

‘Stay Safe’: A Case for Support in Sexually Victimised Female Student Communities

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Introduction

A recent UN Women (2021a) publication reports that 97% of UK women aged 18-24 have experienced sexual violence in a public space. Roberts *et al.* (2019: 324-325) define sexual violence as ‘rape and sexual assault’, ‘unwanted sexual touching’, and non-physical harassment such as ‘verbal abuse’. As most young women in the UK are likely to be subject to sexual violence in public spaces, it is important to understand what impact this has on women’s emotional perception of these spaces. The impact of these victimisation experiences on women, turning community spaces into places of vulnerability and fear, highlights why it is critical that women are supported in their experiences of sexual violence. Therefore, the aim of this dissertation is to demonstrate why female student victims of sexual violence need a ‘safe space’ to vocalise their victimisation experiences and work towards healing the harms this violence has inflicted.

Therefore, this dissertation will consist of two chapters, establishing why sexual violence is a critical issue and how victim’s needs must be supported where they are currently not. The first chapter will explore women’s experiences of sexual victimisation in public spaces and why they need to be supported. The second chapter will examine Lenton as a case study of how a ‘victim community’ lacks adequate support. Lenton is specifically chosen due to its high rate of sexual violence reports, with an average report of at least 1 a day, and where this space represents the intersection between gender, age and ‘unsafe’ spaces (POLICE.UK). Current informal support systems, such as the Buy/Sell Tickets (Nottingham uni) Facebook Group, serve as a temporary mechanism to support victims. However, this space is unsuitable for emotional support as it frequently shifts between a safe and unsafe space. This dissertation concludes that the female student ‘victim community’ need to be supported in order to feel that their victimisation in public spaces is legitimate despite their ‘non-ideal’

victim status and, so that they that they feel empowered in public spaces. Therefore, this dissertation diagnoses a lack of adequate support in Lenton and argues that the sexual victimisation of women more broadly must be prioritised.

Chapter 1

Female Sexual Victimisation: Space, Place, Gender and Safety

This chapter theorises emotional geography, gendered spaces, ‘unsafe’ spaces, community, collective victimisation and geographies of fear to establish the emotional aspect of space and place. The aim of this chapter is to explore where female students are multiply vulnerable to sexual victimisation, exploring the emotional needs of individuals and communities affected by sexual victimisation. By exploring the connections between the emotional nature of place and experiences of sexual violence, the chapter will conclude that female students need emotional support to repair the harms caused by direct and indirect experiences of sexual victimisation.

Emotional Geography, Gender and ‘Unsafe’ Spaces

The introduction of emotion into the analysis of ‘spatial processes’ has highlighted how emotions shape individuals' experiences of space and place (Held 2015: 34; Jupp 2013). The concept of emotional geographies can be used to understand the circular nature of the relationship between emotion, space and place (Held 2015). Each actor in this relationship is interconnected in their effect on the other, therefore Bondi *et al.* (2005) describe the construction of emotional geographies as being a mutually constitutive process (Boren *et al.*, 2020). Here, places extend beyond static geographies as they evoke, and are associated with, a particular set of ‘feelings’ for each individual (Jupp 2013: 533). Emotions create a link between spatial and internal psychological experiences, acting as a ‘connective tissue’ that blurs the boundaries between the two (Davidson and Milligan 2004: 524). Although the experience of emotions takes place within the body, an inner spatial experience, emotional geographies do not exclusively focus on the internal experience of emotion but on the projection of these internal experiences onto space and place (Bondi *et al.*, 2005; Held 2015).

The emotions individuals feel in relation to certain places and spaces, as Davidson and Milligan (2004: 523) argue, form 'unique personal geographies'.

Instead of perceiving space to be the contextual setting, the concept of emotional geographies highlights how emotions have the potential to 'shape' individuals' experience of their surroundings, holding the power to restrict certain spaces with attached negative emotions (Bondi *et al.*, 2005; Davidson and Milligan 2004). Accordingly, utilising emotion in the analysis of space and place is essential, as emotions have tangible effects on how individuals experience different spaces and places. Emotions are not exclusively triggered by space but also by interpersonal experiences within these spaces, which in turn shapes individual perceptions of spaces as 'safe' or 'unsafe' (Boren *et al.*, 2020). Bondi *et al.* (2005: 7) argue that emotions should be perceived as 'intrinsically relational' due to the 'close connections between boundary-forming processes and emotions'. Therefore, it is important to analyse how the emotional geographies of an individual are affected where they experience sexual victimisation in spaces within their neighbourhood, as these spaces frame the everyday lives of people living in these places (Jupp 2013).

Public spaces are inherently gendered and as a result, women are continually perceived as, and made to feel, vulnerable within these spaces (Pain 1997). Historically women have been confined to the private sphere through gendered care expectations and restricted from the masculine public sphere. The maintenance of this gendered divide, under the guise of promoting the 'safety' of women, is not only problematic as a technique of control but is also statistically incorrect. Women are more likely to be subject to sexual victimisation in private spaces (Pain 1997; Roberts *et al.*, 2019; Valentine 1992). The ideological continuation of the private sphere as a safe space for women, as a result of the media, their own experiences,

upbringing, and social contact, causes some women to disproportionately project their fear of violent attacks in the public, rather than the private. Additionally, policymakers have a role in constructing the public as an ‘unsafe’ space where they focus on the public ‘as an arena for violent crime’, substantiating women’s fear of these spaces (Pain 1997). Feminist discourse problematises these re-assertions, labelling them as attempts to reify the gendered public-private divide (Gardner 1995; Wesley and Gaarder 2004). Therefore, women’s fear of public spaces is a ‘spatial expression of patriarchy’, as the idea of public spaces as being dangerous for women maintains the notion that the public sphere is an inappropriate space for women to occupy (Valentine 1989: 389). As Green and Singleton (2006: 59) argue, space is ‘embedded in relations of power’ as gender continues to serve as a restrictive method of control to limit women’s movements beyond private spaces. The promotion of safety for women as remaining in private spaces, where the binaries of ‘safe-unsafe’ reflects the ‘private-public’, can be conceptualised as a form of ‘masculinist social control’ to manage women’s occupancy of spaces (The Roestone Collective 2014: 1349). Spaces themselves do not exclude women, instead, it is the projection of gendered expectations and social norms that shape the use of public spaces (Green and Singleton 2006). This is especially apparent where women’s use of public spaces is controlled by their ‘fear of male violence’ (Held 2015: 34). Therefore, male violence against women cannot be separated from the patriarchal structures that perpetuate and enable it, and so violence within these spaces must be analysed through a gendered lens (Roberts *et al.*, 2019; Walby 1990).

Individuals often hold their own perceptions of which spaces can be deemed ‘safe’ or ‘unsafe’. This process of spatial risk assessment is usually due to both their own experiences of certain spaces and external social cues (The Roestone Collective 2014: 1349; Valentine 1989). As Valentine (1989: 386) argues, individuals construct ‘maps’ of where they feel safe

and restrict their occupancy of spaces accordingly. This process is applicable where individuals make safety judgements about others that also inhabit spaces, assessing whether these individuals pose a threat to their safety within a space, despite whether this space was previously perceived as 'safe' in the spatial risk assessment (Tyner 2012). For example, the notion of 'stranger danger' often transforms spaces previously regarded as 'safe' into an 'inherently threatening' space, adapting the use of this space (The Roestone Collective 2014: 1349). Perceptions of which spaces are labelled 'safe' are, therefore, completely unique to the individual, and so is their use of spaces (The Roestone Collective 2014). Further, certain spaces can be considered 'safe' for certain individuals but 'unsafe' for others. Considerations of 'safety' intersect with other identities in addition to gender, such as race, class, sexuality and disability (Koskela and Pain 2000). Different individuals, with their own intersecting identities, have to undertake a constant process of 'negotiation and contestation' for which spaces are open to their use (Green and Singleton 2006: 859). Where the fear of space is involved in this negotiation process, constitutions of whether spaces are regarded as 'safe' is inherently linked to these intersecting identities (Green and Singleton 2006). For example, Our Streets Now (2021), a public movement in the UK advocating for the criminalization of public sexual harassment (PSH), report that lesbian women often testify that they are more likely to be verbally sexually harassed while out in public with a partner than when walking alone. All women have to 'fight' for their occupancy of spaces, but it is important to recognise the differences within this group where some are more advantaged in their negotiation of this space as 'safe' (Green and Singleton 2006: 859).

Women frequently avoid spaces where they are pressured by social norms and agencies, such as the police, to view certain spaces as 'risky' or 'unsafe' (Pain 1997). The external promotion of certain spaces as dangerous subtly incorporates controlled 'images of danger'

into individual emotional geographies of spaces (Stanko 1990: 45; Tyner 2012). Where women are encouraged to assess the perceived risk of spaces, certain spaces are conditionally ‘unsafe’ whereas others may be continually perceived as this. For example, public spaces are perceived as conditionally ‘unsafe’ at night yet ‘safe’ during daylight hours. Furthermore, concerning sexual victimisation, women are taught that if they experience victimisation while occupying public spaces then they are partially to blame, as these spaces are considered inherently ‘risky’ for women (The Roestone Collective 2014; Tyner 2012).

Conceptualisations of ‘safe’ spaces are inextricably linked to fear, as ‘safe’ spaces are constructed in relation to an ‘underlying threat of violence’ (The Roestone Collective 2014: 1349). There is a tension present in ‘risky’ and ‘unsafe’ spaces, as women have to occupy these spaces in their daily lives but are also continually told to avoid them, reinforcing the perception of these spaces as dangerous (Roberts *et al.*, 2019). Where these ‘safe’ spaces are perceived as exclusively within the private sphere, more specifically within the home, many women experience feelings of vulnerability when occupying spaces beyond the boundaries of the private (Wesley and Gaarder 2004). Women continue to feel restricted by the ‘invisible prisons’ that are ‘safe’ spaces, as fear of the public and violence within this space serves as a tool of self-exclusion (Green and Singleton 2006; Madriz 1997: 93). In contrast, some women choose to partake in ‘bold walks’ where they actively occupy certain spaces despite their ‘unsafe’ status (Koskela 1997: 316). However, Wesley and Gaarder (2004) argue that even within these active attempts to subvert the gendered restrictions of ‘unsafe’ spaces, the feelings of vulnerability left by the promoted fear of public spaces never completely fade.

As women are often blamed for their victimisation in public spaces where they are seen to be putting themselves at risk, it is useful to link the concepts of ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe’ to Christie’s (1986) theory of ‘ideal’ and ‘non-ideal’ victims. Christie’s (1986: 19) idea of the ‘ideal’

victim is innocent, not seen to put themselves at risk, undergoing a ‘respectable project’, weak and does not attempt to resist their victimiser (Roberts *et al.*, 2019). This conception of victimhood feeds into existing gender norms and undermines the credibility of the majority of victimisation experiences. For example, when women occupy spaces deemed as ‘unsafe’ they are presented as holding a level of culpability for their victimisation and lose their status as ‘ideal’ victims. The notion of the ‘ideal’ victim feeds into victim-blaming attitudes where if victims do not meet the requirements to achieve the ‘ideal’ victim categorisation, it allows others to question the credibility of victim experiences. Undermining the credibility of victims can lead to secondary victimisation, where victims are denied emotional support from the community or official agencies, such as the police, if they do not meet the expectations of the ‘ideal’ victim (Randall 2010; Roberts *et al.*, 2019). Women victimized in ‘unsafe’ spaces are more likely to be subject to victim-blaming attitudes by official agencies, such as the police, and wider society because they are blamed for putting themselves at ‘risk’ in these dangerous spaces (Walklate 2008; Holstein and Miller 1990).

Community, Collective Victimisation and Geographies of Fear

The term ‘community’ can be used to describe a set of people within a specific geographical space that have shared experiences (Jupp 2013). This concept links to the emotional geographies felt by members of communities, as individuals within these groups often feel a ‘sense’ of community where they feel ‘comfortable’ and ‘at home’ (Jupp 2013: 547; Jupp 2008). However, McDowell (1999: 100) theorises ‘community’ as relational due to the existence of both ‘material social relations’ and ‘symbolic meanings’. Therefore, a relational community is much like conceptualisations of ‘home’ in that it is ‘a fluid network of social relations, context dependent, contingent, infused with power relations and created by mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion’ (Tyner 2012: 135). Here, ‘community’ only

maintains a conditional attachment to geographical surroundings, if examining the relational community within a specific physical space, but ultimately can transcend the confines of static spaces (McDowell 1999; Tyner 2012). While this dissertation utilises McDowell's (1999) definition of community as relational, it is acknowledged that the concept of 'community' is highly contested within geographical literature and between disciplines (see Aitken 1998, Sen 2006, Young 1990). It is essential to utilise the relational definition of 'community' within the context of this dissertation to legitimately employ this concept with regard to victimology theories of collective victimisation, interactional victimology, and to extend analyses of emotional geographies beyond physical spaces to virtual spaces (Holstein and Miller 1990; Strobl 2004: 304; Zehr 2015: 37).

The specific community subject to analysis here is female student populations that have experienced or fear sexual victimisation, constituting a distinct 'victim community' (Morrall *et al.*, 2010: 822). As Universities UK (2016) reports, as 45% of students attending university are under the age of 21, they have a statistically increased risk of victimisation (Roberts *et al.*, 2019: 325). In addition, Phipps and Young (2015) report that when discussing sexual harassment with a group of 40 female university students, two-thirds disclosed that they experienced sexual harassment regularly. Therefore, female students form a unique community subject to regular sexual victimisation (Roberts *et al.*, 2019). It is important to examine the harm and impact of this victimisation experience, how it affects female students' emotional geographies where they are victimised and what can be done to support these individuals following victimisation experiences. Using the relational definition of 'community', this dissertation will later explore victimised female students' experiences of space and place through a specific physical place, Lenton, Nottingham, extending analysis to the Buy/Sell Tickets (Nottingham uni) Facebook group, a virtual community space.

As Strobl (2004) highlights, there are varying categorisations within the concept of victimhood. Specifically, ‘personal’ and ‘collective’ victimisation can be used to understand the emotional needs of the individual, the victimised female students and the wider female student community. Collective victimisation is experienced when attacks, in this case sexual violence, are directed specifically against a certain social group, female students (Roberts *et al.*, 2019). All those within this ‘social category’ who are directly victimised, experiencing harm as a direct result of sexual violence, can be considered as ‘personal victims’ (Strobl 2004: 304). Strobl (2004) argues that the categorisation of each individual as either a ‘personal’ or ‘collective’ victim is reliant on the victim’s perception of their experience and whether they have felt direct or indirect harm, as only the victim can fully understand the extent to which they subjectively feel victimised (Strobl 2004).

Our Streets Now (2020) report that 84% of female students in the UK have experienced sexual harassment in public spaces, highlighting that this violence is not uncommon or unusual. Following experiences like this, the emotional geographies of those victimised can become permanent geographies of fear (Wesley and Gaarder 2004; Valentine 1992). As an impact of this permanent fear and expectation of violence, ‘personal’ victims of sexual violence can feel further restricted in their community spaces (Davidson and Milligan 2004). In addition, those within the victim community that share identities, for example the female student community, may also experience ‘collective’ group harms leading to the perception of community spaces as particularly ‘unsafe’ for all within this group. This is particularly significant for the female student demographic being analysed because, as previously explored, women are continuously made to feel ‘unsafe’ in public spaces due to the continuation of the gendered public-private divide and the expectation for them to avoid

‘risky’ spaces (Pain 1997). The threat of violence prompted by experiences of sexual violence increases feelings of vulnerability when occupying public spaces, especially where these spaces are sites of prior victimisation. Mehta and Bondi (1999: 75) report that female university students living in urban spaces engage ‘defensively’ with these spaces, as they expect to encounter hostility in public spaces here (Wesley and Gaarder 2004). Extending Newman’s (1972) literature of ‘defensible space’ in the city, fear creates limitations for women where their mobility within these spaces are shaped by this fear (Davidson and Milligan 2004: 526).

As a result of victimisation experiences, Roberts *et al.* (2019: 327) report that victims can feel ‘angry’, ‘fearful’, ‘vulnerable’ and ‘unsafe’, and due to these emotions are more likely to ‘avoid certain groups, men and places’ (Kelly 1988). Fear may manifest in subtle behavioural changes, such as where women place a ‘virtual curfew’ on themselves, usually reflecting daylight hours (Pain 1997: 234). Other preventative tactics encouraged by fear include, being in a constant ‘state of vigilance’, as women are continuously apprehensive with their engagement with public spaces (Pain 1997: 234). Hollander (2001: 105) reports that women may alternatively ‘[ask] men for protection’, ‘[modify] their clothes’ or only go outside ‘in the company of other women’. Our Streets Now (2021) report that PSH ‘limits our freedom and sense of security’, as women feel unable to occupy public spaces without an overriding feeling of vulnerability and fear of victimisation. Victim testimonials shared by Our Streets Now on their Instagram page reveal the impact of victimisation where women change their habits and public behaviour as a result. One testimonial reads: ‘I was walking to my student house during university and a guy shouted at me “where are you going blonde bitch?”... I had to take a different route home’ (Our Streets Now 2021). This supports research conducted by the NUS (2018), which reports that women are likely to avoid certain spaces, changing their

behaviour in response to victimisation experiences. These spatial restrictions can impact well-being and shape self-identity, as Pain (1997) argues, these are perhaps the most long-term harms caused by fear. Where women have to live with a 'shadow of sexual assault', they are confronted with constant vulnerability in public spaces, heightening existing fear and exaggerating harms further where women have experienced 'personal' victimisation (Ferraro 1995; Strobl 2004; Wesley and Gaarder 2004: 646).

Through exploring the multiple vulnerabilities faced by this 'victim community', this chapter has established that support is needed by sexually victimised females in order to support their emotional geographies of space and place. Therefore, this 'victim community' is harmed in specific ways and have specific gendered needs, recognising that different vulnerabilities exist within this group where other inequalities intersect, and so support services need to be specifically designed for this 'victim community'. The next chapter will expand upon supportive services, analysing Lenton as a case study for female sexual victimisation.

Chapter 2

Support in Lenton: Analysing the Buy/Sell Facebook Group

This chapter explores the existing support available for the female student ‘victim community’ in Lenton and analyses the effectiveness of informal support through the Buy/Sell Tickets (Nottingham uni) Facebook group, from now referred to as the Buy/Sell group. Furthermore, it examines why the presence, or lack of, emotional support impacts a victim's perception of these spaces as ‘safe’ for vocalising harms. This virtual space has the potential to cause secondary victimisation where commenters joke about victimisation experiences, highlighting the ‘risk’ of informal spaces for supporting the emotional needs of victims. Therefore, it concludes that a more controlled space is needed to effectively support victims of sexual violence. This could be a more formal ‘victim support’ Facebook group, University support sessions or restorative processes facilitated by Lenton police.

Contextualising Lenton as a Site of Victimisation

Between April 2019 and April 2021 there have been 752 reports, an average of 31 reports a month, of violent or sexual crimes in Lenton and Dunkirk, Nottingham (POLICE.UK 2021). The homogenisation of violent and sexual crimes in reporting statistics, including both public and private spaces, highlights a limitation in the crime reporting process. This combined statistic increases the difficulty of establishing which crime type needs to be prioritised. Regardless, the high statistic does signify that sexual violence is a critical issue in this area. Additionally, where it is nationally reported that females are disproportionately impacted by sexual violence, it can be assumed that the rate of sexual violence incidents in this area is largely against females (UN Women 2021b). As Roberts *et al.* (2019: 325) report, individuals under the age of 21 are the most at risk of victimisation. Therefore, the high crime rate in

Lenton represents the intersection between gendered vulnerabilities faced by women in public spaces and a high rate of victimisation as a result of the young population.

Support for the 'victim community' in Lenton exists but is not adequate to manage the scale of the problem and to effectively meet the needs of all victims. Despite the high rate of reported violent and sexual crimes, sexual violence is consistently excluded from Lenton police's 'policing priorities' (POLICE.UK 2021). Nottinghamshire police offer support for sexual victims through the Topaz Centre. However, this support facility is aimed at those who have experienced a physical assault, and so the emotional impact of non-physical sexual violence is shown as a lower priority for local police (Topaz Centre 2021). The University of Nottingham's duty of care towards the student 'victim community' is limited as Lenton is beyond the university's boundaries. Additionally, as not all victimisers in Lenton are students, they cannot be subject to the University's civil sexual misconduct policies. The University's available support includes a 'report and support' service that allows victims to report their sexual victimisation experiences to the university (University of Nottingham 2021). A case is then opened, and students are able to have a meeting with a welfare officer where they are guided to relevant internal and external support facilities. Although this service does exist, it is not advertised effectively, as repeatedly argued by Our Streets Now UoN (2021).

Our Streets Now UoN, a local branch of the Our Streets Now UK campaign, is an example of online informal support for the Lenton 'victim community'. Our Streets Now UoN shares victim testimonials on their Instagram page sent in from local female victims of PSH, largely focussing on Lenton. Many of these experiences relate to female students' fear of walking through spaces that they occupy daily, for example, spaces encountered on the walk home

from university. As shown in Fig. 1, Lenton is perceived to be a place that constantly evokes negative emotions while occupying this space, such as being ‘scared’. This account demonstrates the scale of sexual victimisation experiences in Lenton, and continually advocates for more support for these victims. Although the Our Streets Now UoN Instagram page allows victims to vocalise the harms they experience, the posts are anonymised and so victims can never receive direct support through this space. Therefore, although extremely effective as an advocacy space, it is unsuitable as a long-term option for victim support.

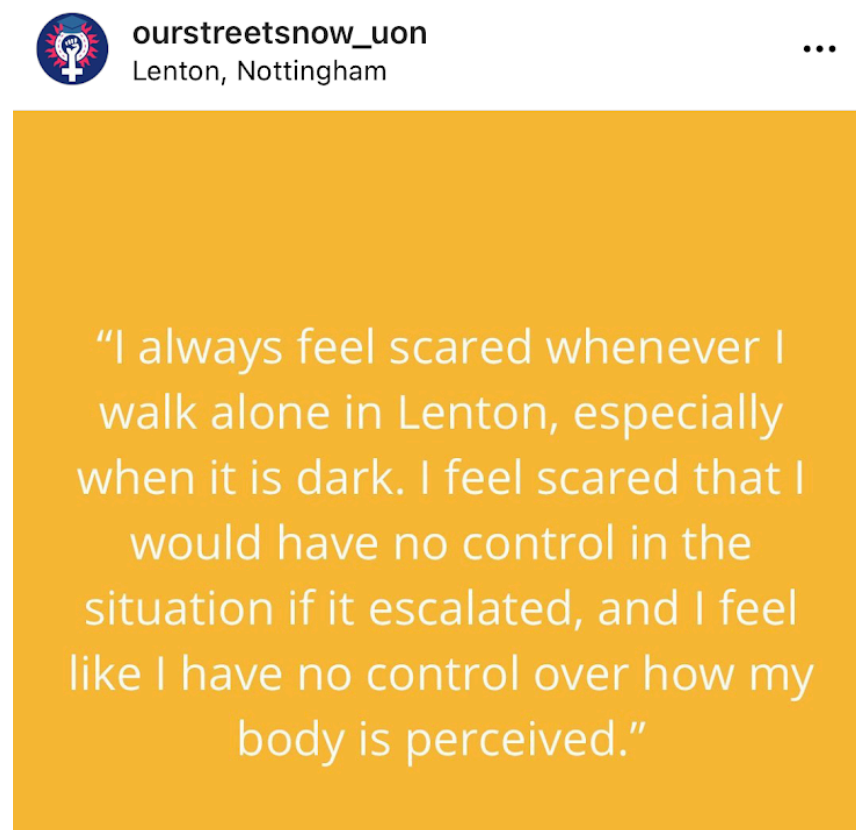


Fig. 1. Our Streets Now UoN Instagram Post. (Our Streets Now UoN 2021).

Methodology

To explore the existence of support in Lenton, I examined the Buy/Sell group, an informal online community group. Although this group is intended as a virtual community hub to, for example, buy and sell club night tickets, it is also utilised as a space to share victimisation

experiences within Lenton. Due to the scale of the group, with over 34,600 members, the group's engagement and reach allows victimisation posts to operate as a warning system for those vulnerable to sexual victimisation in public spaces and as a mechanism of community support for female students who have been directly victimised. Therefore, this section will analyse the suitability of the virtual Buy/Sell group as a functioning 'safe' space for victims to gain support.

The research conducted on the Buy/Sell group focussed on victim posts between April 2019 and April 2021. Relevant posts were found by using a specific set of search terms influenced by geographies of fear literature (see Wesley and Gaarder 2004; Pain 1997; Valentine 1992). The terms used were: 'safe', 'careful', 'creepy', 'weird', 'following', 'grabbed', 'touched', 'assault', 'harassment' and 'sexual'. There were a total of 73 posts that related to sexual incidents in this area, 17 of these posts were selected as these were specifically relevant to the following discussion on the interaction between virtual spaces, gender and emotional support. Further, in order to examine gendered interactions in this space all of the posts selected were posted by female group members.

Whilst I was contacting posters, one offered to expand on their victimisation experiences in Lenton. However, as I am not trained to address the needs of victims, undertaking the responsibility of listening to victims' emotional experiences would be just as unsuitable as the informal services currently available. Therefore, I did not feel equipped to listen to and support victims beyond the scope of their already shared experiences on the Buy/Sell group. However, these interactions do further indicate the need for a 'safe' space for victims to vocalise their experiences of sexual violence in Lenton and be listened to by trained facilitators.

Alongside a theoretical interest, I have a personal interest in this group as a researcher due to my identity within this 'victim community'. From living in Lenton and belonging to this community, I want to understand the intersecting geographies of victimisation of space and place for this particular 'victim community'. As this group is private and only open to Nottingham students within this area, my personal involvement with this group prior to this research is the reason I was aware of this space as an opportunity to analyse the informal support available in Lenton.

Facebook Groups as a Form of Informal Support

Multiple theorists (see Buehler 2017; Buehler *et al.*, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2020) have identified Facebook as a social network site (SNS) capable of providing 'supportive communication' for community members. Facebook enables victims to 'broadcast' their support requests to all members of a group, allowing these users to appeal to a wider audience at one time. Therefore, increasing the possibility of supportive engagement (Buehler *et al.*, 2019: 2567). Further, Lucero (2017) argues that due to the nature of posting on virtual spaces, victims can control the communication of their victimisation experience, and so victims regain a certain level of control over their vulnerability in this space. However, the suitability of Facebook as a form of victim support is questionable at multiple levels, such as its inadequate capacity to meet victim needs, the possibility for individuals to be rejected as victims by other users, and the risk of further victimisation where individuals are subject to online sexual harassment (OSH) and gendered 'trolling' (Jungselius 2019; Lewis *et al.*, 2017; Vitis and Gilmour 2017). These negative online experiences have the potential to cause further harm, also known as 'secondary victimisation' (Randall 2010). Furthermore, applying emotional geography theory

to Facebook as a virtual space exposes where these spaces can become emotionally ‘unsafe’ for victims (Bondi *et al.*, 2005; Davidson and Milligan 2004).

Considering the Buy/Sell Group as a ‘safe space’ for victimised female students



Fig. 2. Victimisation post on the Buy/Sell group. (Buy/Sell 2021).

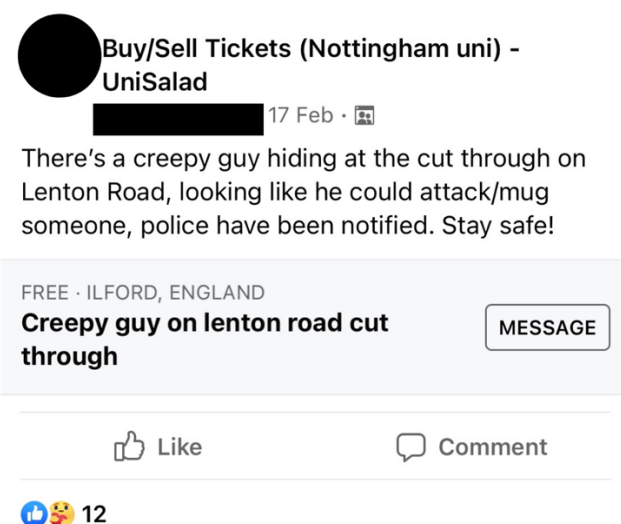


Fig. 3. Buy/Sell post warning others in the area to ‘stay safe’. (Buy/Sell 2021).

The use of the Buy/Sell group often shifts between its intended use as a space to buy and sell items or event tickets and as an informal space for victims to share their experiences. It is not uncommon to see a post detailing a sexual victimisation experience preceded and followed by posts selling or appealing for club night tickets. The juxtaposition of these victimisation posts trivialises victim experiences, where they become an expected aspect of student life. This content incongruity signifies the limited capacity for this group to adequately support those victimised and address their emotional needs, as it is not designed or intended for this purpose. The variety of posts on the Buy/Sell group highlight that this space cannot be analysed exclusively as a 'victims support' group as victim experience posts are incompatible with the intended use of the page. As seen in the group's 'about' section, the admin describes the group as a space to buy and sell tickets and other items, there is no mention of this group as a space to seek support for sexual victimisation or warn others of possible victimisation. Further, the admin states they are 'not responsible for any activity that occurs on this page', by doing so they reject the responsibility to monitor this space as safe for victims, as well as any interactions that occur within it. However, as this group continues to be utilised as a virtual space for victims to post about their experiences, the group's ability to support victims and meet their needs must be analysed.

Although female group members post their victimisation experiences to warn others, in addition to looking for informal support, this act of sharing experiences can harm other women's perception of the space, increasing their feelings of vulnerability or fear in relation to this space. Comparing this process of online sharing to Stanko's (1990: 100) theorisation of violence shared through news outlets, 'sexual safety' is 'shattered' where women are exposed to stories of violence against other women in public spaces. When faced with experiences shared by directly victimised women, a woman's own perception of her personal

safety is impacted. This is exaggerated where the information source, the Buy/Sell group, covers an extremely specific physical geography, such as in Fig. 2 and 3. where the posters refer to specific roads in Lenton. As a result, women reading these posts may be encouraged to change their routine, as shown by the NUS (2018) report, avoiding areas portrayed as ‘unsafe’ by posters. Although this is positive in terms of avoiding physical threats of violence, the emotional impact of this can exaggerate women’s fear and vulnerability in these spaces despite a lack of personal victimisation (Roberts *et al.*, 2019).

Holstein and Miller (1990) dispute that the victim has complete control over their categorisation as a victim, arguing that the individual has to be recognised as a victim by others to gain this status. The application of the ‘victim’ label is subject to an interactional debate here, as the comments in response to posts shift between supportive and mocking responses (Holstein and Miller 1990). The act of ‘liking’ is significant on the Buy/Sell group as in this case it signifies a quantifiable form of support for victims and signifies whether respondents perceive the poster’s victimisation as legitimate (Jungselius 2019). This is highlighted where some victimisation posts have more likes than others, which is usually in conjunction with how ‘shocking’ the post is, feeding into whether the poster meets expectations of the ‘ideal’ victim category (Strobl 2004). Where posters provide detailed explanations of their victimisation, highlighting whether they were attacked while doing a ‘respectable activity’ such as walking back from university in the daylight, they often receive more likes (Christie 1986: 19; Roberts *et al.*, 2019). For example, a poster that demonstrated the ‘ideal’ nature of their victimisation by signifying they had taken preventative precautions by walking home with their friends received 506 likes whereas another post where the victim describes being approached whilst walking alone at night received 81 likes, considerably fewer. These are routinely responded to with outcries of horror from the female group

members, as these individuals could be similarly impacted by this type of victimisation (See Fig. 3). Here, it is clear that although perhaps carried out inadvertently, responders reinforce notions of legitimate and illegitimate victimisation experiences where support levels differ between posts.



Fig. 4. Comments in response to a post from a female user about victimisation. (Buy/Sell 2021).

In addition to liking, Facebook enables commenters to choose alternate ‘reactions’ to respond to posts. Therefore, reactions to victimisation posts demonstrate where other group members feel ‘sad’, ‘angry’ or ‘happy’ about the experience shared by posters (Li *et al.*, 2020). However, Li *et al.* (2020) argue that these one-click reactions are an inadequate form of support in response to individuals vocalising their victimisation experiences, as these reactions are inherently unsympathetic due to their low-effort nature. In comparison, ‘composed communication’ such as comments demonstrate a higher level of effort and

translate as more compassionate (Li *et al.*, 2020: 783). Although the selected 17 Buy/Sell group posts received over 100 reactions on average, only 3 posts received over 20 comments. Where posts received more than 20 comments, the majority of the comments were male group members tagging their friends while making negative jokes about the post (Fig. 4). There were very few positive comments in response to these posts, with an average of one or fewer positive comments per post. This demonstrates where the virtual space fails to meet victim needs, as Li *et al.*, (2020) argue that positive commenting greatly changes the victim's perception of how supported they are.

A negative form of commenting is also depicted in the Buy/Sell group where certain individuals, mainly men, respond to posts with jokes, mocking the victimisation experience. These responses can be labelled as 'trolling', where these responses serve to embarrass, minimise the harms experienced by the victim or harm victims further (Lowenstein-Barkai 2020: 15; Lumsden and Morgan 2016). Where group members, mainly men, responded to victimisation posts negatively, the content of these posts contributes to 'lad culture' discourses where female sexual victimisation is mocked (Lockyer and Savigny 2019). As a result, the harms of the posted victimisation experience are minimised. One male member tagged his male friend saying, 'obvs you with ur parka and beanie you horrible boy', jokingly suggesting that his friend regularly engaged in this behaviour (Fig. 4). Here, the commenter deems it appropriate to respond to the post without regard for how his comments may impact the original poster, and potentially cause secondary victimisation. This insensitivity highlights the continued relevance of the gendered power dynamic in the public sphere where the emotional safety of the female posters is threatened by male commenters (Roberts *et al.*, 2019; The Roestone Collective 2014). Where commenters mock the posters victimisation, they actively engage in a debate regarding whether the individual can legitimately claim the

‘victim’ label (Holstein and Miller 1990). In turn, the impact of the poster’s victimisation experience is minimised where the vocalisation of their harms is rejected (Lockyer and Savigny 2019). Here, victims may experience secondary victimisation where their victimhood is rejected (Walklate 2008).

Just as women feel they are excluded from physical spaces by fear of sexual victimisation, virtual spaces can exclude women where they experience negative reactions to their posts (Fig. 4.). Lewis *et al.* (2017: 1479) argue that violence extends to online space where the ‘wallpaper’ of violence and abuse experienced by women transcends physical space. Here, the concept of ‘spatial patriarchy’ is revisited through the jokes seen in response to the posts on the Buy/Sell group, highlighting a resolute display of toxic masculinity where these jokes are deemed as appropriate (Valentine 1989). Megarry (2014: 47) argues that this type of sexual harassment in virtual spaces should be considered as a strategy of ‘excluding women’s voices from the digital public sphere’. Therefore, similarities between online and offline behaviour cannot be ignored where this highlights a constant pattern of misogyny and violence. Men can be ‘jerks’ in physical public spaces and demonstrate the same type of behaviour in online spaces, signifying that this behaviour is a wider problem that needs addressing and that victims need more controlled environments where they can escape this behaviour (Shaw 2014: 274). Women continue to be restricted in virtual spaces as they are in physical spaces, demonstrating a continuum of gendered public spaces. Although this type of response to posts is not uncommon on the Buy/Sell group, these responses need to be analysed through a gendered lens to recognise that this engagement with posts cannot be justifiable due to its ‘expected’ nature (Vitis and Gilmour 2017). Problematically, the suggestion that women should ‘disengage’ from the online community when they are harmed by commenters responses mirrors arguments that women should avoid certain public spaces deemed unsafe

for them if they do not want to be sexually victimised (Lumsden and Morgan 2016; Vitis and Gilmour 2017: 339).

The group does make some attempts to regulate the environment and promote it as a ‘safe space’ for victims. The admin and certain group members have shared posts criticising other group members who respond mockingly to victimisation posts. Where members do continue to ‘joke’ in response to these posts, the admin states that they will be blocked and permanently excluded from the group. Since this post, there has been a reduced frequency of negative responses to posts. The most recent selected posts from 2021 have between 1-3 comments of these nature in comparison to an earlier post from January 2020 that has 124 ‘trolling’ comments (Fig. 2). However, attempts to regulate the environment will remain responsive as the admin cannot block members until they have behaved in this way.

Therefore, it cannot be ensured the Buy/Sell group is a consistent ‘safe space’, and so more controlled environment is needed to effectively support victims.

The Buy/Sell group highlights the tension between the beneficial nature of virtual spaces for vocalising victimisation experiences while also demonstrating the difficulties with sharing vulnerabilities with the wider community online, where negative responses can cause those victimised to feel as though their harms as a result of this experience have been deemed illegitimate (Randall 2010). The variety of responses to posts demonstrate how the virtual spaces can shift between ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe’ spaces for victims, establishing this virtual space as emotionally unstable. This space has the potential to cause secondary victimisation where the victimised posters feel that their victimisation has been mocked and their support needs have not been met (Holstein and Miller 1990; Randall 2010). Therefore, the shifting safety of

virtual community spaces for victims demonstrates the necessity for a controlled environment for victims to vocalise their experiences and receive emotional support.

Conclusion

This dissertation has established where female students form a distinct ‘victim community’ that is multiply vulnerable. Women are subject to gendered restrictions in physical and virtual spaces, blamed where they expose themselves to ‘risky’ spaces, labelled as ‘non-ideal’ victims where they do not fit the expectations of the ‘ideal’ weak and innocent victim (Christie 1986; Green and Singleton 2006; Pain 1997; Randall 2010). The impact of victimisation shapes the emotional geographies of female students as geographies of fear, where they feel restricted and change their behaviour as a result (Wesley and Gaarder 2004; Valentine 1992). This demonstrates the need for victim support in order to repair where victim’s experience their community spaces as geographies of fear. Within the context of Lenton, the Buy/Sell group acts as a temporary response to this need for support. However, as chapter two has demonstrated, the Buy/Sell group is not an adequate form of emotional support for sexually victimised female students as these individuals are exposed to negative interactions where their victimisation is mocked, shaping their emotional geography of the online space as one of extended gendered vulnerability. Therefore, more formal responses to this victimisation are required. This support could be in the form of a more formal Facebook group, designed for this ‘victim community’ specifically or more formal public support such as restorative processes run through the police or university. These forms of support would provide victims with the opportunity to productively work to repair the harms felt by their victimisation experience and be responded to by trained facilitators that understand the needs of the victim, avoiding secondary victimisation (Gherkin 2012; Hoyle and Young 2003; Orcutt *et al.*, 2020). Women’s emotional safety, and their intersectional experiences of sexual victimisation, need to be prioritised in order to subvert the continual cycle of their vulnerability in public spaces. Where violence continues to be the norm, and is trivialised as such, women will continue to be restricted in their use of all public spaces. As Our Streets

Now (2021) state: ‘we deserve to be in public without feeling anxious’ and ‘we deserve to feel safe’.

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