find subjectivity in the label “victim”. This is likely due to the historical implications of blame and oppression that accompany the label “victim”. As described by Weedon (1987), subjectivity is fluid and constantly shifting based on language and discourse. While the shift in language and discourse around the label “survivor” can be viewed as disrupting dominant discourses and identifying opportunities for change, both labels are still used in societal structures. For example, legal systems continue to use the label “victim” during sexual violence prosecution. As shown in this study, discourse centring on the label “victim” is overwhelming negative, often steeped in rape culture and rape myths. Societal understanding of the label “victim” can in turn be harmful, especially when considering the legal implications, as perpetrators are rarely held accountable, and their “victims” are often targeted, blamed, and humiliated for their experiences (O’Neil, 2019; Nason et al., 2018). The *Identity* discourse also discussed the fluidity of identity, and how people may choose to identify as a “victim” and a “survivor” interchangeably based on their subjectivity in a specific place and time. Rape culture and rape myths continue to be perpetuated in our society, and new avenues to project these discourses are being found.

Control

Poststructural approaches emphasize the importance of empowerment and seeking opportunities for resistance to dominant social structures and discourses. This resistance aims to deconstruct and dismantle accepted notions of power (Numer & Gahagan, 2009; Weedon, 1987). Ideas of power were central to participants' discussions presented in the discursive thread of *Control*. As discussed in Chapter Three, poststructural approaches often draw on the work of Foucault. Foucault asserts that power is not something that someone or one group possesses, rather Foucault argues that power is something that is constantly negotiated and creates positions of dominance and oppression (Downing, 2008; Foucault, 1980; Foucault, 1995). Negotiation of power was viewed in the discursive thread of *Control*. The complexities of the negotiated positions of dominance and oppression were discussed by participants, primarily, whether using the label “victim” or “survivor” gave power to the individual or the perpetrator.

Weedon (1987) states that subjects and subject positions are constantly reformed based on dominant discourses and hold power differently depending on context. This means that subject and subjectivity are often conflicting and contradicting and are often created to serve specific interests. Participants discussed how the label “survivor” has the potential to re-negotiate the power allocated to the perpetrator, which was deemed beneficial for the individual in terms of separating oneself from their assailant. This is reflected in feminist scholars, who argue the importance of framing women’s experience in terms of their resistance and agency instead of oppression (Convery, 2006). Despite this, participants' responses yielded contention with this way of knowing; the exclusion of perpetrators in the discourse may contribute to the reduction of accountability, causing

perpetrators of sexual violence to not be held liable for their actions. This dissonance could continue the normalization of sexual violence in our society, and the re-production of rape culture. Poststructuralism analyses allow us to examine foundational structures of discourse, allowing researchers to explore where there is resistance.

The *Control* discourse identified in this study demonstrates the resistance and negotiation of discourses and the implications for positioning and power.

Severity

One of the objectives of this study was to theorize how language and labels may influence broader societal implications of sexual violence labels. As discussed in the literature review presented in Chapter Two, rape culture is continuously being produced by institutional, social, and historical discourses. To reiterate, rape culture is a theoretical construct that describes a social system where rape is condoned, normalized, excused, and encouraged through normative attitudes, beliefs, and practices (Hermann, 1988, Hocket & Saucier, 2015; O’Neal, 2019). Historical discourses of sexual violence resulted in the production of rape myths, which are the inaccurate beliefs about sexual violence and those who have experienced it, such as an individual’s characteristics or behaviours resulting in their experience of sexual violence (Burt, 1980). These discourses remain dominant today and influence how people view those who experience sexual violence. The influence of these discourses surfaced in participants' responses. In the *Severity* discourse, participants discussed how sexual violence was not always life-threatening or a “serious” offence, causing many participants to believe that the label “survivor” was unfit to describe this experience. The discourse of *Severity* is institutionalized and continues to normalize the neglect of sexual violence. Dominant

discourses on the perceived severity of sexual violence are viewed in all sectors, including health care, government policies, and the legal system. These systems reproduce inequities, particularly among marginalized groups who are over-represented in sexual violence statistics, including women, 2SLGBTQ+ people, and people of colour (Conroy & Cotter, 2014). Severity discourse influences institutional agendas, thus, the effects of severity discourse toward sexual violence continue to create oppression.

Participants understood sexual violence severity to be a spectrum. While this is true, a potential consequence of this belief is that society may view some instances of sexual violence to be worthy of empathy and societal support while other experiences are not. This belief may be further influenced by who experienced the sexual violence. The dominant discourse in society creates positions of dominance and oppression (Downing, 2008; Foucault, 1980; Foucault, 1995). As such, ideas of severity, empathy, and the applicability of using the label “survivor” are likely influenced by who experienced the sexual violence, and their position of power in society, causing inequities in our societies to be manifested and maintained. These are all key considerations and warrant further investigation.

Study Strengths, Significance, and Implications

The implications of this study have the potential to be far-reaching. Participants in this study had the opportunity to reflect on their own beliefs on sexualized violence and sexual violence labels. As this is an under-researched area, this may be the first-time participants considered their beliefs on the influence of the two labels. This critical reflection may have encouraged conversations amongst their peers about the implications

of sexual violence labels, causing knowledge and discussion on this topic to occur within different settings.

The implications of this study also have significance to me as a researcher. This study allowed me to strengthen my qualitative research abilities. This research serves as my thesis for the partial fulfillment of the Master of Art in Health Promotion program at Dalhousie University. Aside from the academic and professional advantages of this research, this research study allowed me to continue to educate myself, and others about sexual violence.

Universities could also significantly benefit from the findings of this study. The findings could assist in the creation of policies to combat sexual violence through a strengthened understanding of how labels can be associated with differing perceptions about rape myths and rape culture. These findings could also be adopted by support services and programming on university campuses to assist students who have experienced sexual assault. Beyond the scope of the university setting, the findings could inform provincial and federal legislation on sexual violence. This research could disrupt existing discourse and shift language in current policies, programs, and resources. The findings of this study may provide an important foundation for future research in this field to advance our understanding of this complex and under-researched area.

This research could bring forth important implications for the Health Promotion field. Existing knowledge on sexual violence labels is derived from a quantitative lens. This study adds to the literature by qualitatively studying the impact of sexual violence labels using a transformative worldview and poststructuralist strategy of inquiry. This study could highlight the need to re-frame how sexual violence labels are used and how

we must think differently about how beliefs about sexual violence are formed. The findings of this study could advance additional health promotion research in this area through the recognition that sexual violence labels may play a role in improving outcomes and dismantling inequities experienced by those who have been sexually assaulted.

Health promotion strives to go beyond individual health behaviours and focus on broader social and political drivers of health outcomes (Heard et al., 2020). Health promotion researchers aim to understand the social, economic, political, and cultural constraints that influence health and wellbeing (Heard et al., 2020). This research supports this ideology by examining how societal and institutional forces, create beliefs, which influence discourses of rape culture and rape myth acceptance. Future health policies could be implemented or re-examined based on these findings. It may be discovered that the language used in current policies and practices needs readjustment within all health fields, and lead to new initiatives within health promotion. These findings could be considered in the development of new initiatives to reduce the presence of rape culture and rape myth acceptance on university campuses and in other societal institutions. Understanding the discourses in use can be used to craft effective messaging, particularly in a university context. In addition, the influence of language and labels on societal beliefs and health outcomes could be explored in differing contexts to address other social issues by health promoters. The findings of this research could be used as a rationale to explore the impact language and labels have on societal perceptions of other health-related topics, for example, the term “survivor” for those who were diagnosed with cancer. This could lead to significant opportunities for future research in health

promotion and encourage the consideration of language as an influencer of health beliefs and practices.

Knowledge Translation

Understanding current discourse on sexual violence labels and how they contribute to rape culture and rape myth acceptance can help combat campus sexual assault. The findings of this study can also help improve community and government level policies and practices to address sexual assault broadly. The knowledge generated by this study can be translated to educate key informants and stakeholders on how sexual violence labels can impact people's beliefs, values, and practices about sexual assault and contribute to discourse promoting rape culture and rape myths. The knowledge generated by this study seeks to extend our minimal existing knowledge on sexual violence labels and draw attention to the impact these labels have and promote further exploration of this phenomenon.

Due to the lack of research on this topic, I believe that students, university administrators, and other stakeholders are not aware of the impact of sexual violence labels. I believe it is my ethical responsibility to disseminate the findings of this study in attempt to disrupt the prominent discourses that emerge in this study that contribute to and normalize the ongoing occurrence of sexual assault on university campuses. I plan on publishing this research through traditional means including presenting my findings at local research conferences, and preparing a manuscript based on the findings of this study to publish in scholarly journals.

While it is important to disseminate the knowledge generated by this thesis to an academic audience, I believe that it is important to ensure that this knowledge extends

beyond the academic community. Knowledge translation activities will include a one-page handout using lay language to be distributed to a variety of locations: University administrators, university residences, sexual health centres, government health agencies, and online spaces. I have an established connection with the Department of Student Health and Wellness at Dalhousie University, which will be used to distribute the handout to Dalhousie residences and create posters and information packets that can be displayed at health programming at Dalhousie University. Other universities will be emailed the handout and will be asked to distribute it to their students and display it at their programming.

In addition to the hand-out, infographics and visuals depicting main discourses from the research will be created. From this, specific action areas that could improve outcomes based on the findings will be distributed. The created infographics, posters, and action areas will be used to create a social media package that will be sent to existing social media accounts whose purpose aligns with this study's and who's audience may benefit from the findings. The social media package will be used to highlight key findings from the study, in a way that is engaging and reaches those who may benefit from the information. I will collaborate with organizations such as sexual assault centres, sexual health clinics, universities, and affiliated student societies to share the social media resources that I will be making via their own social media accounts. Collaborating with these organizations and societies will ensure that the findings are disseminated to as many people who may benefit from them as possible. In comparison, creating my own account would not allow for a vast dissemination strategy as I would have to accumulate followers on a new social media account. These social media packets reflect the findings

presented in Chapter Four and Chapter Five. Due to limited, I will be making all the components of the social media packet myself, after I successfully defend my Master of Arts in Health Promotion thesis. I intend to use the free graphic-design platform Canva to create all the social media graphics, posters, and documents that will then be shared with the societies. Draft social media captions will also be proved to the organizations to ensure that sharing these documents are not adding additional stain to workloads.

Study Limitations

The data used for this study is previously generated from a larger research project. This result in some study limitations that must be discussed. For example, I was not involved in the creation of the open-response questions or the data collection process of the study. Because of this, I have no control over the wording of the question that I analyzed. The wording of this question “*What is your view about the use of the word "survivor" instead of "victim" to describe those who have experienced sexual coercion or sexualized violence?*”. The question asked students their view of using one term *instead of the other*, this may influence students to respond to the question differently if the question only asked students their views on the term survivor and their view on the term victim separately. For example, students may be influenced to view the term survivor as superior to the term victim, as the question implied that the term survivor is replacing the term victim. Despite this, the question does position participants to discuss their beliefs about both labels, allowing for a clear exploration of the labels and their current discourses. The phrasing of the question also considered the emergence of the term ‘survivor’, which is very timely, and may have influenced participants to reflect on the institutional and social influences that resulted in adoption of the term in many spaces.

While the phrasing of the term may have posed potential challenges and limitations to the findings of this study, considering these implications prior to data analysis allowed me to critically analyze students' responses, which helped to mitigate the associated limitations.

This study used written text data only. Data were not collected using traditional qualitative methods such as face-to-face interviews or focus groups. This has the potential to limit the findings, as I could not ask follow-up questions, confirmations, or clarifications to participants. Despite this, using open-response online methods to collect qualitative data on sensitive subjects, such as sexual violence, has been seen as a benefit (Kelly et al., 2013). Online methods have been shown to make participants feel less judged and feel free to express their beliefs compared to an interview where participants may skew their beliefs to match the interviewer's desirability (Kelly et al., 2013). Further, using text data allowed for a large sample of undergraduate students to explore a wide range of beliefs on sexual violence labels, which would not have been feasible using interviews. In addition, there is an opportunity to do a follow-up study to investigate this phenomenon further. Despite this, employing discourse analysis on written text is uncommon. Typically, studies using discourse analysis collect data using interviews or focus groups because of the ability for an in-depth exploration of people's beliefs; however, Cheek (2004) states that discourse analysis can be conducted with any text. In discourse analysis, text is defined as any representation of reality. For example, Cheek (2004) lists possible texts to be pictures, interview transcripts, poems, procedures, or field notes, proving that discourse analysis cannot be narrowed to one form of data collection. While using text data may sway from the "norm" of existing discourse analysis studies,

the rise of collecting electronic data for qualitative studies is likely to become more commonplace due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (Moises, 2020).

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study demonstrate that there is considerable need for future research in this field. Future research should consider conducting a similar study using traditional qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups to explore the complexities and interconnection of the discourses on sexual violence labels discovered in this study. The societal influence of sexual violence labels should also be further explored, including what influences perceived severity of different forms of sexual violence and beliefs on the applicability of using the label “survivor” for all forms of sexual violence or sexual cohesion. Findings from this study yielded discourses of “survival” and the normalization and disregard of the seriousness of sexual violence. Additional research into this discourse and how implications of sexual violence labels influence these beliefs is needed. In addition, researchers should examine additional societal and institutional implications of sexual violence labels influence such as reporting cases of sexual violence, prosecuting, and experiences within health care and judicial settings.

This research identified that both those who have and have not experienced sexual violence feel that they do not have the authority to speak on the topic, more research is needed to understand this discourse, and how its re-produces stigmatization of sexual violence. Additionally, findings from this study found that people who have experienced sexual violence often hold beliefs that are in tensions to the dominant discourse. Future research should consider an exploration of beliefs and values of sexual violence labels

among people who have experienced sexual violence and people who have not to examine these tensions further.

A significant contribution to the literature would be conducting a similar study with people who identify as 2SLGBTQ+ to examine how beliefs on sexual violence labels maybe be influenced based on gender identity or sexual orientation. The beliefs of sexual violence labels among 2SLGBTQ+ people who have experienced sexual violence should also be explored in future research.

Conclusion

Previously, little was known about the societal implications of sexual violence labels, such as how they contribute to rape culture and the acceptance of rape myths. Among existing literature, university students were excluded despite the unrelenting rates of sexual violence that occurs on university campuses and the institutional sexual violence policies that are continuously being implemented. This research filled a crucial gap within the literature by exploring a large sample of 218 university students' beliefs and values on sexual violence labels. Specifically, this research examined the discourses surrounding the labels "victim" and "survivor". Using a critical poststructuralist approach, six threads of discourse were theorized: *Identity*, *Resiliency*, *Self-exclusion*, *Blame*, *Control*, and *Severity*. All discourses mutually informed one another and gave insight into the complexities of the beliefs and values held towards sexual violence labels and their implications within society. Findings revealed that participants' beliefs about "victims" often re-produced discourse of rape culture and rape myth acceptance. Many participants believed that the label "survivor" should replace the label "victim" to bring tension to the discourses of rape culture and rape myths. Despite this, tensions were

present in each discourse, and counter-discourses highlighted the unintended consequences of shifting our language and removing the label “victim” in terms of recovery, justice, and rape culture. This research provides an opportunity to better understand how language and labels create discourse on sexual violence and explore and theorize their potential societal implications. The overarching goal of this research was to produce knowledge that could serve to eliminate the rates of sexual violence on university campuses and investigate the discourses that re-produce rape culture and rape myth acceptance.

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Appendix A – Ethics Amendment & Ethical Approval

Project: 2018-4475

Title: Sex in the Digitized Classroom: An exploratory mixed methods study on undergraduate students' attitudes, opinions, values, beliefs, and practices on sexual orientation and sexual consent

Dear: Health Sciences Research Ethics Board

We are requesting an amendment to our study. The amendment to the ethics application has been highlighted within the document. We are requesting to add a researcher to our study. The researcher's name is Brittany Matchett, who is a Master of Arts (Health Promotion) student at Dalhousie University under the supervision of Dr. Matthew Numer. For the fulfillment of a master's thesis, we are requesting to have Brittany join our study to analyze student's qualitative data from one textbook question within the sexual assault chapter. The question Brittany will be analyzing for her master's thesis is "*What is your view about the use of the word "survivor" instead of "victim" to describe those who have experienced sexual coercion or sexualized violence?"*". In 2019, Brittany analyzed the question "*Do you believe sexual consent should always require verbal consent? Why/Why not?"*" for the fulfillment of her honours thesis at Dalhousie University under the supervision of Dr. Matthew Numer. This amendment was approved by the Dalhousie REB in April 2019.

We would like to thank the Health Sciences Research Ethics Board for their careful review and consideration of this amendment to our project.

Thank you,

Dr. Matthew Numer
Health and Human Performance, Dalhousie University

To: Matthew Numer; Brittany Matchett
Cc: Research Ethics

Dear Matthew and Brittany,

This study was recently closed with our office. Analysis of study data, and writing, is permitted after a study is closed, and so the addition of Brittany to the study team is fine—and you may immediately proceed with this plan—since it is consistent with what was stated in the consent form. We will make a brief note to the file, but no amendment is needed at this time (and therefore an amendment approval letter won't be issued).

Let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,
Angela

Angela Hersey, MES

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