RECLAIMING THE SEXUALLY TRAUMATIZED BODY: WOMEN'S NARRATIVES OF EMBODIMENT AFTER SEXUAL ASSAULT

by

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ABSTRACT

Research has focused on the consequences of sexual assault, with limited attention to women's lived bodily experiences post-assault. Using a constructivist paradigm with a critical feminist lens, the study employed an embodiment framework to examine the research question: *How do women experience embodiment throughout the healing process after sexual assault?* Embodiment is the way one experiences, perceives, and understands their body within their physical and cultural contexts (Piran, 2017). Narrative inquiry was used to investigate eight women's experiences of embodiment throughout the healing process following sexual assault. Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted across participants' narratives and the following themes were identified: (1) Perceived and Scrutinized; (2) Influence of Social Media and Societal Norms; (3) Disconnection; (4) Body Discomfort; (5) Connection with Others; (6) Body Comfort; (7) Physical Movement Facilitating Healing; and (8) Understanding, Renewal, and Reclamation. The findings are discussed along with implications for counselling psychology and future research directions.

Keywords: Sexual assault; Embodiment; Healing; Women's Mental Health

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

> We need to reclaim every shattered fragment of our body to experience wholeness. Healing happens as we invite our bodies back into the narratives of our lives. Even if our body still feels somewhat separated from the self, this invitation can be the first act of acceptance and arrival to learn to say to ourselves, "This is my body."
>
> Hillary McBride, *The Wisdom of Your Body*

This quote emphasizes the central theme of my thesis, which is the process of reclaiming and reintegrating one's body after sexual trauma. Acknowledging and reconnecting with one's body is essential to achieving a sense of wholeness. I intend to demonstrate the importance of addressing women's experiences of embodiment throughout the healing journey after sexual assault. In this paper, the terms "sexual trauma," "sexual violence," and "sexual assault" will be used, and although they sound similar, these words have different meanings. Sexual trauma refers to the psychological and emotional impact experienced by individuals who have been subjected to sexual violence or assault (Gameon et al., 2021). In Canada, sexual violence is a form of gender-based violence and encompasses any form of non-consensual sexual contact, including sexual assault and sexual harassment (Government of Canada, n.d.). Furthermore, the Canadian definition of sexual assault refers to any unwanted sexual activity or contact, emphasizing a non-consensual nature (Department of Justice Canada, 2010).

Globally, sexual violence is one of the most prevalent forms of lived trauma (World Health Organization, 2013). According to the Department of Justice Canada (2019), approximately 83% of sexual assaults are unreported, with merely 5% of incidents being disclosed to the authorities. Statistics reveal that approximately one in three women and one in eight men in Canada will experience some form of sexual violence in their lifetime (Perreault,

2015). The victims of sexual assault are predominantly young women, with those aged 15–24 years experiencing the highest rate of victimization (Perreault, 2015). Alarmingly, the majority of sexual assaults are committed by perpetrators known to the victim, such as friends, acquaintances, or neighbours (Department of Justice Canada, 2022)

The history of research on sexual trauma dates back many decades; however, much of the research on sexual assault and rape has been primarily explored to determine effective treatment (Dion et al., 2022; Gameon et al., 2021; Sinko et al., 2020; Sinko et al., 2021). Treatment-focused studies often employ an approach to conceptualizing trauma that revolves around a checklist of symptoms, which usually falls short of capturing the entirety of the lived experience. Although much of the research on sexual assault has focused on the consequences and factors that facilitate healing, it is unequivocally clear that sexual assault is a devastating violation of bodily autonomy and can have profound and long-lasting effects on individuals' physical, psychological, and emotional well-being. There remains limited research on the lived and embodied experiences after these events.

Embodiment will be addressed in this research because negative embodiment tends to be problematic, resulting in disruption as to how individuals exist within themselves in relation to culture (Piran, 2017). Embodiment represents the lived experience of individuals, bridging the natural and cultural realms, with the body serving as the locus of interaction between these influences (Merleau-Ponty et al., 2013). This concept extends beyond how people perceive and feel about their bodies and encompasses how individuals engage with and interpret their environment. Embodiment influences an individual's sense of self, their relationships, and their place in the world. This research aimed to focus on women's experience of embodiment, addressing the gap in the literature that overlooks how women experience, perceive, and

understand their bodies within their physical and cultural contexts throughout the healing process after sexual assault.

Sexual violence, specifically sexual assault, is not an isolated event that occurs at a specific point in time; it is also shaped by the way that society talks and understands it (Canan, 2019; Pijlman et al., 2023). There is a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between the occurrences of sexual assault and the cultural discourse surrounding it. Legal frameworks and public discourse shape how survivors of sexual assault are supported and how (or if) perpetrators are held accountable, which in turn, directly impacts justice outcomes and societal attitudes toward sexual violence (Mendest et al., 2019; Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022; Whisnant, 2017). Moreover, these narratives, which will be discussed in further detail in this thesis, can affect survivors of sexual assault, influencing their willingness to come forward, seek support, and ability to navigate their healing journey in a society that often struggles to fully comprehend the complexities of sexual trauma (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022; Pijlman et al., 2023; Whisnant, 2017).

Research on the topic of sexuality explores how experiences of sexual trauma impact individuals' bodily sensations and interpersonal relationships. This area of study acknowledges that the repercussions of sexual trauma extend beyond symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), significantly influencing how survivors engage with their intimate environments (Bagget et al., 2017). Historically, limited research has been dedicated to understanding the intersection between PTSD resulting from sexual trauma and its implications for sexuality. Although trauma-focused therapies are widely advocated and empirically supported for addressing sexual trauma, they often overlook the specific sexual concerns that can arise post-assault, such as changes in intimate relationships, sexual expression, and self-perception

(Baggett et al., 2017). Specifically, little is known about the healing process after sexual assault (Gameon et al., 2021; Sinko et al., 2020). This point indicates a related gap that the present study aims to address—the lack of attention to the body, bodily experiences, and bodily connections in the context of sexual assault.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a review of the current literature on sexual assault and identify gaps within this field of research. I will begin by defining sexual assault and demonstrating the racial disparities within sexual assault. Following, I will discuss the journey after sexual assault, which includes the psychological consequences, changes in one's relationship with their body, guilt, shame, self-blame, and healing. In the subsequent section, I discuss theories of embodiment, specifically the developmental theory of embodiment (Piran, 2017), and further explain the construct of the experience of embodiment (Piran, 2016). I will then demonstrate how sexual assault can be conceptualized within an embodiment framework. In conclusion to this chapter, I will provide a summary of the literature to highlight the gaps and state the purpose of the research study, identifying the research question.

Sexual Assault

Defining Sexual Assault

One of the primary difficulties in sexual assault research is establishing a clear definition of sexual assault. Sexual assault is a broad term that includes a wide range of non-consensual acts committed against an individual. In Canada, sexual assault refers to unwanted sexual activity or non-consensual sexual touching, including fondling and groping, and sexual attacks such as rape, and coercion (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008). The defining characteristic of sexual assault is the absence of consent, meaning that the victim did not agree to the sexual activity (Department of Justice Canada, 2010). The legal definitions of sexual assault can vary throughout North America, but criminal codes generally recognize the importance of the absence of consent and the presence of force or intimidation (National Research Council, 2014). Consent must be informed, voluntary, and mutual, with the ability to be withdrawn at any time. The

varied definitions of sexual assault reflect the inherent challenge of capturing the full scope while emphasizing consent as the defining element.

Because the definitions of sexual assault vary across different statutes, the National Academies Panel on Measuring Rape and Sexual Assault suggests that national surveys should adopt a definition that is inclusive of all genders and encompasses a wide range of penetrative acts (National Research Council, 2014). This definition should specify that the perpetrator's intent is for sexual arousal or degradation, involves the use or threat of force, emphasizes the absence of consent, and includes various forms of unwanted sexual contact beyond penetration (National Research Council, 2014). According to the Criminal Code of Canada, sections 271 and 272.1(1) describe sexual assault as "any unwanted sexual act done by one person to another or sexual activity without one's consent or voluntary agreement" (Department of Justice Canada, 2010, p.334). In R. v. Ewanchuk (1999), the court described the goal of Canada's sexual assault laws as protecting the "personal integrity, both physical and psychological, of every individual," and asserted that "having control over who touches one's body, and how, is central to human dignity and autonomy" (p.348). By grounding this study's definition of sexual assault on a clear understanding of consent, a framework can be created that not only captures the broad spectrum of non-consensual acts but also upholds the principles of personal integrity and autonomy.

Given the inconsistencies and variations in how sexual assault is defined across different legal systems and studies, this thesis aligns with expert recommendations by adopting a definition of sexual assault that emphasizes the key elements of consent, autonomy, and bodily integrity. In this research study, sexual assault is defined as non-consensual sexual behaviours that violate an individual's autonomy and bodily integrity. This definition includes any form of unwanted sexual contact, ranging from sexualized touching to attempted or completed

penetration, irrespective of gender or sexual orientation. The central tenet of this definition is the absence of consent, underscoring that the victim did not provide voluntary agreement to engage in the sexual activity. Furthermore, this definition acknowledges the nuances of sexual assault across different legal frameworks and jurisdictions, recognizing that legal definitions may vary, but they consistently emphasize the significance of consent and the presence of force or coercion. Therefore, this definition seeks to align with recommendations from authoritative bodies like the Criminal Code of Canada and the National Academies Panel on Measuring Rape and Sexual Assault, advocating for inclusivity, specificity regarding perpetrator intent, and acknowledgment of various forms of unwanted sexual contact beyond mere penetration (Department of Justice Canada, 2010; National Research Council 2014).

Gender Disparities in Sexual Assault

Gender disparities in sexual violence refer to the unequal ways individuals experience, respond to, and are affected by sexual assault based on their gender (Bloom, 2008; Conroy, 2024). Research and statistics indicate that women are disproportionately impacted by sexual assault, displaying higher rates of victimization than men (Conroy, 2024; Perreault, 2015). Feminist scholars contend that sexual violence is a systemic issue entrenched in patriarchal structures that reinforce male dominance and contribute to ongoing aggression towards women (Canan, 2019; Lazar, 2007; Whisnant, 2017). These patriarchal systems normalize violence against women and shape societal attitudes, making it difficult for women to seek justice and receive support (Whisnant, 2017).

As previously demonstrated, statistical data demonstrate significant gendered patterns in sexual assault victimization (Conroy, 2024; Perreault, 2015). Women experience sexual violence at much higher rates than men, with studies showing that the majority of perpetrators are male,

regardless of the victim's gender (Perreault, 2015). Societal norms further shape these experiences—women are often socialized to be cautious and responsible for preventing assault, while men are less likely to be perceived as victims (Petersson & Plantin, 2019; Weiss, 2010; Whisnant, 2017). These norms also influence reporting behaviours; women may fear stigma or disbelief (Whisnant, 2017), while men may struggle with societal expectations of masculinity that discourage acknowledging victimhood (Petersson & Plantin, 2019). Additionally, legal and institutional responses to sexual violence often reflect these gendered assumptions, leading to disparities in justice outcomes and impacting help-seeking behaviours (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022; Pijlman et al., 2023; Whisnant, 2017).

Although sexual violence affects all people, this study focused on women's post-sexual assault experiences. Given the high rates of victimization among women and the systemic barriers they encounter (Conroy, 2024; Weiss, 2010; Whisnant, 2017), narrowing the focus allowed for a deeper exploration and closer attention to the gendered dimensions of sexual violence specific to this population. By centring women in this study, the aim was to provide a more nuanced understanding of women's post-sexual assault experiences and attend to the structural and interpersonal factors that influence the healing process.

Racial Disparities in Sexual Assault

Racial disparities in sexual assault are a critical issue that affects different people groups across Canada, with Black, Indigenous, Multiracial, and People of Colour (BIMPOC) experiencing unique and often heightened vulnerabilities. The term *BIMPOC* encompasses a broad range of individuals, providing a structure to include various subgroups. However, specific subgroups within this terminology may be referenced by using more precise terms to acknowledge and respect the unique experiences of each group. The intersection of race and

sexual violence brings to light the compounding effects of systemic racism, historical trauma, and socio-economic inequalities that shape the experiences of individuals from these communities. Although sexual assault is a pervasive issue that transcends racial boundaries, BIMPOC communities often face additional layers of discrimination and barriers when seeking justice, support, and healing. Language barriers, cultural stigmatization, mistrust of authorities, and limited access to culturally competent services exacerbate the challenges (Bryant-Davis et al., 2010; Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022). BIMPOC populations are underrepresented in sexual assault research, leading to gaps in understanding and hindering efforts to address the unique needs and experiences of these communities (Gameon et al., 2021; Moore & Van Vliet, 2022).

Bryant-Davis et al. (2010) highlight that sexual violence against African American women is deeply rooted in the historical context of slavery. The sexual exploitation and domination of enslaved women have lasting impacts, with the trauma being passed down through generations (Bryant-Davis et al., 2010). Rooted in historical and ongoing systemic racism, Black survivors of sexual assault often confront compounded layers of discrimination and marginalization in their pursuit of justice and healing. Statistics reveal alarmingly high prevalence rates, with Black women in particular being at a significantly increased risk of sexual violence (e.g., rape, incest, childhood sexual abuse, and sexual coercion) compared to their white counterparts (West & Johnson, 2013). Approximately one in five African American women have reported being victims of rape at some point during adulthood (West & Johnson, 2013). These listed factors are inseparable from these women and must be considered to understand and contextualize their stories of sexual assault and healing.

Sexual assault within Indigenous communities reflects the devastating impact of colonialism, intergenerational trauma, and ongoing systemic injustices. Indigenous peoples face

disproportionately high rates of sexual violence, with Indigenous women and girls being particularly vulnerable. In a 2019 survey, Statistics Canada collected data on self-reported victimization and found that, on average, six in ten Indigenous women (56%) experience physical assault in their lifetime and approximately 46% have experienced sexual assault. In contrast, about 34% of non-Indigenous women have experienced physical assault, and approximately 33% have experienced sexual assault at some point in their lives (Statistics Canada, 2022). Murphy-Oikonen et al. (2022) report how the historical and systemic injustices, including ongoing colonial practices and institutional racism, have profoundly impacted Indigenous women's interactions with the police. These factors also contribute to a lack of faith in the justice system and deter many women, specifically those who identify as Indigenous, from seeking help. Systemic barriers and historical injustices often lead to silence, where the stories of Indigenous women's experiences of sexual assault remain untold.

Root (1995) defines *multiracial* as a term used to describe individuals whose heritage encompasses two or more distinct racial groups. This descriptor includes those identifying as biracial, encompassing two distinctive racial groups. The term "multiracial" refers to individuals with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, such as Black and White, Asian and Latino, or combinations including Indigenous ancestry. Furthermore, People of Colour (POC) is another broad term to refer to individuals who identify as a part of non-white racial and ethnic groups who are not specifically Black or Indigenous (Glossary of Inclusive and Antiracist Writing Terms | SFU Library, n.d.). Obtaining specific statistics on sexual assault for the Multiracial People and POC groups, within the BIPOC framework, poses complexities due to the broadness of these terms and would not reflect the experiences of all subgroups. These groups still experience sexual assault with prevalence rates varying across racial and ethnic groups.

The lack of diverse representation in research not only limits the relevance and applicability of findings but also perpetuates systemic inequalities by reinforcing dominant narratives that prioritize the experiences of white, non-BIMPOC individuals. By failing to capture the full spectrum of experiences and needs within minority groups, research on sexual assault risks reinforcing harmful stereotypes, overlooking important cultural and historical factors. This research aimed to address this gap by centring the voices and experiences of women while intentionally seeking out a more diverse sample (e.g., BIMPOC). Additionally, this study contextualized women's stories within their historical and cultural contexts, honouring their heritage and the unique factors that shape how they exist through their bodies in the world.

The Journey After Sexual Assault

To describe what occurs after sexual assault as a journey is to acknowledge the ongoing and evolving nature of healing. Survivors of sexual assault are confronted with feelings of violation and betrayal, and perhaps even physical injuries leaving poignant reminders of what took place. The journey is about navigating the existence within one's body, where every sensation, touch, and movement carries memories of trauma and aspirations for healing and restoration. In the following section, I will outline the psychological impacts of sexual assault, including dissociation and feelings of guilt, shame and self-blame, and the path toward healing.

Psychological Impact

The aftermath of sexual assault often involves persistent mental health challenges. Individuals may experience emotional distress, difficulty in functioning, and long-term psychological symptoms. Previous research demonstrates that those who have been sexually assaulted commonly experience PTSD, depression, and anxiety (Nöthling et al., 2022; Rothman et al., 2021; Short et al., 2021), and, importantly, the degree of threat and violence of the sexual

assault can impact psychological outcomes and the severity of traumatization to an extent (Campbell et al., 2009; Young 1992). For example, in their quantitative study on the consequences following college sexual assault among women, Rothman et al. (2021) found that participants who reported multiple types of penetrative assault exhibited significantly higher levels of PTSD, depression, and anxiety in comparison to those who experienced assault through only one type of penetration. Similarly, Nöthling et al. (2022) revealed that 48.5% (n = 310) of participants met the clinical cut-off for PTSD symptoms at three months post-rape, with the cumulative incidence increasing to 54.8% (n = 350) at six months, underscoring the prevalence of PTSD following sexual assault, specifically rape. In another study, Short et al. (2021) found that more than three-quarters of participants who experienced sexual assault continued to experience clinically significant post-traumatic stress (PTS), anxiety, or depressive symptoms six weeks after the assault, with the majority also reporting clinically significant new or worsening regional pain. These studies emphasize the lasting psychological effects of sexual assault.

Dissociation

Dissociation refers to the mental and psychobiological process in which individuals may detach from their thoughts, emotions, or sense of self in response to traumatic events, such as sexual assault (Schimmenti, 2018). Broadly, dissociation can be conceptualized as (a) a disruption in the integration of mental processes; (b) an altered state of awareness; and (c) a defence or coping mechanism (Schauer & Elbert, 2010). Additionally, individuals may experience memory deficits, somatoform disorders, conversion disorders, amnesia, detachment, depersonalization (e.g., out-of-body experiences), and derealization (Schauer & Elbert, 2010; Schimmenti, 2018). These experiences are characterized by feelings of self-alienation or detachment from the external world and emotional blunting (Schauer & Elbert, 2010).

Peritraumatic dissociation, dissociative experiences, and emotional numbing have been found to increase the risk of depression and anxiety symptoms, as well as PTSD (DeMello et al., 2023; Feeny et al., 2000).

Research indicates that peritraumatic dissociation is more prevalent in women during sexual assault compared to other forms of trauma (DeMello et al., 2023; TeBockhorst et al., 2015). Specifically, peritraumatic dissociation serves as a temporary psychological response to avoid emotional and physical pain during sexual assault (DeMello et al., 2023). Although this phenomenon can provide temporary relief, dissociation can become a coping mechanism to escape overwhelming experiences, traumatic memories, and perceived threats in an attempt to create a psychological sense of safety (Schauer & Elbert, 2010). Individuals describe dissociative experiences as watching themselves, floating or zoned out, and being detached from their bodies and surroundings (Schauer & Elbert, 2010; TeBockhorst et al., 2015). Understanding dissociation within the context of sexual assault provides insight into the psychological coping mechanisms that individuals employ to manage overwhelming trauma. Specifically, dissociation illustrates the significance of the body by demonstrating how it can respond to trauma through detachment. This response highlights the body's central role in processing and managing traumatic experiences, revealing how trauma can disrupt the natural connection between mind and body (Schauer & Elbert, 2010). Although not all survivors of sexual assault experience overt trauma symptoms, many may still experience a disconnection from themselves and their bodies. This sense of estrangement can manifest as a feeling of detachment or alienation from their physical and emotional selves, which may not always meet the clinical criteria for dissociative disorders. Understanding women's experiences of embodiment post-sexual assault in relation to

dissociation offers insight for understanding how reconnection with the body can be integral to the healing process.

Guilt, Shame, and Self-Blame

Survivors of sexual violence often experience common emotions like guilt, shame, and self-blame, which can affect the healing process (McElvaney et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2024; Weiss, 2010). Shame involves feelings of worthlessness and a desire to hide, targeting the self, while guilt is linked to regret over specific actions or inactions (Robinson et al., 2024). Self-blame occurs when individuals attribute responsibility for the abuse to themselves, either due to their behaviour or perceived personal flaws (Kline et al., 2021). Aakyaag et al. (2016) emphasize that sexual violence has a higher association with shame than other forms of trauma, and the presence of multiple types of violence increases reports of shame and guilt.

Weiss (2010) suggests that the shame experienced by survivors of sexual violence is mediated by cultural narratives tied to gender stereotypes. Specifically for women, shame is reinforced by societal beliefs that portray them as deserving of, disgraced by, or tainted through sexual victimization. These harmful ideologies often hold women accountable for their own victimization, drawing distinctions between so-called “good girls” and those who are assaulted. Such narratives contribute to framing sexual violence as a source of shame for women, posing a direct threat to their sense of femininity and self-worth. This culturally ingrained victim-blaming perpetuates feelings of isolation and self-criticism among female survivors of sexual assault.

McElvaney et al. (2022) explored how young individuals often cope with shame following sexual assault and found that they often use indirect methods to manage their emotions. One way that young individuals may do this is through avoidance, where they either downplay their experiences, delay disclosing the abuse, or refrain from talking about it

altogether. This avoidance helps shield them from the shame they fear might arise from others' reactions. Additionally, some young people express shame through self-blame, taking on responsibility for the abuse in an effort to make sense of the trauma. Rather than directly stating feelings of shame, many survivors of sexual assault articulate these emotions implicitly through phrases like feeling "dirty" or "embarrassed," and expressing a fear of others learning about their experiences. These subtle expressions of shame reveal the depth of their internal struggle, even when the emotion itself is not overtly acknowledged.

Self-blame, often fueled by shame, can have devastating psychological effects on survivors of sexual violence. When individuals believe they are responsible for their abuse, they may experience increased feelings of anxiety, depression, and self-criticism (Robinson et al., 2024). Shame acts as a mechanism for self-blame and exacerbates these emotional struggles, reinforcing the belief that they are at fault and deserving of punishment or judgment (Robinson et al., 2024). This self-critical mindset, along with feelings of inadequacy and guilt, can hinder emotional recovery by creating a persistent cycle of negative self-evaluation. The internalized belief of being judged by oneself or by others can profoundly affect their psychological well-being (Robinson et al., 2024). Over time, these emotions may become maladaptive, contributing to mental health disorders such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety (Kline et al., 2021).

Moreover, the impact of shame and self-blame extends beyond the individual to their relationships with others, further impacting their healing process. Research suggests that shame leads to self-imposed isolation, as survivors of sexual assault often fear rejection or disapproval from others, and thus, avoid disclosing their experiences (Pijlman et al., 2023; Weiss, 2010). This isolation prevents them from seeking the support necessary for recovery and can intensify feelings of loneliness and disconnection. In the face of shame, the act of disclosure becomes a

crucial step toward healing (McElvaney et al., 2022). Speaking out can help reduce the burden of shame and foster a sense of personal agency, allowing survivors to reclaim control over their experiences (Kline et al., 2021). However, the fear of judgment, often internalized through self-blame, can make it difficult for survivors to reach out.

Although opening up about sexual assault is an essential part of healing, the act of disclosing alone is insufficient for achieving positive outcomes. When survivors of sexual assault experience negative social responses after disclosing their trauma, such as disbelief or blame, it intensifies feelings of shame associated with the assault (DeCou et al., 2017; Pijlman et al., 2023). This heightened shame contributes to higher levels of psychological distress among survivors of sexual assault (DeCou et al., 2017). Invalidating responses, including the perception of invalidation, to initial disclosures of sexual assault further increase feelings of shame, which can deter survivors of sexual assault from re-disclosing their experiences (Catton et al., 2023). Individuals who face invalidation may sometimes try to revise their narratives due to heightened shame. Those who change their narratives express feeling more shame and are motivated by a desire to restore their social standing with the recipient they initially disclosed to (Catton et al., 2023). This can come in the form of survivors of sexual assault altering their narratives or omitting details they believe others may question or discredit. The way people respond to disclosures of sexual assault can impact the individual's feelings of safety, willingness to seek further support, and overall healing journey.

In brief, guilt, shame, and self-blame shape individuals' experiences after sexual assault, often leading to disconnection. This emotional distancing can manifest as avoidance, negative self-perception, and feelings of unworthiness, which hinder the healing process (McElvaney et al., 2022). Fear of judgment and invalidation further reinforces this sense of isolation, preventing

survivors of sexual assault from seeking support (Catton et al., 2023; DeCou et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2024). However, reclaiming a sense of agency through disclosure and receiving compassionate responses can help alleviate these emotions and foster reconnection (Bhuptani & Messman, 2022; Catton et al., 2023; DeCou et al., 2017). These findings demonstrate how survivors of sexual assault can feel isolated and disconnected on a social and sociocultural level.

Towards Healing

Healing after sexual assault can be a lengthy process that requires time and support. Current research emphasizes the importance of addressing the psychological, emotional, and physical impacts of sexual trauma (Short et al., 2021). Past studies demonstrate that supportive and validating responses from friends, family, and professionals can significantly aid the healing process by mitigating shame and promoting a sense of safety (Bhuptani & Messman, 2022; Catton et al., 2023; DeCou et al., 2017). The healing process following trauma, such as sexual assault, is personal and differs significantly from person to person. Factors such as personal history, support networks, coping strategies, and access to resources impact each person's path toward the ultimate hope for the restoration of well-being.

The term *healing* can vary across cultures, communities, and individual experiences. In some contexts, healing may refer primarily to the physical recovery and the restoration of bodily health as emphasized by the biomedical model (Deacon, 2013). In contrast, the biopsychosocial model integrates biological, psychological, and social factors in understanding and treating health and illness, emphasizing the interconnectedness of mind and body (Deacon, 2013). The biomedical and biopsychosocial approaches to health and healing originate from Western medical and psychological frameworks. These Western approaches do not encompass the rich diversity of healing practices found in many non-Western cultures, which often prioritize

holistic, spiritual, and communal methods (Moodley et al., 2008). Traditional practices, community rituals, and intergenerational support can play significant roles in the healing journey. For example, Indigenous Peoples understand healing as a holistic concept that includes spiritual elements and the restoration of harmony within the self and with nature and community (Moodley et al., 2008). The purpose of recognizing these diverse healing practices is to create a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to the term healing. This holistic perspective not only expands the understanding of healing but also contributes to the preservation and revitalization of cultural identities and practices in the context of health and wellness (Bowden et al., 2017; Nabigon & Wenger-Nabigon, 2012).

There is limited research on the healing process after sexual assault. A significant challenge in understanding this process may arise from the way current research typically uses the term “sexual violence” to encompass a wide range of behaviours, including sexual assault, abuse, and other forms of sexual harm (Sinko et al., 2020). Some studies do not explicitly define what constitutes sexual violence, leading to ambiguity and limiting the ability to differentiate between various experiences of trauma. This generalization obscures the unique aspects of healing specifically related to sexual assault, as it conflates different types and degrees of body violations. Although the psychological and physical consequences of sexual assault are well-researched, the exact nature of the healing process remains unclear (Gameon et al., 2021; Sinko et al., 2020). Additionally, the non-linear and individualized nature of healing complicates understanding, as each individual’s healing process is shaped by a variety of sociocultural factors (Sharma et al., 2023). This lack of clarity underscores the importance of the present study’s focus which aimed to provide a more nuanced and precise understanding of the unique aspects of the healing process specifically in the context of sexual assault.

Research has identified various factors that facilitate healing after sexual assault, many of which address the emotional, psychological, and physical effects of trauma. Trauma-focused therapies play a central role in helping survivors process distressing memories, reduce symptoms of PTSD, and develop healthier coping mechanisms (Baggett et al., 2017; Weingarten et al., 2023). Physical movements such as exercising, yoga, and mindfulness, have also been shown to promote healing by helping survivors of sexual assault reconnect with their bodies, regulate their nervous systems, and reduce anxiety and stress (Higgins et al., 2024; Nicotera et al., 2024; Rhodes, 2015; Schwartz & Page, 2024). Additionally, spending time in nature can provide a sense of calm, grounding, and emotional restoration, supporting overall well-being (Moore & Van Vliet, 2022). Despite the differences in these approaches, there appears to be a commonality among them in restoring a sense of control, safety, and agency, which is often disrupted by sexual trauma. Whether through physical movement, therapeutic dialogue, or connection with others and the environment, these interventions have been found to facilitate healing by promoting self-compassion and emotional regulation and creating a positive relationship with oneself (Moore & Van Vliet, 2022; Nicotera et al., 2024; Rhodes, 2015).

Despite the extensive research on the consequences of sexual assault, limited studies focus on how sexual assault survivors experience their healing process (Gameon et al., 2021; Sinko et al., 2020). Although there has been limited research on the direct, lived experiences of individuals following sexual trauma, this is changing. Social and cultural understandings of sexual trauma are evolving, especially with the rise of social movements where women are increasingly sharing their stories of sexual assault and abuse. Current research is only starting to explore the role of cultural and social contexts in the healing process, further highlighting a gap in the literature (Sharma et al., 2023; Sinko et al., 2021). As research progresses, there is

increasing recognition of the need to also examine how cultural and social contexts impact survivors of sexual assault's healing journeys, including the aspects of reconnecting with one's body and finding safety within it.

Embodiment

Embodiment may offer a framework that can bridge the understanding of sexual assault and the healing journeys of individuals, particularly when considering sociocultural contexts. Embodiment refers to the way individuals experience, perceive, and understand their bodies within their physical and cultural contexts (Piran, 2017). Understanding post-sexual assault experiences through an embodiment framework provides a way to attend to the biological, psychological, and sociocultural aspects of individuals' lived experiences.

Philosophical Underpinnings

Embodiment is rooted in philosophical inquiry and addresses the relationship between the mind and body, challenging traditional dualistic perspectives. The dualistic perspective posits a separation between the mind and the body, considering them fundamentally distinct entities. It suggests that mental phenomena and physical processes operate independently, often with the mind regarded as superior to the body. Jean-Paul Sartre's rejection of Cartesian dualism exemplifies this shift in perspective, as he perceives consciousness as inherently embodied (Sartre, 1943/1956). For Sartre (1943/1956), consciousness is embodied, meaning that our physical existence is essential to our experience and perception of the world. Sartre (1943/1956) emphasizes that an individual's body is not just a physical object but a fundamental aspect of their being that shapes their interactions and freedom. This perspective posits that one's physical presence is inseparable from their experience and perception of reality.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) further expands the concept of embodiment by emphasizing the inseparability of the mind and body. In the French language, Merleau-Ponty (1962) introduces the notion of *le corps objectif*, the body-for-other, referring to the body as an object in the world subjected to the external perceptions of others. *Le corps objectif* is contrasted with *le corps propre,* the body-for-self, describing the body as not merely an object controlled by the mind but an active participant in shaping our sense of self and our interactions with the world. Merleau-Ponty (1962) states that the body serves as a means of perceiving and understanding the world. Contrary to Descartes' dualistic framework, Merleau-Ponty contends that human perception and subjectivity are grounded in the body, which serves as the locus for one's engagement with the world. The imperfect, intentional, and limited nature of an individual's perceptual abilities provides a way of looking at things from many different perspectives. Thus, these limitations enable individuals to access and understand the world in the first place (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). To exist as a human is to navigate and experience reality through one's embodied self, reflecting the interconnectedness between one's physical being and lived experiences.

Contributions from feminist theorists have continued to further the knowledge of embodiment. Drawing from their experience as a clinician working with survivors of sexual abuse, Young (1992) contributes to the discussion on embodiment in psychology by questioning the adequacy of existing conceptual frameworks that explain how individuals inhabit their bodies. Young (1992) describes embodiment as the experience of the self through the body. Expanding on Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body as the locus of human subjectivity intertwined with its social milieu, Allan (2005) asserts that specific social and cultural contexts shape bodily perception. This perspective positions the body as a product and an agent of cultural

reproduction and transformation (Piran, 2017). For women, embodiment is particularly influenced by power within society, often leading them to conform their bodies to social expectations, such as being agreeable, appearing smaller, and restraining desires and behaviours. These perspectives demonstrate how women's experiences of embodiment are profoundly shaped by their social environments throughout their lives.

The Developmental Theory of Embodiment

The developmental theory of embodiment (DTE) emerged through the collective contributions of various scholars across different fields, including psychology, sociology, and feminist theory. The DTE is a social theory formulated from an extensive mixed-method research program involving cisgender girls and women (Piran, 2017). The DTE proposes three domains through which individuals' experiences of embodiment are shaped: the physical domain, the mental domain, and the social domain. Within the domain of physical freedom, events contribute to an individual's experience of their body and fall into four main categories: (a) freedom in physical engagement and movement (e.g., agency and body awareness and connection); (b) safety for the body territory (e.g., safety); (c) care of the body (e.g., attunement); and (d) freedom of desire (e.g., owning desires). Conversely, individuals may experience physical corseting depicted by: (a) corseted and blocked physical engagement and movement (e.g., restricted movement); (b) violations to the body territory (e.g., lack of safety); (c) neglect of body care; and (d) restriction of desire. In the mental freedom domain, experiences prompt individuals to engage with the world actively and meaningfully while also adopting a critical perspective toward restrictive social norms that govern embodied experiences. Within the mental corseting domain, women perceive and experience their bodies as deficient objects, reinforcing the expectation that women should be docile and submissive, and subjecting them to dichotomous social

constructions and stigmatizing labels. Experiences of the social power domain include freedom from prejudice, harassment, body-based harassment, and appearance-based social power, while also experiencing empowering relationships and having membership in equitable communities. In contrast, experiences of the social disempowerment domain entail exposure to prejudice, harassment, body-based harassment, and appearance-based social power while also experiencing disempowering relational connections and no access to equitable communities. The DTE offers a framework for understanding how various physical, mental, and social experiences shape the embodied lives of cisgender girls and women, highlighting the contrast between freedom and restriction in these domains.

The Emergence of the Experience of Embodiment

The research program contributing to the development of the DTE not only yielded insights into girls' and women's embodied experiences throughout their lives but also revealed the construct, which became labelled the experience of embodiment (EE). Piran (2016) conducted a 5-year prospective study involving repeated interviews with a sample of 27 girls (ages 9–14), 11 young women (ages 20–27), and 31 older women (ages 50–68). The constructivist grounded theory approach was used to analyze the interview transcripts, leading to the emergence of the core construct of EE. EE includes a continuum of experiences, ranging from positive to negative. Positive embodiment was characterized by a positive body connection and comfort, embodied agency and passion, and attuned self-care. In contrast, negative embodiment involved disrupted body connection and discomfort, restricted agency and passion, and self-neglect or harm. Five central categories, denoted as dimensions, emerged in all three qualitative studies, each encompassing positive and negative aspects. These dimensions were: (a) body connection and comfort versus disrupted body connection and discomfort; (b) agency and

functionality versus restricted agency and restraint; (c) experience and expression of desire versus disrupted connection to desire; (d) attuned self-care versus disrupted attunement, self-harm, and neglect; and (e) inhabiting the body as a subjective site versus inhabiting the body as an objectified site. Adding to the existing literature, EE reveals important dimensions of inhabiting the body in the world, reflecting the experiences of girls and women throughout their lives, from negative to positive embodiment.

The continuum between positive and negative embodiment demonstrates how experiences post-sexual assault may be conceptualized within an embodiment framework, as these experiences can disrupt body connection and agency—aligning with the core dimensions of EE. This framework is particularly valuable for understanding post-sexual assault experiences, which account for the shifts between positive embodiment—characterized by comfort, agency, and self-care—and negative embodiment, marked by disrupted body connection, restricted agency, and self-neglect. This shift can also manifest as dissociation, where individuals might experience their bodies as objectified sites rather than as active, subjectively inhabited spaces. Piran's categorization of embodiment further enriches this understanding by offering a structured lens through which to analyze these shifts. An embodiment framework aligns with the objectives of this research study by providing a lens to capture the nuanced ways sexual trauma shapes women's experiences of embodiment throughout the healing process after sexual assault.

The Objectification Theory

Experience of embodiment spans across five continuous dimensions: body connection and comfort, agency and functionality, experience and expression of desire, engagement in attuned self-care practices, and resistance to self-objectification. These dimensions offer a way to understand how trauma, such as sexual assault, disrupts a woman's relationship with her body.

The dimension of resisting objectification is significant to sexual assault, as it relates directly to self-objectification. Developed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), the objectification theory provides a framework for understanding the impact of sexual objectification, as seen in instances of sexual assault, on women's mental health and well-being. When sexual objectification occurs, women are viewed as bodies or objects, valued mainly for others' use and pleasure. According to this theory, women in sexually objectifying cultures are socialized to internalize an observer's perspective of their bodies, leading to self-objectification. This internalization is depicted by habitual body monitoring consciousness, leading women to constantly check and adjust their appearance to conform to the idealized female body.

Relating the objectification theory to the DTE, a clear intersection emerges, particularly in understanding how embodied experiences are shaped. The DTE posits that girls and women's experiences of embodiment are influenced by physical, mental, and social domains. Freedom from self-objectification encourages experiences of positive embodiment, allowing women to inhabit their bodies as sites of subjective experience rather than mere objects of the objectifying gaze. In contrast, self-objectification disrupts the positive embodiment dimensions outlined by DTE—such as body connection, comfort, agency, and functionality—creating a fragmented, objectified view of the body. This process of self-objectification, where women perceive their bodies through the lens of external judgment and potential harm, undermines their sense of body ownership and agency (Piran, 2017). Through the lens of objectification theory, objectification reinforces a narrative where women's bodies are viewed as commodities for others' pleasure, leading to self-objectification and a fragmented view of the body, where the body becomes a stranger.

Sexual assault is a literal form of sexual objectification because the individual is reduced to an object of the perpetrator's desires, stripping them of autonomy, agency, and personhood. Women with histories of sexual trauma often report significantly higher levels of sexual objectification, body shame, and trauma symptoms in comparison to those without (Miles-McLean et al., 2015). Research demonstrates that sexual objectification, including underlying racial microaggressions, may hinder the healing process after sexual assault as they function as reminders of past sexual trauma and exacerbate fears of future victimization (Eshelman et al., 2024). Furthermore, the literature posits that women who experience sexual objectification and internalize these views are more likely to engage in self-objectification (Eshelman et al., 2024; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Loughnan et al., 2013; Miles-McLean et al., 2015). Moreover, cultural tightness, defined as the degree to which norms are strictly enforced and deviations are punished, predicts higher levels of self-objectification among women (Wang et al., 2024). This effect is particularly evident in cultures with more rigid norms, where women may feel greater pressure to conform to these cultural expectations (Wang et al., 2024). The literature demonstrates that sexual objectification and self-objectification hinder the healing process after sexual assault, indicating an impact at a sociocultural level.

Sexual Assault within an Embodiment Framework

Existing literature has extensively examined the consequences of sexual assault and the disclosure of sexual trauma. Embodiment theory creates a way for researchers to center their investigation on the body by moving away from an externally focused approach to the subjective experience of the 'embodied subject,' which is attuned to and integrated with the feelings and sensations of the physical body (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Sexual trauma disrupts individuals' relationships with their bodies, altering how they perceive and experience their bodies

(Hammers, 2014). These experiences can fundamentally change our body, rendering it unrecognizable compared to its previous state of comfort (Young, 1992). Young (1992) asserted that the central difficulty of embodiment, such as in instances of sexual abuse, involves "being present in one's body" (p. 91), an experience she argued is often overlooked in alternative conceptual frameworks. For those who have experienced sexual trauma, fully inhabiting their body and seeing it as a core part of their identity can feel dangerous and irrational because of the trauma associated with their physical self (Young, 1992). Conversely, rejecting the body and its importance in shaping personal and social identity means denying a fundamental aspect of their personhood, stripping away the essence and rights that define who they are (Young, 1992). There is an inner conflict survivors of sexual trauma face between acknowledging and rejecting the experiences of their bodies and identities.

Within an embodiment framework, sexual assault may be conceptualized and understood as a violation of body ownership. Sexual assault may disrupt positive embodiment, leading to a disconnection from one's body. Negative embodiment manifests in various ways, such as a diminished sense of agency and an altered perception of physical boundaries (Piran, 2017). Furthermore, negative embodiment entails the experience of inhabiting the body as an objectified site, where one's body is perceived primarily in terms of external judgments and societal expectations rather than through body agency and ownership (Piran, 2016). Survivors of sexual assault experience an objectifying external gaze that reduces their body to an object of scrutiny and desire (Eshelman et al., 2024; Haikalis et al., 2018; Hollett et al., 2024; Miles-McLean et al., 2015). Consequently, survivors of sexual assault may experience fragmentation and struggle to reconcile their personal experiences with societal expectations of their bodies, often leading to self-objectification (Eshelman et al., 2024; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Loughnan et al., 2013;

Miles-McLean et al., 2015). As previously mentioned, self-objectification involves internalizing the external gaze, viewing oneself through the lens of others' judgments and perpetuating a cycle of negative embodiment and diminished self-worth (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Piran, 2017).

Importantly, the embodiment framework emphasizes the sociocultural context in which bodies exist. Cultural narratives and societal attitudes toward the body significantly influence how survivors of sexual assault process their experiences and perceive their bodies post-event (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Piran, 2017). Individual experiences are co-constructed, influenced by internal factors such as personal perceptions and experience of inhabiting the body and external factors, which include societal norms, social judgments, and assumptions projected onto the body (Piran, 2016). This framework acknowledges the personal constructions of the body in relation to external influences, thereby shaping the lived experiences of individuals and how they inhabit their bodies. The way people inhabit their bodies reflects their life journeys—echoing the narratives others have woven about them and their understanding of the world and their place within it (McBride, 2021). Embodiment is the moving expression of one's selfhood, the ongoing narrative of one's identity shaped by cultural constructs and the people within them (McBride, 2021).

Although research has focused on the consequences of sexual assault and methods for physical healing, the experience of inhabiting one's body post-sexual assault remains a critical gap in the literature. This oversight does not account for how sexual assault can affect individuals' relationships with their bodies and how they exist within them. An embodiment framework offers a critical lens through which to explore the experiences of survivors of sexual assault, recognizing that their relationships with their bodies evolve in response to their experiences and the societal context in which they live.

Summary and Research Question

Upon reviewing the literature on sexual assault, several critical themes become apparent. Firstly, there is a notable focus on the psychological symptoms (e.g., PTSD, depression, anxiety, etc.) and how trauma-focused therapies can alleviate these issues and elicit healing (Baggett et al., 2017; Nöthling et al., 2022; Rothman et al., 2021; Short et al., 2021; Weingarten et al., 2023). Secondly, another theme is the disconnection survivors of sexual assault experience from their bodies, often including dissociation, guilt, shame, and self-blame (Bhuptani & Messman, 2022; DeMello et al., 2023; McElvaney et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2024; TeBockhorst et al., 2015; Weiss, 2010). Additionally, prior research identifies different factors that facilitate healing after sexual assault, such as exercise and yoga, to help restore a sense of control and a positive relationship with oneself (Moore & Van Vliet, 2022; Nicotera et al., 2024; Rhodes, 2015). The literature demonstrates that sexual assault impacts women at biological, psychological, and sociocultural levels, yet little is known about the actual healing process (Gameon et al., 2021; Sinko et al., 2020).

The purpose of this research study was to address the gap in the literature on how survivors of sexual assault experience embodiment throughout the healing process (Gameon et al., 2021). By using an embodiment framework, this research study contextualized the relationship between individuals' experiences of their bodies and sexual assault within the sociocultural milieu. There is limited literature that examines the role of cultural and social contexts in the healing process after sexual violence (Gameon et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2023; Sinko et al., 2021). Furthermore, current research study samples are primarily comprised of white women, which does not reflect the diversity of society. Therefore, this study actively sought a more diverse sample (e.g., BIMPOC). By including a more diverse sample, societal and

cultural contexts are even more important to explore when examining the healing process after sexual assault. This research study advocates for a shift in perspective—from viewing sexual assault as an isolated event to recognizing it as an interconnected issue that is influenced by cultural and societal contexts. This research utilized an embodiment framework to explore the research question: *How do women experience embodiment throughout the healing process after sexual assault?*

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the constructivist paradigm utilized in this research, and how I incorporated a critical feminist lens to bring the narratives of survivors of sexual assault to the forefront. I will begin by explaining how the constructivist paradigm and feminist lens align with the study's objectives and then state my position in relation to the research, detailing how my background and experiences may have shaped the approach and interpretation of the data. Lastly, I will provide an outline of research procedures.

Research Paradigm

A paradigm is a set of interconnected beliefs, theories, and assumptions that collectively shape a coherent perspective on how the social world functions (Ponterotto, 2005). The selected paradigm provides a structured framework for understanding and studying social phenomena, guiding researchers in their investigation and interpretation of these phenomena. A paradigm directs the entire research process, from fundamental assumptions to decisions about how the study is conducted (Ponterotto, 2005). The present study is situated in the constructivist paradigm with a critical feminist lens. Using a constructivist paradigm combined with a critical feminist perspective aligns with the study's goals by focusing on the importance of exploring social structures and power dynamics within the broader sociocultural contexts that influence women's embodied experiences after sexual assault.

Ontology

The constructivist paradigm's ontological assumption is focused on relativism, which suggests that multiple realities exist and are constructed by society and individual contexts (Mertens, 2020). These realities stem from individuals' unique experiences and perceptions, creating diverse interpretations and understandings of the world. Hence, individuals are actively

shaping their perceptions and constructing their realities, which are influenced by social interactions and personal experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Rather than an objective reality, constructivism maintains that multiple interpretations of a phenomenon can coexist and regards each as valid. Within the constructivist paradigm, reality is socially constructed and interpreted subjectively (Ponterotto, 2005). By acknowledging that these realities are socially constructed and influenced by individual contexts, the study can capture women's experiences of embodiment after sexual assault within their proper sociocultural environments.

Epistemology

The epistemological stance of constructivism takes a transactional approach, asserting that knowledge evolves through interactive processes influenced by societal and historical contexts (Mertens, 2020). Furthermore, knowledge is constructed through relationships and may also emerge from interactions between the researcher and the participant. The constructivist paradigm posits that knowledge is formed through the process of interpreting data, which influences our understanding of the world (Ponterotto, 2005). Through the interaction of the researcher and the participant, meaning and knowledge are co-constructed (Mertens, 2020). The researcher's values and biases are acknowledged and disclosed, recognized as fundamental aspects of the research process (Ponterotto, 2005). However, the findings of the research must be supported by the data and the rationale of the analysis process so that it remains relevant to the intended audience.

In the constructivist paradigm, research involves interpreting and understanding human experiences in relation to their contexts. This assumption was particularly relevant to my study, as it was necessary to understand each woman's experience of embodiment after sexual assault within their sociocultural context. Therefore, the co-construction of knowledge facilitates the

integration of each woman's personal, social, and cultural experiences into the research findings. Sexual assault can be a profoundly disempowering experience, but a collaborative approach—consistent with research conducted within a constructivist paradigm—can empower participants by validating their perspectives and grounding the findings in their lived realities. This approach acknowledges the women's voices, actively involving them in the research process and ensuring their experiences are respected and accurately represented. This relational piece enhances the study's relevance and promotes a more inclusive and participatory research environment.

Axiology

In the constructivist paradigm, values are considered to be integral components of the research process, shaping (and often creating) the outcomes of inquiries (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Moreover, excluding values is not tolerated, as it undermines the interests of marginalized and "at-risk" audiences whose authentic perspectives deserve equal consideration alongside those of more influential audiences and the researcher's perspective (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The constructivist paradigm argues that it is misleading to believe that researchers can remove their biases and values from research, especially in interactions that are inherently interdependent (Ponterotto, 2005). Acknowledging and managing one's values is more honest and practical than trying to eliminate them, as biases inevitably shape how research is conducted and interpreted (Ponterotto, 2005).

Constructivist axiology addresses how researchers' values and biases impact the research process and outcomes. These principles promote ethical research practices, such as transparency, reflexivity, and shared power, ensuring that participants' perspectives are respected and accurately represented. Given the sensitive and personal nature of these experiences of

embodiment after sexual assault, it is important to approach the research with an understanding that my values and biases will influence the process.

Critical Feminist Lens

Historically, feminist scholars have highlighted that psychology's deeply ingrained androcentric bias, which considers men as the standard, led to sexist conclusions that render women either irrelevant or problematic to understanding human experiences (Gross; 2013; Hesse-Biber, 2013; Lazar, 2007; Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). From this stance, feminist scholars argue that knowledge production is influenced by the social context and perspectives of those in power, shaping what is considered valid knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). Similar to constructivist ontology, critical feminists recognize the existence of multiple valid realities and emphasize their construction influenced by social positions and power dynamics (Lazar, 2007; Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). Feminist epistemology urges us to critically examine society through women's perspectives to develop a broader understanding of how society functions as a whole (Hesse-Biber, 2013). Due to efforts made by feminists to raise awareness and consciousness about gender issues, within academic institutions and in broader society, women started to bring attention to situations where their voices, perspectives, and experiences were ignored, overlooked, or deliberately excluded (Hesse-Biber, 2013). Feminist scholars from various fields are collectively dedicated to reshaping knowledge through explicitly non-androcentric and decolonizing perspectives (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019).

Throughout history, overt expressions of gender disparity or sexism have been reflected through social gatekeeping, gender-based violence against women, and sexual harassment (Lazar, 2007). This research study adopted a critical feminist lens because of the emphasis that experiences and empirical knowledge are shaped by social and historical contexts, necessitating

a focus on power dynamics (Lazar, 2007; Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). Research indicates the importance of centring the voices of survivors of sexual assault (Gameon et al., 2021) which aligns with critical feminist perspectives that prioritize placing women at the forefront of the research process (Lazar, 2007). Based on the literature underpinning this study, embodiment refers to the way individuals experience, perceive, and understand their bodies within their physical and cultural contexts (Piran, 2017). Moreover, the embodiment framework emphasizes the sociocultural context in which bodies exist (Piran 2016, 2017), illustrating how personal and collective histories, cultural norms, and social expectations influence the way survivors of sexual assault experience their bodies through the healing process. Therefore, adopting a constructivist paradigm with a critical feminist lens is suitable for the present research study's objectives because it emphasizes the significance of examining social structures and power dynamics within the broader sociocultural contexts that shape women's embodied experiences.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry aligns with constructivism because knowledge is co-constructed through interactions and there are multiple valid perspectives (Josselson & Hammack, 2021; Riessman, 2008). In the context of research, "the researcher does not *find* narratives but instead participates in their creation" (Neander & Skott, 2006, p. 297) through methods such as writing or visual data, or through conducting research interviews (Riessman, 2008). The researcher's active role, including how they listen and ask questions, played a critical part in shaping the stories that participants decided to tell (Riessman, 2008).

Narratives capture not only what someone does in the world, but also how the world affects and shapes their experiences (Riessman, 2008). Narrative inquiry emphasizes that stories are shared within specific contexts and with a purpose (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). There is a

focus on the narrative content and also on how the story is constructed, the social positions of the narrator, and the intended effects on the audience (Josselson & Hammack, 2021; Riessman, 2008). Narrative inquiry considers it important to pay attention to how the narrator uses language to structure and sequence events in a coherent and meaningful manner that creates a narrative reflective of their interpretation of experiences and aligns with their communicative intent (Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative inquiry is a way we can understand how individuals use storytelling to construe meaning of their experiences, form and express their personal and social identities, and convey these experiences and stories within specific contexts (Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008).

Upon consideration of the study's focus on embodiment, the gap in the literature, and the research question, narrative inquiry was considered the most suitable method for the present study. Following sexual assault, where participants' body ownership and agency were violated, narrative inquiry honours individual agency by involving survivors in the active co-construction of narratives where meaning and knowledge emerge (Riessman, 2008). A piece of narrative inquiry that resonates with me is its encouragement for participants to speak in their own ways, which may shift the power dynamics in interviews; even though relations of power may never be equal, this approach can reduce the disparity (Riessman, 2008). Additionally, narrative inquiry creates a unique opportunity for participants to be involved in the analysis process (Riessman, 2008). These aspects are essential for being sensitive to participants' experiences and for initiating conversations about women's experiences of embodiment after sexual assault throughout the healing process, thereby establishing a climate for storytelling.

As previously mentioned, the embodiment framework of the study encompasses one's experience of their body in their sociocultural context (Piran 2016, 2017). This emphasis makes

narrative inquiry an ideal method for this study, as it focuses on the contextualization of experiences and explores how narratives are influenced or constrained by power dynamics and social context (Josselson & Hammack, 2021; Riessman, 2008). Riessman (2008) further highlights the importance of context in narrative construction:

> In a dynamic way then, narrative constitutes past experience at the same time as it provides ways for individuals to make sense of the past. And stories must always be considered in context, for storytelling occurs at a historical moment with its circulating discourses and power relations. (p.8).

In essence, narratives are a way to make sense of past experience, with their meaning intertwined with the context in which they are created and told. Therefore, an integral part of narrative inquiry is the thorough consideration of historical and sociocultural contexts and power dynamics throughout the research process. These considerations align with the study's focus on women's experiences of embodiment post-sexual assault, which are impacted by the prevailing societal and cultural narratives, social (dis)empowerment, (dis)connection, (dis)empowering relational connections, and experiences of equity (Piran, 2017).

Data Collection

The following section details the specific methods for recruiting participants, collecting and analyzing data, addressing ethical considerations, and ensuring research quality.

Participants

The sample included eight women between the ages of 19–30 who reported experiencing sexual assault. To be considered eligible to be a part of the study, participants had to be between the ages of 19 and 30, English-speaking, and women who identified as having experienced sexual assault. Four participants identified as White, one participant identified as White/Irish,

one identified as Vietnamese, one identified as Chinese Canadian, and one identified as Middle Eastern/White. Most of the participants reported experiencing one or more incidents of sexual assault. At the time of the study, all of the participants reported living in British Columbia.

My sample size aligned with narrative research expectations and thematic analysis guidelines, suggesting that smaller sample sizes are appropriate (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Creswell, 2007; Morrow, 2005). This sample size was in line with the concept of "information power" proposed by Malterud et al. (2021), which posits that the adequacy of a sample size is determined by the richness and depth of the information it can provide. The study's narrow focus on the embodiment experiences of survivors of sexual assault ensured a dense dataset by addressing a prevalent phenomenon through the lens of embodiment theory. This approach leveraged the commonality of the experience and aims to facilitate rich, nuanced dialogue with a diverse sample, thereby enhancing the depth and relevance of the insights.

Recruitment

Purposive and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants to ensure specificity in targeting individuals with relevant experiences and to expand the sample by reaching additional participants through existing connections. Participants were recruited online via electronic posters on social media (e.g., Instagram and Facebook) and word of mouth. The recruitment poster provided information about the nature of the study, the inclusion criteria, and my contact information (see Appendix A for the recruitment poster). Women who met the inclusion criteria and were interested in participating emailed me and received a digital screening questionnaire to determine their suitability for the study (see Appendix B for the digital screening questionnaire). The digital screening questionnaire included the study's operational definition of sexual assault so that prospective participants could determine if their experiences aligned with the criteria set

forth. The purpose of allowing prospective participants to discern if their experiences align with the study's operational definition of sexual assault was to respect the subjective nature of such experiences.

Sharma et al. (2023) suggested the usefulness of conducting research that distinguishes between sexual abuse and sexual assault. Sexual abuse is commonly understood as repeated non-consensual sexual acts by someone in a position of power or trust (Finkelhor et al., 2014; Kennedy & Prock, 2018). As previously defined, sexual assault is any non-consensual sexual act or behaviour, typically referring to a single occurrence, but individuals may experience multiple sexual assaults perpetrated by various people (Murphy-Oikonenj et al., 2022; Najdowsk & Ullman, 2011; Rothman et al., 2021). Individuals who identified as having experienced sexual abuse without also experiencing a sexual assault were excluded from the study.

Pilot Interview

Before beginning data collection with research participants, I conducted a pilot interview to refine the interview process. The purpose of the pilot interview was to test the interview procedures, identify potential challenges, and enhance the clarity and flow of the questions. I invited a classmate with qualitative research experience to participate in the pilot interview. The classmate was provided detailed information about the procedures and assured that their data would not be included in the study. I assumed the role of the interviewer, verbally reviewed the informed consent form with the classmate to ensure they understood their rights and the purpose of the session and then proceeded with the interview. Afterward, I debriefed the process by discussing the experience with the classmate and solicited their feedback on the structure, clarity, and depth of the questions. Based on this feedback, I adjusted the introduction and revised the probing questions to improve their specificity and effectiveness.

Data Collection Procedure

Informed Consent. After returning the digital screening questionnaire, women who were identified as suitable candidates were invited to participate in the study. Once participants agreed to be a part of the study, I emailed the informed consent form (see Appendix C for the informed consent form) and a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D for the demographic questionnaire). Participants signed and returned the consent form with the demographic questionnaire to remain eligible for participation. Participants were informed that they could choose to decline to answer any demographic questions that they did not wish to. Then I scheduled the first one-on-one interview. Participants were given the option to complete their interviews in person or through Zoom.

The First Interview. As narrative inquiry posits that knowledge is co-constructed and emphasizes the collaborative relationship between researcher and participant (Josselson & Hammack, 2021; Riessman, 2008), the interview started with me sharing my position relative to the research topic, and by building rapport with the participants. To promote a collaborative interview process, I used a semi-structured interview format with open-ended questions (see Appendix E for the interview guide). This interview was video and audio-recorded for the transcription process, as explained in the informed consent and will be further explained in the following section. I offered a break if the participant experienced discomfort or distress during the interview, and the participant could choose to stop the interview at any time. The interview concluded with a debrief of the process. Each participant received a debrief form with a list of mental health resources regardless of whether they completed the interview (see Appendix F for the debrief form). The participants were informed about the follow-up interview and received a digital $25 Amazon gift card as compensation for their time.

The Transcription Process. Before conducting the follow-up interview, I transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim. Transcripts are important in qualitative analysis because they retain an accurate account of what the storyteller spoke and preserve the original meaning and context while informing the preliminary stages of analysis. I anonymized the transcripts by replacing the participants' names with their chosen pseudonyms and omitting any identifying information.

While reviewing the transcripts, I focused on key events, themes, meanings, and emotions in the narratives (Riessman, 2008). I had to group pieces of the participants' stories as they shifted between the past and present, and toward the end of the interview, I often asked additional probing questions to explore specific experiences in more detail. I referred to the interview guide to select excerpts that aligned with the study's objectives, ensuring their relevance. The narratives were then organized temporally, paying close attention to the sequence of events and the emotional cadence of the storytelling (Riessman, 2008). After organizing each event temporally, I carefully refined the participants' words for grammatical clarity and formed complete sentences to preserve their original meanings, tone, and intent. This approach allowed me to construct coherent narratives that reflected participants' lived experiences and highlighted significant turning points (Riessman, 2008). Ultimately, these narratives formed the foundation for reflexive thematic analysis, enabling me to explore broader patterns and themes across the data while honouring each participant's experience. This dual focus on narrative construction and thematic analysis deepened the overall understanding of the research findings.

Second Interview. The second interview involved a review of the participant's narrative account. Participants were provided with a list of follow-up questions (see Appendix G for the Follow Up Interview Guide Questions) to consider as they engage in the analysis process by

sharing their perspectives, including their feelings and interpretations of the narrative account, to ensure that their stories were being represented accurately. The purpose of this process was to ensure that the final narrative account reflected the co-construction process between the researcher and the participant. Three participants completed the second interview virtually. However, as the interviews coincided with the Christmas break, five participants opted to review their narrative accounts independently. To accommodate this preference, I requested these participants to "track changes" in their documents, allowing their edits and feedback to be reviewed and integrated. After this follow-up interview, I applied reflexive thematic analysis across all the co-constructed narratives.

Optional Group Interview. All of the participants were invited to attend an optional group interview to review and discuss the final themes from the analysis. Only one participant attended the optional group interview, as four women were unavailable and three did not respond. During the interview, I presented each theme, allowing the participant time to reflect and share her thoughts. She expressed that hearing the themes and quotes from other women illuminated aspects of her own story that she had not previously considered. When one of her own quotes was used to support a theme, she described feeling empowered, as if she were "taking back" her power. Although the group interview was initially intended to gather collective insights, the discussion remained meaningful and impactful with the single participant who attended. At the end of the interview, the participant and I reflected on the trust required to share one's story, especially without knowing how the research process would unfold. The participant expressed gratitude and affirmation for the way her story was represented, acknowledging that the research honoured her experiences in a way that felt respectful and empowering.

Data Management. All forms were stored in a password-protected folder on my personal password-protected laptop. An encrypted Zoom account was used to record all the interviews to later create transcripts, which were stored on an encrypted USB. Furthermore, the participants' chosen pseudonyms were used to label the data files. A second copy of the files was saved in a second password-protected folder on my personal password-protected laptop.

Data Analysis: Applying Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke's recent articles highlight the fluidity and adaptability of thematic analysis, acknowledging that researchers may draw on different types of thematic analysis depending on their specific research questions and contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021, 2023). Following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2023), this research reflects a Big Q approach by employing qualitative research principles and an analysis method grounded in a non-positivist framework. Reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2023), emphasizes the importance of researchers actively engaging with their positionality and reflexivity throughout the analysis process. This approach recognizes that researchers' unique perspectives, backgrounds, and assumptions inevitably influence their interpretations, shaping how themes are identified and understood within the data.

Braun and Clark's (2006) method of reflexive thematic analysis was chosen for this study because it provides a clear framework and a rigorous process of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data such as narrative inquiry. Braun and Clark (2006) describe six steps to thematic analysis: (1) familiarizing yourself with your data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; (6) and producing the report. Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted to identify common themes across all the participants' narratives.

The process of creating the narrative accounts directly informed the reflexive thematic analysis by providing a detailed, context-rich foundation for identifying themes. As I transcribed and organized the participants' stories, I was able to immerse myself in the data, noticing key moments, emotions, and shifts in their narratives. This close engagement with the data allowed me to identify patterns and recurring ideas, which became the basis for the reflexive thematic analysis. Additionally, listening to the recordings provided an opportunity to revisit not only the content of their stories but also the way they told them—their tone, pauses, and emphasis. I could hear the emotion behind their words, the weight of certain moments, and the subtle nuances in how they framed their experiences. This careful attention ensured that the themes I identified were not only reflective of the participants' voices but also anchored in the rich context of their lived experiences. The iterative process of moving between the narratives and the themes allowed for a more nuanced, reflexive approach to analysis, ensuring that the final themes captured the complexity and depth of the participants' stories.

Phase One: Familiarizing Yourself with Your Data. In the first phase, I, the primary researcher, immersed myself in the data to become familiar, which also involved the transcription process, where the recordings were transcribed verbatim. Using these transcripts, I created individual narratives for each participant, which were later analyzed. As previously mentioned, participants were invited to engage in a collaborative reading to review and edit the narrative account to ensure accuracy. Then, I reviewed the narratives and noted initial observations and general patterns, which informed ideas for coding to be revisited in later phases.

Phase Two: Generating Initial Codes. The second phase involved reading the participants' narratives several times to generate initial codes from the data across the entire

dataset. Codes capture features of the data (e.g., semantic, latent) and represent fundamental segments of raw data that can be interpreted in relation to the phenomenon. I systematically worked through the entire data set, providing equal consideration to each data item, and identified notable aspects that may contribute to recurring patterns throughout the data set. While developing and associating codes with data extracts, I strived to maintain the narrative features to avoid losing context.

Phase Three: Searching for Themes. In the third phase, I examined the list of codes and how they could be sorted (e.g., combining, separating, etc.) into potential themes. A theme encapsulates a significant aspect of the data regarding the research question and reflects a pattern or meaning within the dataset. I analyzed the relationships among codes, themes, and various levels of themes, including the main overarching themes and subthemes within them. If there were codes that did not seem to fit within the main themes, I created a "miscellaneous" theme to temporarily hold these codes. The purpose of retaining these codes was to ensure that no data was overlooked and to allow for the possibility of integrating them into the analysis later if their significance becomes apparent during the refinement process (phase four).

Phase Four: Reviewing Themes. The fourth phase involved reviewing and refining the potential themes identified in the previous phase. Upon examination of the candidate themes, the researcher gained clarity on which themes may not be fully supported by the data. Additionally, I merged some themes into a single theme, whereas others needed to be divided into separate ones. This phase included two levels of reviewing: (1) the coded data extracts and (2) the dataset as a whole. I began by reviewing the coded data extracts of each theme to determine if they formed a coherent pattern. At the second level, I assessed the validity of individual themes and determined

if they accurately reflected the overall meanings found in the dataset. Lastly, I coded any additional relevant data that may have been overlooked in earlier stages.

Phase Five: Defining and Naming Themes. In the fifth phase, I continued to refine and define the themes. I wrote an analysis to capture the essence of each theme to determine how it fits into the broader story relative to the research question and aims. Then I identified what specific part of the data each theme addressed to minimize the overlap between themes. Each theme was examined individually and in relation to others. Additionally, I identified sub-themes within the larger themes, which can help organize complex themes and show the hierarchical structure of the data. To conclude this phase, I created clear and concise names for each theme.

Phase Six: Producing the Report. The concluding phase consisted of a final report which summarized the analysis. The report used specific data extracts as examples to demonstrate the themes found across all of the participants' narratives.

Rigour and Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

The criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research are inherently linked to the theoretical framework of the specific discipline in which the study is conducted (Morrow, 2005). While counselling psychology research has traditionally adhered to post-positivist standards of rigour, its growing focus on constructivism and social-justice perspectives necessitates broader consideration of paradigmatic underpinnings for rigour or trustworthiness that may be more appropriate (Morrow, 2005). Lincoln and Guba (1986) propose that trustworthiness in qualitative research involves a set of criteria that address the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of findings, aligning more with a naturalist approach. Within the context of narrative inquiry authenticity, verisimilitude, and reflexivity was used to assess the rigour and trustworthiness of the study.

Authenticity

Lincoln and Guba (1986) argue that the criteria for trustworthiness are insufficient because they address concerns that are primarily relevant from a positivist paradigm. To address these shortcomings, Lincoln and Guba (1986) propose the term authenticity to take into consideration contextual influences and include additional naturalistic criteria. The five sub-criteria include: (1) fairness; (2) ontological authenticity; (3) educative authenticity; (4) catalytic authenticity; and (5) tactile authenticity.

Fairness. Fairness denotes a balanced representation of all viewpoints and voices within the research. Recognizing value-pluralism, I sought to clarify and honour constructions presenting perspectives fairly and ensuring they are validated by multiple sources (Amin et al., 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). The sources that I used included member checks, expert peer reviews, and thick descriptions (Amin et al., 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Member checks refer to collaborating with participants to ensure that the narratives accurately reflect their stories. To receive expert peer review, I consulted with my supervisor and second reader to review and discuss the research process, findings, and interpretations to gather feedback and ensure accuracy. Thick description refers to the detailed account of a phenomenon, such as the experience of embodiment after sexual assault, that includes behaviours and the context, meanings, and interpretations behind them. The second purpose of fairness was to ensure that all parties have a voice in negotiating recommendations and subsequent actions (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). The process included a negotiation, characterized by openness, equal power dynamics, and conditions where all parties are equally informed and skilled in bargaining (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Ontological Authenticity. Ontological authenticity involves enhancing participants' understanding of their social reality (Amin et al., 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I achieved this sub-criterion by engaging participants in reflective discussions to promote consciousness-raising (Amin et al., 2020). Some participants came to recognize and address the contextual factors that have contributed to political, cultural, or social disadvantages (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Whereas other participants developed a greater understanding of complexities that were once overlooked or inadequately understood (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Furthermore, I kept a reflexive journal about my personal growth and changes in understanding during the research process (Amin et al., 2020). This journal is further explained in the following subsection.

Educative Authenticity. Educative authenticity refers to how effectively the research process helps the researcher and participants gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for the perspectives and experiences of people from groups other than their own (Amin et al., 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). To facilitate educative authenticity, I kept an audit trail and gathered participants' testimonies (Amin et al., 2020). An audit trail is a detailed account of the research process, including decisions made, data collected, and analyses performed, to ensure transparency and verification of the research steps and findings. During the follow-up interview, I asked participants about their experiences and how their perspectives may have changed or been influenced by the research. Again, expert peer review and reflexive journaling are considered helpful procedures in this process too (Amin et al., 2020).

Catalytic Authenticity. Catalytic authenticity measures the research's effectiveness in encouraging meaningful actions, such as clarifying the focus of an issue, addressing, or improving a problem, and refining values (Amin et al., 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). The rationale for this sub-criterion is that knowledge alone is not enough to address the various issues

participants bring up during the research (Amin et al., 2020). To achieve catalytic authenticity, I focused on co-construction during the research process, provided evidence that the research findings may have practical implications, and ensured that the final report is easily accessible to those involved and affected by the research (Amin et al., 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Tactile Authenticity. Lastly, tactile authenticity is defined as the empowerment of participants to take action (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I used several techniques to increase tactile authenticity which include confidentiality, informed consent, member checks, and discussing power dynamics (Amin et al., 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I also discussed power dynamics early on to help build rapport with the participants. When participants know their input is valued and that they have an equal opportunity to influence the research, they may be more likely to engage openly and collaborate. This helps prevent dominant voices from overshadowing others and ensures that the research findings represent the diverse experiences of all participants.

Verisimilitude

Loh (2013) states that for narrative studies to have trustworthiness, they must achieve verisimilitude so that interpretations reflect the true nature of the personal realities. Verisimilitude refers to the quality of written narratives that appear real and alive, immersing the reader within the context of the study. I wanted to co-create narratives that accurately reflected the experiences and perspectives of the participants. The goal of verisimilitude is to produce carefully crafted narratives to offer insights and yield empathy to facilitate understanding of the participants' subjective world. I achieved verisimilitude by conducting member checks and seeking expert peer review. Specifically, I inquired about the extent of the 'trueness' or 'realness' of the themes and narratives.

Reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity refers to examining how one's experiences and understandings influence the research process, contributing to the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Morrow, 2005). Situated in the constructivist paradigm with a critical feminist lens, I explored my position as a researcher in the following section. This included describing my beliefs, biases, and values that shape my inquiry, which is a reflective process integral to reflexivity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Another valuable way to maintain reflexivity was to keep an ongoing research journal throughout the proposal drafting to the completion of the study (Morrow, 2005). Methodologically, reflective journals align with the constructivist and feminist perspectives, allowing for my experiences, thoughts, feelings, and opinions to be visible and acknowledged throughout the research design, data generation, and analysis (Morrow, 2005; Ortlipp, 2008). Through reflective journal writing, I tracked my developing understanding of my role as a researcher, interviewer, and interpreter of the data, alongside documenting the decisions and theoretical explanations for those decisions (Ortlipp, 2008).

Position of the Researcher

Adhering to the constructivist research paradigm, researchers must acknowledge their values, biases, positionality, context, and subjectivity, as knowledge is co-constructed with participants and these factors intersect (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Mertens, 2020; Ponterotto, 2005). Similarly, the critical feminist lens asserts the importance of explicitly stating one's positionality, including social and cultural identity, and emphasizes the necessity of working in collaboration with the participants to avoid perpetuating academic imperialism (Lazar, 2007). This echoes historical patterns of imperialism, where dominant powers imposed their knowledge, values, and authority on less powerful regions, thus maintaining a dynamic of control and marginalization in

contemporary academic contexts (Lazar, 2007). With reflexivity being an important component of narrative inquiry and the constructivist paradigm, complimented with a critical feminist lens, I took the time to reflect on my positionality concerning the present study and acknowledged the bidirectional influences between my positionality and the unfolding research process.

My position as a researcher is influenced by my personal experiences and background, which shape my approach to studying women's experiences of embodiment following sexual assault. I have lived through the trauma of sexual assault and the experience of disconnection from my body. A large part of my healing journey was to learn how to exist in my body again. Drawing from these experiences, the main question that arose for me was "How do people find safety and security in their bodies after sexual assault?" I was introduced to the theory of embodiment which inspired me to explore women's experiences of embodiment following sexual assault in my current research. This focus is not only a product of my past experiences, academic interests, and work with clients but also my commitment to contribute meaningfully to the discourse on women's mental health. As a researcher and student therapist, I strive to put the voices of women and marginalized groups at the forefront.

Since I addressed racial disparities of sexual assault within the BIPOC community, it is necessary to mention my own identity. I was adopted from Thailand at a young age and grew up in Western Canadian culture. Even though I am a visible minority, POC, I recognize that I hold privilege. I have had the privilege of receiving an education at a secular and private Christian university, which has afforded me many opportunities and resources. Being in a master's counselling program has allowed me to gain experience with clients and develop transferable counselling skills that enhance my ability to engage in meaningful conversations about specific topics during the research process.

Although it took me a year to open up about my sexual assault experience, my parents' support helped me access therapy which greatly contributed to my healing process. However, I recognize that not everyone who discloses their sexual assault has a supportive network or access to similar resources. For many, financial constraints, lack of insurance, or living in areas with limited mental health services can impede their ability to receive counselling. Additionally, some survivors of sexual assault may not have disclosed their experience(s) due to fear of stigma, lack of trust in the system, or personal barriers such as cultural norms. These factors can significantly impact their comfort and willingness to share their experiences of embodiment. The stage of an individual's healing process further influences how open they are about their experiences; those who are still struggling or have not yet sought therapy may find it especially challenging to discuss their embodiment.

By recognizing my position and relationship with the research study, I can better acknowledge how my personal experiences and perspectives influence the research process. My passion for supporting women's mental health informs my approach to this research. I am dedicated to ensuring that the study not only contributes to academic knowledge but also honours and amplifies the voices of the women involved.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The following chapter presents the participants' narrative accounts co-constructed from the initial interview. Each woman chose a pseudonym to protect her identity and all narrative accounts were edited to omit any identifying information. These narrative accounts follow the stories of different women's experiences of embodiment throughout the healing process after sexual assault. Presented in first-person language, the narrative accounts introduce the reader to each woman's unique story and sociocultural context, laying the foundation for this study's findings.

Participant One: Jillian

Jillian, a White woman in her mid-twenties, was 24 years old when she experienced sexual assault.

Experiences of Embodiment Post-Sexual Assault

Feeling Dirty. I have a history of abuse throughout my childhood, though not by anyone within my family—I feel like that's important to note. The recurring feeling I often experienced was a sense of being "dirty" like I needed a shower. I remember times in my life when I would shower but still not feel clean, so I would shower many times over again. It was this overwhelming need to clean myself, yet no matter what I did, I couldn't. That's often how I felt—dirty.

Shame. Shame came along with that very quickly, though it was probably so intertwined with everything else; (heaviness, wrongness, unworthiness and like I was the sin itself) that I didn't consciously notice shame itself right away. Then there's this feeling something akin to alienism. It's hard to explain, but it feels like if I were a child inside one of those adult-sized inflatable Halloween costumes, the ones where you're a giant Hulk, a snowman, or a

tyrannosaurus rex. I was painfully aware (and I thought everyone else was too) that I didn't fit inside my own body, whereby my own skin and the flesh were the thing that you blew up. I was the little person/skeleton trying to fit inside of that skin, and I never did. I didn't feel like I could put my arm out and actually reach my physical fingertips. In a strange way, it was as though I didn't know where I started or began. In a really weird way, there's this sense of not knowing where the end of your foot is. For example, when I took a step, I had this exaggerated sense that I didn't know where my foot was going to stop because I didn't feel like my skeletal frame reached down to match the termination of the inside of my own foot.

Gut Feeling. There were a lot of dark feelings afterward. Dark feelings and maybe deep, dark places too, but one of the biggest ones that led me to understand that something was deeply wrong was the hatred for myself that had been planted deep inside me. I won't go into the details, but the way I had previously coped with sexual abuse throughout my childhood was through repression. As a result, I didn't remember much initially, I just knew that something very bad had happened and that something very bad was wrong. That feeling started very low in my gut, like the sensation you get when you feel like you're going to puke. The pain from puking starts low and comes up and out. For me, this pain started in my throat, then travelled down past my stomach and was no longer constrained to a singular organ, it embedded itself into my entire essence. This time there was nothing I could do to get it out, I was the act committed against me. My gut felt like it weighed a million pounds, even though there was nothing physically there. Inside me was a silence that was so loud, it was deafening. These feelings became normal.

Social Disconnection. After I was SA'd I cut off many connections I had and did not pursue relationships of any kind for many reasons. Immediately after my sexual assault was a time where it felt like I was taking all of my resources that I needed and bringing them in

towards me. I was cutting off everything else that wasn't a dire need, one because I just didn't trust anyone for anything, let alone myself afterwards. I needed to be very small and close to myself in order to feel safe and start rebuilding very cautiously so I cut off a lot of those relationships and connections that I did have that weren't a need and only a want.

Dance

Desire to Heal. I did a lot of things to heal after my experience, but one of the major contributors to my healing was dance. One of the ways that I unconsciously (but consciously) knew I needed to heal was some kind of dance. I didn't know why I needed to go, but I knew that I needed it. I Googled dance classes for beginners and realized I had followed one of the local studios on Instagram already. The local studio was advertising a program for women exclusively to regain their confidence, power and find themselves again. To me, the advertisement sounded fruity and airy fairy but I was desperate, very desperate and I knew that I needed something like the 10-week program was describing and it involved some dancing. I had always wanted to dance beautifully since I was a child and I had my first encounter with sexual abuse, but never felt like I could dance. Presently though, I had already lost everything which ironically made it feel very safe to enroll. I had nothing left to lose so I decided to sign up.

I attended the dance studio run by a local woman and her team. They offered classes for everyone, whether you had been dancing for over 25 years or had never danced before in your life—not even in the kitchen with the mop. What made it feel easier, even though walking in was the furthest thing from easy, was the fact that they truly accepted anyone, no matter their experience or skill. Part of my instructor's mantra was, "Whatever you have, I'll take, and I'll work with you."

Tasting a Raspberry. I walked into my first Airy-Fairy Self-Help Class and immediately saw women with very diverse stories. Whether it was a mother of six who felt burnt out, or someone like me, the class wasn't about being picture-perfect, in fact, it was far more about being raw and becoming comfortable with that shadow part of yourself. It involved lots of stretching, body movements, and exercises. The first 15 minutes were just stretching, nothing special that I hadn't seen elsewhere before. Initially, it felt really dumb, and now that I'm saying it out loud, that feeling is coming back. One of the things that made it so impactful was that the class gave me opportunities to be real with myself and these complete strangers. The class gave me steps to regain my personhood after I was left with the shell of the human I had become due to the abuse. It was about things I could actually do—like describing the taste of a raspberry. We'd go around the room, and she'd bring in different fruits, saying, "Okay, just put one in your mouth and be very conscious of how it feels and tastes." I remember thinking, "This is so dumb. I can't believe I paid money for this." But by the end of the class, I realized I actually did feel better. I could now articulate to someone how a raspberry feels compared to a strawberry. I'd never thought about that before. After experiencing sexual assault or abuse, you must start small to regain trust, especially with yourself. At the time, I didn't feel like I could do anything; I felt like a shell of a human being (because I was). But being able to walk in and eat a raspberry—saying, "Yeah, I did that,"—was enough for that day. And that simple victory started building my confidence, eventually helping me work up to dancing full routines in an entirely different class with the same instructor.

Moving My Body. After a while, I finished the Airy-Fairy Self-Help Class and immediately signed up for the dance class. The classes were incredibly adaptable to wherever you were at. Some of the classes were more advanced, while others were for beginners, so I went

to the beginner class. The meaning of the dance class name was “Lioness.” Stepping into class for the first time, I felt a bit like the Tin Man from The Wizard of Oz. You know, the character who’s all rusty and needs oiling—he’s not a robot, but I felt like a Robotic Tin Man. I didn’t realize I could move my feet so much. I remember being in sports as a young kid in elementary school, and the number one thing gym teachers or coaches always told me was, “Jillian, you can move your feet.” Looking back, I think part of why I wasn’t athletic as a child was due to the trauma of sexual abuse. Between not feeling like you have the ability to “move” and change your circumstances and the alienness you have within your own body it’s no wonder I thought I wasn’t athletic. It’s interesting because now, after doing a lot of healing work, I’ve become far more athletic and dexterous. But stepping into that dance class, I felt like the Tin Man all over again despite all my progress from my Airy Fairy Self-Help class previously. I almost cried over something really simple… really often. In fact, I did cry a couple of times. My instructor was very understanding and said, “That’s fine. There are Kleenex here. You can cry the entire class if you need to.” I felt so foreign to myself, how was I supposed to move gracefully and make a T-rex blow-up suit I didn’t fit look beautiful? It felt impossible and I felt defeated. Slowly, I improved but, the core foundations of those dance moves were what helped me fit into my own skin most; stretches and body movement.

Doing those exercises, like rolling our spine upwards one vertebra at a time, was incredibly helpful. The instructor was very knowledgeable about the physical body, with a lot of experience in that area. Although she’s very athletic, she is a new dancer. Due to this, she was able to easily articulate how and why these muscles and movements were working. I found the combination of physically doing the exercises and listening to her explain things like “now think about this vertebra, then the next one” to be so helpful. She was also not afraid to start at the very

beginning with me. If something was too hard, she would always break it down into smaller steps, so I wasn't overwhelmed by trying to do a full movement all at once. For example, instead of working on a whole foot movement, she would break it down into parts. Once I mastered one part, we would move on to the next, like eventually working up to two-foot movements all the way to eventually performing multiple dance routines on stage in front of a crowd.

Dancing with God. I have this memory from dance class, and it must have been about three months in—so it wasn't right away. By three months into the class, I had started counselling and seeking help for the sexual abuse, addressing quite a few areas of my life. The first three months I spent in shock, kind of glazed over in most areas of my life. One day, I didn't feel like going to dance. I just didn't have it in me. Being winter, it was a dark, cold, and rainy night and everything inside me wanted to stay home to watch a movie or sit in front of the fire. I went anyway because I had paid for the class, and I figured I had to get my money's worth. Honestly, that's the only reason I went that night.

Once I was there, I felt like I was making so many mistakes. The things I had done so well a week or two ago suddenly felt foreign to me, and I got so frustrated. I remember thinking, "I might cry," I remember standing in the studio, asking, no, begging God to walk in the studio door and dance with me. I have no idea what song we danced to that night, but I do know that, at that moment, I felt Jesus walk into the room. And for the first time in my life, I felt like the body inside of me began to grow.

It's not that I could touch my fingertips right away, it wasn't some 180-degree miracle that happened, I didn't 'suddenly fit in my own body but, something felt different. I'm not sure if I made fewer mistakes that night, but I know I felt His presence. It wasn't a coercive, controlling and manipulative man that I had far more experience with within my life but a quiet, loving, and

respectful request. It felt as if He walked up to me, extended His hand, and asked, 'Would you dance with me?' I will never forget that.

Reconnecting Through Movement. Learning to live in my own body and move again was foundational. Personally, it was the first thing I had to learn in order to trust myself again. It wasn't about avoiding mistakes; it was about allowing myself to make them and learning through them such as through dance. I fell. I tripped. I turned the wrong way. I didn't put my hand where it was supposed to be. I didn't put my foot where it was supposed to be. But that process of trial and error helped me reconnect with my body.

This learning carried over into other areas of my life, especially my job, which is very physical. I love being out in nature and consider outdoor activity or engaging with nature in any way to be my favourite hobbies. Initially, I would practice walking across slippery logs in the forest. It might sound strange, but through this, I developed an awareness of my own feet. Now, I can walk in the forest, balancing on logs almost effortlessly based on how they look, how I feel in my shoes, the kind of shoes I'm wearing, the type of wood, and even the amount of rain we've had. All those things combined together came from: "Okay, just walk across this log and see if you can do it and let yourself fall down if you need to."

Within the last few years, I've hiked a famous multi-day hike located in B.C. and almost perfectly and effortlessly crossed a famous section of said trail known for its slippery rocks and heavy rainfall. The way I can now move in the forest is that of someone who moves with nature and not against it. None of this would have been possible if that instructor hadn't been willing to break down one movement into five separate pieces, and if Jesus hadn't been willing to dance with the little bit of me that was left. For me, rediscovering how to live in my own body was the foundation of healing. It started with something as simple as stretches, walking across a log, and

mastering small movements and it transformed into a greater confidence and sense of belonging within myself.

Present Experience of Embodiment

Christian Faith. I am a Christian and my faith is the foundation of my journey. I need this experience to be something that helps other people, otherwise it's not worth anything. I needed God to make something good from this experience because otherwise, it's worth nothing. I didn't feel like I couldn't live at the time if God didn't use it. Truthfully most of me still feels this way. I know that the only reason I got through what I did was because of God and my resilience. While it may sound cliché, I don't think my words could ever fully express how deeply I need Him. I've needed Him through everything. Part of what I learned through that experience was understanding how God sees me and loves me, and while many moms tell their kids, "God knit you together in your mother's womb," it's one thing to hear it and another to truly understand it in your heart. When I began to grasp that, it wasn't just knowledge in my head anymore; it became something I felt within myself. As I started to live that truth, it radiated from the inside out. Now, I feel like I walk differently and live out differently.

I feel far more confident now—though maybe "comfortable" is a better word—in my own body. It wasn't always this way. In fact, this is probably the newest thing for me. I haven't had much time yet with this feeling of belonging inside myself. Overall, I'd say that most days I feel fairly healthy. Of course, some days I have to work harder at it—you know, I'm a woman, and especially during certain weeks of the month, things can feel a bit off. But honestly, I really do love myself and who I am. I love the way God made most of me.

I do still struggle with my cellulite and wonder why I need that, but aside from that, I've grown to appreciate myself and I'm working on loving my cellulite too. I'm a woman and it will

help me grow smart and healthy babies when the time comes. Loving myself has made it easier to love others. Not that loving others was difficult before, but I no longer compare myself to them. Now, when I see someone—whether it's you or even a cashier—I can just think "Wow, objectively, that is a very beautiful person." Instead of wishing for their hair colour or wishing my nose looked like theirs, I can simply appreciate them and think, "God did a really good job on you," and then move on. I think that's such a radical shift, and I truly believe it's because I've learned to love myself and feel comfortable in my own skin.

Women in My Life. I had the privilege of being trusted by a family member with a story very similar to mine. She also experienced sexual abuse and overcame it. Now, she has two kids, and I've observed how she connects with her body. Whether it's going for a run, stretching, or even just the way she speaks about herself, it's been impactful for me. It's not that she didn't struggle. She never hid that from me, but she spoke to herself with a softness I hadn't seen before. That softness and acceptance have influenced how I've gotten to where I am today.

I'm hesitant to say that cultural influences shaped the way I view my body—not because they didn't, but because I'm not always conscious of them. Still, there must have been something there. Another person who comes to mind is my grandmother. I spent a lot of time with her when I was young, more than my other cousins. I liked the way that she accepted her wrinkles and the way that she was. She wasn't ashamed of her varicose veins. I think to some degree that has now changed, but I remember her as a fiercely beautiful woman who wasn't afraid of aging and a woman who laughed often. I've tried to implement that same mindset in my own life now.

Dear Past Self. If I could go back in time and tell myself something or even tell others I would say this: The things that man did to me, the way he used me, can never define who I am or permanently diminish the integral or outward beauty I have. That beauty can never be

completely lost. I wouldn't tell myself that he couldn't hurt me, because he did, but I would remind myself that I could never be completely erased. You can never be entirely gone even if only a shell of you remains, part of you remains. I'd tell myself that you can always rebuild, always get back into your body. You can find yourself again. It sounds cliché, but it's true. Something that has really helped me is knowing that every seven years, every cell in your body is recreated. In seven years, I'll have a body that has never been touched by him. I know that might sound strange, but it gives me so much hope. I don't know if this fully captures what I'm trying to say, but it's the best way I know how to express it right now, like any language it will take me a lifetime to learn how to deeply and fully articulate the things surrounding any kind of abusive event and the depths to which God worked in my life and how he continues to do so.

Participant Two: Eliza

Eliza, a White woman in her mid-twenties, was 15 years old when she experienced sexual assault.

Experiences of Embodiment Throughout Childhood

Family of Origin. Growing up, my family wasn't very touchy-feely—we didn't give many hugs or cuddle often. My parents were pretty strict and not very affectionate when it came to emotions. If I was upset, they wouldn't offer comfort like, "Come here, let me give you a cuddle." Instead, it was more like, "Go to your room and deal with it yourself." I think what would have helped me more with my emotional well-being is having that support, where someone would help me regulate my emotions instead of just being told to handle it on my own.

Being Presentable. My parents always emphasized the importance of looking presentable because, as they would say, "You never know who you're going to meet each day." They believed that making a good impression was crucial, as it could lead to opportunities or

important relationships. They would remind me that I might meet someone like a future boss or someone who could significantly impact my life. That mindset stuck with me, shaping how I present myself to the world.

Fitting In. When I was younger, I was bullied a lot, so I always tried to change myself to be liked by others, especially within friend circles. I would adjust who I was to fit in and make friends. When it came to relationships, I did the same thing—I would pretend to like things that my crush liked, even if I didn't. For example, if they had a random hobby, I'd say, "Yeah, I like that too," when in reality, I didn't. I was just trying to relate to them, even though I wasn't genuinely connecting.

Experiences of Embodiment Post-Sexual Assault

Shame. I did not tell anyone about the sexual assault for five years. I knew my parents wouldn't have approved of me being alone with that person at the age I was, so I felt like I couldn't tell them what happened because they would be upset and feel that I had broken their trust. I also couldn't talk to my friends about it either because I feared they would say, "I told you so" or remind me that they never trusted that person. I didn't want them to think that I was being loose with my morals, not protecting myself, or that I wasn't strong enough to say "no" or push someone off if I needed to. It just left me feeling overwhelmed with a lot of shame.

I felt a lot of shame about my body, especially knowing that I had a gut feeling that this person might not be safe. But I ignored that feeling and trusted myself less when I went against someone else's advice. It made me question my own instincts, and I wondered, "Why should I trust myself if I let myself down in that situation?" Whenever I went near the area where it happened, I'd get nervous and anxious. It was near the sports field where I used to play field hockey, so every time I had practice, I'd feel a little upset in my stomach and not quite like

myself. Those recurring thoughts of what happened made me feel uneasy all over. I felt out of control and in a daze. It was just an overwhelming, physical reaction.

Desperate for Emotional Connection. Emotionally, I was often eager to seek out connections with people. If someone treated me a certain way, I would jump on it, thinking it would fill a part of me that lacked someone who treated me well. Sometimes, I would get caught up in the attention they were giving me and jump into a relationship or try to be in one, even if that person wasn't good for me. I would ignore things that were irresponsible or disrespectful, just focusing on the fact that they were paying attention to me and being kind. They were filling a void. It was like, "I'll be with anyone who shows me kindness, even if it's not a healthy relationship."

I think it was like, if someone wanted me to do something that made me uncomfortable, I would still convince myself that I needed to please them. I didn't want to feel like I was being pressured into something I didn't want to do, but I would make myself believe that it was what I actually wanted. In the end, I convinced myself it was my decision, even though it might not have been fully my choice.

Disconnected. I think I felt disconnected because I was working so hard to feel connected, but in the process, I was losing my own sense of autonomy. I was forcing myself to feel a connection, but it wasn't a genuine one at the time. Having that experience made me step back and ask myself why I wanted to feel connected to someone, especially if it didn't serve me in a positive way. I think it was just kind of lonely because I would have friendships that weren't consistent. We would be really close for a few days or months, but then it would just fizzle out, and we wouldn't hang out anymore. It felt super lonely to put so much effort into something, only for it to slowly fade away.

Physical Activities. Around the time of the sexual assault, I was starting to get into more physical activities. Before that, I had been focused on music and theatre, but after the incident, I was introduced to field hockey. Engaging in a more physically demanding activity helped take my mind off what had happened. I shifted my focus to setting goals, improving my stamina, and working on my performance rather than dwelling on the trauma.

As I got into field hockey, I also began strength and conditioning at school, which involved lifting weights, running, and other strenuous activities. I really appreciated how these workouts left no room in my mind to think about anything else—I was completely focused on the task at hand, like lifting or squatting. To complement these activities and support my recovery, I realized I needed something to help stretch my body and promote better recovery. That's when we started going to yoga as a family. Practicing mindfulness in a safe and trusted environment was incredibly beneficial in helping me clear my mind and find some peace.

The Desire to Change. After the assault, even my diet changed. I felt a strong desire to transform my body—to look different from how I did when it happened. It was almost as if I wanted to leave that version of myself behind. My sense of fashion also shifted drastically. I didn't want to wear the same types of clothes anymore. I threw myself into a mindset of, "Okay, let's change the way I look." I became more conscious of my appearance—how I dressed, how I did my makeup, and how I presented myself to the world. I think it stemmed from feeling so gross and disconnected during that time. I felt like I needed to change a lot to reclaim a sense of control and move forward.

I realized I didn't want to attract that type of person anymore. He was more of a "rugby guy" who seemed drawn to tomboyish girls, and I thought, I don't want to be a tomboy. I want to embrace my femininity. I started dressing in a way that felt more feminine and intentionally

distanced myself from anything that might appeal to that kind of guy. Even though I was still doing activities like weightlifting, I wanted my appearance at school to reflect this shift. It was a way of reclaiming my identity. Over time, I felt like the past version of me became almost a stranger. I'd look at her and think, why would I need to dwell on her? I'm not even her anymore. It was like I was creating a separation between who I was then and who I wanted to be.

Dating. The first two years of my current relationship were a bit confusing. I was excited, of course, but I also had doubts in the back of my mind, wondering, "Is this the person I'm truly connected with, or am I just convincing myself?" I had a history of changing myself for others, so I questioned if this was a real connection or just another case of me compromising. But after two years, I realized that no, this is exactly what I want. I felt connected to myself, and although we have different hobbies, interests, and even family values, we're not trying to change each other.

Hugs. We were friends for two years before starting our relationship, and even then, he was always very affectionate. Whenever we'd be at school waiting for our buses, he'd say, "Oh, give me a hug, bye!" Every time we saw each other, it started with a friendly, "Hey, how's it going?" followed by a hug. That affection has carried through into our relationship.

My Husband's Family. Transitioning to being around my husband's family, where physical affection is more common, was a big change for me. My mother-in-law, for example, would often rub my back or give me a little massage, and that was something I wasn't used to. I was fine with hugs, but that kind of physical touch was unfamiliar and made me feel uncomfortable at first. I'd think, "Why are they rubbing my shoulders? This feels weird," or "Why is my husband rubbing my back when we're outside? We're not at home." But now, I

realize it's just a way of showing affection, and I've come to appreciate it—it's actually a really nice gesture. It was definitely a different experience for me.

Work Incident. I had an experience with a customer that really shook me. There's this one customer who I just feel in my bones is not a good person. He's yelled at me before, and while I've been yelled at by other people without feeling much, this time was different. My voice started to shake, my back felt hot like I had a burning sensation down my spine, and my arms began to shake strangely. I couldn't understand what was happening until I realized: it was fear. Even my face changed, and my whole demeanour felt heavy. It was a clear "fight or flight" moment, and I knew I needed to get out of there. Afterward, I talked about it with my coworkers to calm myself down. I didn't know what about this person triggered that reaction in me—maybe their body language or something about them that reminded me of someone else—but it just felt wrong. Even after talking about it, I still felt that same overwhelming fear, and it was a really unsettling experience.

Present Experiences of Embodiment

(Un)aware. Sometimes, I feel like I dissociate from my body, almost to the point where I don't even recognize it. I'll catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and think, "Oh, that's what I look like." I never really think about my body until I see it reflected back at me. Even with my tattoos, I'll forget they're there, and then someone will point them out, and I'll be like, "Wait, I do have tattoos." It's like a sudden realization that brings me back to being more aware of how my body looks. Sometimes, I get so caught up in my head that I become overly aware of my body, wondering, "Is this changing? Does it look different today?" I think it comes in waves—there are times when I feel really connected, and then other times when I don't feel connected at all.

Yoga. I'm trying to do more mindful activities, like yoga and stretching, so I can really tune into my body. Otherwise, I feel less aware, especially with things like my breathing. When I focus on my breath, inhaling and exhaling, I become more conscious of my body. I'll think, "Okay, I feel the top of my head, the tops of my shoulders, and my fingertips on the floor." It helps ground me and makes me more mindful of my body. Afterward, I definitely feel more connected and confident, like, this is my body, and I can move through the day with awareness. I'm naturally clumsy, so I often bump into things or people without realizing it, especially at work. Doing these mindful activities helps me become more aware of my surroundings and the space I'm in.

Walking. I think going for walks and having time to exercise while being with my own thoughts is really important. I don't even listen to music while I walk; I just focus on being conscious of what I'm doing and reflecting on my thoughts.

Body Comfort. When it comes to the level of comfort in my body, I'd say it's around 90% now, with discomfort being pretty minimal. Thankfully, I've distanced myself from the people who used to make me uncomfortable, so I don't see them very often. I've also set up strong boundaries. I feel more in tune with myself when I'm around people I trust. Having people I trust around helps me relax and fully take in my surroundings.

However, when I'm in public or with someone I don't trust, I notice my body tense up without even thinking about it. My breathing changes, and my body language shifts. I think my face changes a lot too—I'm usually a pretty smiley person, but I've noticed it at work. For example, if I encounter a certain customer, I'll tell myself, "I need to leave the room," and I'll go to the back to calm down. I'll take a moment to think about why I'm feeling upset, and then I'll use the headset to see if they're gone before returning. This customer made me uncomfortable,

and people would ask, “Are you mad at me? You look so angry.” I’d tell them, “No, I’m not angry, I’m just kind of scared.” It made me realize that my body really does change when I’m not in a safe place. It’s only after I realize my body is tensing that I look around and think, “Okay, that makes sense—there’s someone I don’t trust or feel comfortable with.”

It’s the feeling of not trusting someone, where I don’t even want to be in the same room with them. Sometimes, I don’t even want to look at their face. When I do make eye contact, it feels really scary, and I just can’t handle it. I don’t want them to look at me that way. So, when I feel that mistrust or a lack of safety, I avoid eye contact because it really freaks me out.

People Pleasing. Even in a professional sense, people would say, “You’re a people pleaser, and you need to stop that.” And I’d think, “It’s in my nature to please people.” But I’m working on it now, learning that it’s okay to disagree or say no.

Trusting Personal Judgement I think my past decision-making sometimes put me in a bad space, but looking back now, I realize that when I trusted myself to jump into something, my current relationship ended up in a great way. I’ve never felt unsafe in the relationship, and I’ve always felt comfortable speaking up and being honest. My honesty has always been met with compassion and understanding. So, I’ve learned that I should trust myself more, because my past decisions don’t dictate how I’ll handle things in the future. It’s about believing in myself and recognizing that I made the right choice, so now I need to trust my decision making and own it with confidence.

My Husband. I still feel empowered in the relationship, able to speak up about things, and that’s been really healing for me. We share a similar temperament—neither of us likes yelling, and our temperaments just mesh really well together. In my current relationship, physical touch is very important to us, and it’s a big part of our quality time together. Whether we’re

cuddling on the couch or I'm resting my head against his chest and listening to his heartbeat, it's incredibly comforting. It makes me feel relaxed and at ease in a way that I wouldn't if I were with someone I didn't trust—it would feel unbearable. Being able to ground myself in his presence and touch feels so reassuring and creates a strong sense of closeness.

I think I've become so much more comfortable with myself. In the past, I didn't want people to see my body or perceive me in a certain way. But now, I want to be seen—I want my partner to tell me I'm beautiful or that he likes how I look. However, if it were someone I didn't trust, I'd feel completely different. I wouldn't want them to look at me at all.

Physical Touch. I think physical touch is really important when connecting with people. Whether it's a small gesture like a massage or just being close, it can be incredibly meaningful and even healing. I've learned over time that physical touch actually helps me regulate my emotions. It wasn't always like this—before, physical touch used to make me uncomfortable, and I relied on being alone in my room to process my feelings. But now, I've realized that things like a hug, a hand on my shoulder, or just simple affection can provide the reassurance I need. It's become one of the most comforting and effective ways for me to feel grounded and supported.

Whenever my husband and I see each other, we naturally embrace, and those six-second hugs have become really important to us. It's a way to connect, almost like co-regulation, letting those happy hormones flow. Over the years, this has helped us grow even more comfortable with each other.

Appearances. I've always felt that first impressions are so important, and I don't want people to perceive me as someone who doesn't care about themselves. I want to look like I put effort into my appearance and carry myself with self-respect. For example, just this morning, we

were watching my parents' dogs overnight, and I forgot my hairbrush and didn't wash my makeup off before bed. As we were leaving my parents' house, I realized I looked like a mess. I asked if my husband had a comb or anything I could use, and when he said no, I started feeling really self-conscious. When we got into the elevator, I was startled to see someone else there, and it hit me—I didn't want anyone to see me like that, with unbrushed hair and smudged makeup. Once we got back to our apartment, I thought, "I always want to look presentable. I don't want someone to look at me and think, Oh, you should brush your hair, or You don't look put together." It's just important to me to show that I care about myself.

Even if I'm just going to work and don't take a moment to put on mascara, which seems like such a minimal detail, I realize afterward that I feel better when I do take that time for self-care. If I don't take that moment, I don't feel as confident doing my job, which might sound a bit strange, but it really does make a difference for me.

My Sister. I definitely think my younger sister has been a huge support. She's experienced some things that mirror my own, so having someone who can relate to me has been really important. What's even more inspiring is that she's been able to overcome those challenges and still lead a successful, happy life, excited for the future. Knowing that someone can go through something really terrible and come out stronger on the other side has been comforting. Since we've had similar family experiences and relationship timelines, we've been able to fully lean on each other. We've had conversations where we've both expressed how grateful we are to have each other, not only as sisters but also as friends. Having such a strong relationship with her has been incredibly helpful.

Healing. I think healing and growth take time—it's not something that happens automatically. First, you need to process what happened to you. Then, you need to reflect on how

it made you feel and consider what moving forward looks like. This involves figuring out the boundaries you want to set with others, and deciding what is and isn't okay for you. It's a gradual process and definitely not an overnight change. It's also important to remember that whatever emotions you experience along the way are valid, and it's okay to feel them as part of the journey.

Participant Three: Mia

Mia, a Vietnamese woman in her mid-twenties, experienced sexual assault from early childhood until the age of eighteen.

Experiences of Embodiment Throughout Childhood

Contradicting Messages. Growing up, my parents often told me that I was ugly, and I found that very confusing. I was told this by other people as well. Because of these comments, I developed a belief that I was unattractive. At the same time, I found it strange and unsettling when people who had said or implied that I was ugly also treated me inappropriately or even assaulted me in a sexual way. This contradiction was hard to process. On one hand, I thought such behaviour would only happen to people who were considered attractive, which led to a warped understanding of my self-worth. It made me feel as though I was "unworthy" or "not good-looking," and people felt entitled to treat my body however they wanted. These experiences deeply shaped the way I viewed myself and my value in relation to others.

Friendships with Men. Growing up, I didn't have many female friends; most of my friends were male. I also enjoyed hobbies, like gaming, that are typically associated with guys. People generally found me funny and fun to be around, but when they saw me in person, especially in terms of attraction, I often heard things like, "You don't look like what I thought you would," or comments about my appearance that made me feel uncomfortable. One of my ex-

partners would tell me that I was beautiful, but also that I had a good body but not a good face. These kinds of comments stick with me because I tend to be more sensitive. I internalize things like the way my nose or my eyes look, the things people notice about me that I feel I can't defend or change.

It was quite strange because I realized that my male friendships often seemed conditional. Either they were attracted to me, so they gave me the bare minimum of respect, or they were interested in another woman, and I was expected to help them with that. The friendships felt very shallow and unstable. Over time, my male friendships have improved, and I've done my best to filter out people who still treat me this way. My experience was that I was either helpful to them or seen as someone with the potential to be helpful.

I also received a lot of unsolicited comments about my body or appearance that I didn't realize were problematic. There were many things that men would say or do that I didn't recognize as inappropriate at the time—like commenting on what I wore or how I presented myself, saying things like, "Why did you wear that?" or "I don't think that looks good on you." They would also tell me to be less loud or change things about myself that I couldn't really alter. It was as if they felt entitled to share their opinions, believing that if I wanted to be in their friendship or better myself, I should listen to their advice. I felt like I had to present myself according to their expectations so that I was worthy to be in their presence.

Experiences of Embodiment Post-Sexual Assault

Powerless. I actually didn't think about the assault for a long time. I think I just didn't address it because of the nature of what happened—I was told I couldn't tell anyone. Even the trusted people in my life who knew about it advised me not to talk about it anymore. So, for several months, I didn't acknowledge it at all—about six months or more. I just pushed it aside.

At the time, I think the nature of the assault really affected me. I've always had this tendency to want to please people, and I did it with the hope that if I gave them everything, like offering the ocean when they asked for a drop of water, they would love me in return. That's how I thought I could earn love growing up. During those events, I somehow convinced myself that if I let it happen, maybe they would love me. I was trying to justify it, trying to process what was happening, even though I knew deep down it didn't feel right. It wasn't necessarily new because of the people involved in the assault; I had experienced abuse from them before. So, it wasn't surprising in that sense. However, what I felt was this overwhelming wave of emptiness, followed by a deep sense of helplessness. If that makes sense, emptiness is one thing, but this time, it was coupled with a feeling of being completely powerless.

Emptiness. I definitely didn't have much bodily self-awareness when I was younger, but after my assault at 17, I became more aware of how foreign my body felt to me. I can best describe it as feeling really empty—a violent, overwhelming sense of nothingness. It felt like my body was just a shell as if everything inside had been gutted out. If that makes sense, it was as if something had been taken from me, leaving me feeling completely empty. It didn't feel like love (general affection)—it just felt empty. For a long time, I couldn't understand why I felt this way. Now I know why, but at the time, it was so confusing. I kept wondering, "Why do I feel this nothingness? Why can't I just feel whole, fulfilled, or complete?" It was a constant struggle to make sense of it all.

Robbed. It is the feeling that someone has taken something vital from you, leaving you with this empty shell of a woman. It's like someone stole a part of your soul, and now it's entirely your responsibility to rebuild yourself, to create a version of yourself that you can like and live with. If I were to visualize it, it feels as though someone took your essence away

completely—it's no longer yours. And in order to keep moving forward, to reclaim even a small part of your identity, you have to start sewing together a new version of yourself. It's not that the version of you before was flawed or unworthy, but it's gone, and rebuilding is the only way to continue.

That process is exhausting because life keeps happening. Challenges arise, and you feel beaten down again and again, making it seem like you're always in this endless cycle of stitching together a "forever version" of yourself. You never know when—or if—it will be complete. And more than that, you wonder when you'll finally get to put it on and feel comfortable, to feel that sense of happiness or peace, or that you've truly moved past it. It's difficult to feel whole again when such a crucial part of you was taken away.

Dissociation. During that time, I began to have moments where I would dissociate. Looking back, I think that's when it started. I would dissociate more often and become aware of it. I always have a hard time explaining this to other people, but the concept of dissociation feels like I'm constantly trying to escape my own body. It felt like I was out of my body like I was trying to escape being in my own skin. I hated being here, and I couldn't stand looking at myself. It's as if I'm seeing myself from a third-person perspective. Sometimes, when I'm walking with others, I'll suddenly stop, and I can tell people are watching me, wondering why I've stopped, but my body feels paralyzed. It's like I'm transported back to a moment from the assault, where I was frozen, unable to move.

It's incredibly debilitating to have something so unbelievable happening to you, and then have your body react the same way—like I'm stuck in that moment again, unable to act. If I were to describe it from a psychological standpoint, it feels like I'm witnessing the assault again without any power to stop it. My body takes me back to that moment where I felt so powerless,

thinking, “What if I just don’t do anything, because what can I do in this situation?” It’s like being trapped in that sense of helplessness once again.

Social Disconnection. I felt like, physically, I might not appear disconnected, but inside, I felt very disconnected from the people around me. I distanced myself from a lot of my relationships, not because they were with bad people, but because I felt so disconnected from myself, my identity, and my body. For a long time, I just didn’t want to connect with others. Even though I still tried to show up for people, hanging out and doing the things I was expected to do, I didn’t feel like I was truly a part of their lives. I didn’t feel authentic in front of them. When conflict arose, it felt like they already had preconceived notions of who I was before I even had the chance to be comfortable enough to show them my true self. They had already decided how I should show up for them, which made it hard for me to be authentic. Over time, I lost track of who I was because I was so disconnected from others, and I didn’t know how to show up for them in a genuine way. It’s not that I was hiding anything—it’s just that it always felt like there was a barrier preventing people from truly understanding me.

First Time Disclosing the Sexual Assault. At the time, I had a romantic partner in college, and when I first started talking about the assault, his response was very monotone. Over the course of the year, his reactions varied, but by the end of our relationship, he had implied that the assault was my fault. The most painful moment came when he asked me, “Is your assault even real, or did you make it up?” That was incredibly hard to hear. I had a difficult time processing that, especially since I was also involved in a PTSD drug experiment at the time. My supervising therapist was very helpful in holding space for my anger, as I struggled to believe that someone would be so skeptical of my experience. It was painful, but I couldn’t fully access that anger or pain when it happened—it was just too jarring for me to process in the moment.

This was the first time I had disclosed the assault to someone, and it was a painful experience to have that kind of reaction. Over time, I began to disclose it to other trusted people in my life. However, the way that my ex-partner reacted when I first shared my experience was still a strange and hurtful encounter.

Friendships with Women. Over time, I've developed more female friendships, and slowly, I've learned to be more forgiving and gracious toward myself and my body. I think a lot of my healing journey started with having more female friendships and seeing how my friends go through their own journeys. It's been so much more uplifting to witness, and it has helped me with my own personal development as well.

I think my best friend's situation is similar to mine, though not identical. She's incredibly beautiful, and it pains me that she can't see that about herself. As I've developed more female friendships, I've noticed how many women are overly critical of themselves. I see how they are perceived by the men in their lives, and while I understand that this is a very heterosexual perspective, the idea of women being constantly perceived seems universal. I see the effects of this in my friends when they stress over what they're going to wear or obsess over things like, "Oh my God, I can't believe I have this!" or "I need to fix this." I want to tell them, "Yes, you're so beautiful, and this doesn't make you any less beautiful." It's not that I'm angry at them for not seeing it; it's just painful to see how we're constantly under a microscope, unable to celebrate or enjoy our bodies as they are. We're told our bodies are meant to be changed, experimented with, or demanded by others, but not to be celebrated by ourselves. That's so scary to me.

For so long, I felt like I had to present myself a certain way, whether at school or with friends, just to be liked or accepted. My friends and I talk about how we feel there are these unspoken rules about how we should show up, but when we express that, we're often met with,

"No, we don't see you that way." But there is a truth to it—because when we don't fit those expectations, people treat us differently. It's almost as if our appearance is the bare minimum for any relationship, and that's a hard reality to face.

Present Experiences of Embodiment

The Word Foreign Resonates. This is an interesting and transformative time for me in terms of my relationship with my body. Some days, it's really difficult to look at myself. I know logically that I'm okay, that I'm not terrible by objective standards, but the ideals I grew up with make it hard to accept my reflection. Sometimes, when I go to the bathroom, I avoid looking in the mirror altogether, so I don't have to confront those feelings. Wrestling with this is challenging. Whenever I take pictures of myself or even just perceive myself in any way, it feels unsettling—almost frightening. Knowing that others are perceiving me is even scarier. It's so overwhelming that if I don't feel "presentable," I'll avoid seeing people altogether. It feels foreign to me to exist in my own body, almost as if it doesn't truly belong to me. The word "foreign" resonates deeply because it captures how disconnected I often feel when I look at myself.

Vietnamese vs. Western Culture. It's confusing to feel accepted when I don't look the way I think I'm "supposed" to. Right now, I'm navigating these contradictions and working through them. I've never been at the weight I am now, and while it might not seem that significant by Western cultural standards, as an Asian woman, I feel the pressure of very strict expectations about how women should look. Within that context, I'm considered quite overweight, even obese.

In Vietnamese culture, there is a clear standard for women's appearance, where it is considered more acceptable if you weigh below 50 kg (I'm not sure what that is in pounds).

Women are also expected to be quite short—ideally below 5 feet tall—with small, delicate figures. Growing up in Vietnam, I was around 5'2" or 5'3", which isn't tall by Western standards, but in Vietnam, I was considered very tall. In fact, I was the tallest among all my female Vietnamese friends, which made me feel out of place. I often struggled to find clothes that fit me, even when I weighed around 45 kg, which was considered ideal. My height and overall size made me feel "big" compared to the cultural standard there.

On the other hand, in the West, where I lived in the US for eight years and now in Canada, I'm considered small or petite. However, I've noticed that within Western culture, there's a fetishization of Asian women. People often expect me to fit a stereotype of being physically small, delicate, and docile. There's an unspoken narrative where I'm supposed to be the "cute, quiet Asian girl" who doesn't speak up or assert herself, which aligns with certain Western stereotypes. Ultimately, I feel like I'm caught between two very different sets of expectations. In Vietnam, I'm seen as too big and tall, while in the West, I'm seen as small but expected to conform to an entirely different narrative about Asian women. It's a challenge navigating these conflicting standards on either side of the world.

Managing Discomfort. In the past, I've gone to strange or extreme lengths to manage this discomfort. If I know I'm being perceived, or even perceiving myself, I feel the need to present myself in a specific way—one that makes both me and others feel comfortable. It's as if I need to mould myself into something more acceptable to lessen the fear and discomfort of being seen. But this experience of being perceived—of being seen—has always been uncomfortable for me. Being seen is often associated with love, like when people say, "I feel seen when I'm with you." But for me, it's always felt like a fear of what others perceive about me that I can't change. Once they see me, what are they going to do with that information, and how are they

going to treat me? There's always this fear about their actions and not knowing what will happen next.

Authentic Self. At the same time, I'm making significant progress in my mental health. I'm becoming more authentic and aligned with who I am, and this journey has brought me a lot of love and support from others. That support is both uplifting and troubling because it conflicts with my belief that I need to meet certain physical standards to be loved or perceived well. Part of becoming authentic with yourself is learning to be comfortable with your body, which can be really difficult. It sounds cliché, but it's also about allowing others to perceive you however they want. I get that it's cliché, like, "You shouldn't let other people's opinions affect you," but it's also not nice to feel like you're never enough.

Never Truly Comfortable. I don't think I ever truly felt comfortable in my own body. There were times in my life when I was very skinny, or what people might call my "prime," when I felt the most beautiful. But despite that, I was always perceived by others as not good enough, and that deeply hurt me. I would often revisit those moments, replaying them in my mind and beating myself up over how I was perceived. I tried so hard to change myself, but it never felt like enough. I would look at old photos of myself, and in those moments, I thought I was ugly. Yet, when I look at those same photos now, I realize I looked fine, even beautiful. But back then, I couldn't see it. I would tell myself, "I don't look good enough and choose not to post those photos, convincing myself it didn't matter. Re-examining them now, I can see I was beautiful, but I never thought I was okay at the time. It made me realize that it wasn't about how I actually looked, but about how I was being perceived. I understand that others have different experiences with their bodies, but for me, the constant pressure of being perceived by others made it so hard to truly celebrate anything about my body.

Seen and Loved Without Judgement. Even though I don't think I have many moments in my life where I've felt truly comfortable in my own body, there was one moment recently that stands out—my birthday this past summer. Before that, I had opened up to a lot of my friends about the struggles I was facing with my body. I shared that I felt like I was at my heaviest and that I was scared to be perceived by others. On my birthday, after all the work my friends and I had done to talk through these feelings, they reassured me with so much love and support, saying they didn't care about how I looked and that they loved me no matter what. They encouraged me to celebrate myself because I had been through so much that year.

So, on my birthday, I showed up wearing a dress that I actually liked, one that fit me well for the first time in a long time. It wasn't about worrying about how people were perceiving me anymore. I was just there to enjoy the moment, to have fun with my friends. I wasn't constantly self-conscious about how I was sitting, talking, or adjusting myself. I felt a sense of freedom and comfort that I hadn't felt before. That support from my friends made a huge difference. I still knew that I had work to do on myself, but their overwhelming care and encouragement during a time when I didn't even like myself helped me feel accepted. They told me they wanted me there, and that how I looked didn't matter, but they also genuinely told me I looked beautiful. It felt like being seen in a healthy, loving way, not in a way that felt vulnerable or embarrassing. It was a feeling of being seen and loved without judgment, and that made all the difference.

Pretty Privilege. I mentioned earlier about viewing this from a somewhat nihilistic perspective—the idea that assault happens because someone finds you attractive. Throughout my life, including during the times when I was assaulted, I had worked hard to change aspects of myself to be perceived as "pretty." In doing so, I experienced what's often called pretty privilege, where people treated me "better." But looking back, that treatment wasn't

extraordinary; it was just the bare minimum of basic kindness, extended only because I was deemed attractive.

This dynamic creates an unsettling paradox. On one hand, being perceived as attractive comes with societal privileges, such as people being nicer or more accommodating. On the other hand, that same attractiveness is framed as a justification for harm—like being objectified, harassed, or assaulted. There's no winning in this scenario. When I try to celebrate myself and embrace my appearance, it feels overshadowed by the notion that I'm doing it to please others or cater to their gaze.

I'm still grappling with this concept of pretty privilege, especially in the context of assault. It's a troubling idea that being attractive not only earns you "privileges" but also makes you a target. People seem to associate attractiveness with deservingness—not just of kindness but also of negative, harmful behaviours. It's as if being pretty comes with an unavoidable price.

Participant Four: Elise

Elise, a White woman in her late twenties, experienced sexual assault between the ages of two and three and a half years old.

Experiences of Embodiment Post-Sexual Assault

I was really young, which I only fully realized within the last year. For the longest time, I thought I was about four years old when it ended. But then I found out that I was only two years older than my younger cousin, who wasn't even one at the time. That made me realize, oh my God, I was really young, more like two years old. I don't know exactly how I felt in my body back then because I was so young, and I didn't understand that what was happening was wrong. I don't think it affected me immediately in a way I could recognize. On top of that, I don't

remember much of my childhood—I have this big "blackout" era in my memory. But what I do know is that, for a long time, I really didn't like myself.

They Pretended Like It Didn't Happen. I'm going to be vulnerable and admit something that's not easy for me to share because I feel ashamed of it. When I was a young kid, I used to masturbate. I didn't know that that was wrong. My parents worked a lot, so my grandparents watched me on a regular basis. I was molested for a long time by my step-grandfather. So he was my grandma's second husband. It happened every time my grandma left the house, and I was left alone. I was still in diapers at the time. After it happened, he was essentially just sent away, and that was it. I was separated from him, but he never went to jail, and there was no court case—nothing. They just got an annulment, and everyone pretended like it never happened. I wasn't put in therapy or given any support—there was literally nothing.

Inappropriate Play. I was young, but I now realize that children often display certain behaviours that indicate they've been sexually assaulted. That was true for me as well. Looking back, I wonder if my childhood friends also experienced sexual abuse as the way that we played "house" was not a normal way to play "house." We were doing things that had been done to us, and most of the time, we didn't get caught. To us, it was normal because we knew that "moms and dads" have sex so why shouldn't we play like this? However, there was one time my mom caught me, and after that, I wasn't allowed to play with that friend anymore. It made me feel like I was bad, rather than my mom recognizing that something was wrong and that I needed help. I don't think she understood why I was behaving that way.

That was a huge part of my experience. When you asked if I was sexually assaulted in other ways, I'm not sure. I don't remember how old I was when things happened with older kids. I know I was prepubescent, and the other person wasn't, but that's all I can recall. I'm also

unsure if the age gap was significant enough to make it sexual assault. Even though I went along with what was happening, consent isn't the same when there's a big age difference. For example, if one child is five years older, it's technically not consensual, even if the younger child says yes. I don't know how old she was compared to me, so I can't say for certain if it happened again. What I do know is that I have a lot of memories of inappropriate play and sexual desires as a child starting from when I was two years old.

Shame. Anything I did or used was always taken away—friends, toys, everything. It was never discussed; it was just, 'What are you doing? You can't do that. That's not good.' Then came the shame, and everything was taken away. Yeah, I think shame is the right word. I also felt like I had to either shut down or go numb. I don't remember ever feeling confident as a kid. I often felt shame.

Childhood Experiences of Embodiment

Mom and Grandmother. Growing up with a mom and grandmother who were fatphobic and very critical of themselves definitely shaped me. For example, my grandma, in particular, could be very judgmental about people's appearances. I remember walking with her in the mall, and she'd say things like, "Oh my gosh, look at those people; she's so fat." I'd be shocked and think, Grandma, what the heck? She passed away when I was 12, so I was quite young then. My mom was somewhat similar at times, though I feel she's become more self-aware and less judgmental over the years, which I'm thankful for.

Elementary School. When I was in elementary school, I was made fun of a lot, and looking back, I think, Are we serious? I looked like a normal kid. I often felt hypervigilant and had to be super aware of myself and the people around me.

High School

Comparing to Others. In high school, I was so aware of my size. I struggled a lot with body image and carried a deep sense of shame. That was compounded by bullying, even though I was involved in all kinds of sports. Despite my accomplishments, I constantly compared myself to others and didn't like who I was. I think I often came across as confident, but in reality, it was more of an insecure arrogance.

Overcompensation. I remember one instance when my mom called me out on it. While we were walking through a mall she said, "You are not too pretty to be nice." In hindsight, that was one of the best things she could have said to me. It reminded me to stay grounded. However, I don't think I was truly arrogant. I think any time I felt good about myself, I overcompensated because something inside always felt wrong. I constantly thought there was something wrong with my body.

Water Polo. For example, I used to look in the mirror and think, "I'm so gross, so fat, so disgusting." Those thoughts came from years of being in environments, like playing water polo, where my body was constantly scrutinized or even sexualized. Comments like "You have a baby-maker body," "Your hips are so wide," or "Your curves are so attractive" made me feel like my worth was reduced to my physical appearance. This focus on looks left me with a distorted view of myself.

External Validation. Around the same time, I got a boyfriend, and that brought a lot more external validation. With those changes, I started to feel better about myself, though much of it was still tied to how others perceived me.

Black Sheep. I have always felt like the black sheep, and even now, I often feel disconnected. I've always felt like I don't have a large community, and part of that is because

I've always felt different. It's something I haven't fully been able to pin down—it doesn't feel like something I can clearly define or put my finger on. People would often tell me things like, "You're too this" or "You're too that." For example, many people have said I'm "too serious," and honestly, I wasn't a very playful person growing up.

Playfulness. Looking back, I realize that might be because I never really had the chance to be a kid. I was always on guard, always trying to stay in control, and I don't think I ever gave myself the space to just play or join in with others. Instead, I spent a lot of time observing from the sidelines. That's why I love my husband so much—he brings out this playful side of me that not many people get to see. I'm realizing now that I am actually a playful person. I love to laugh, but I just don't do it very often. It makes me wonder if that side of me was shut down early on because of the environment I grew up in. All of these reflections feel like pieces of a bigger picture I'm starting to understand.

Giving Birth

External Version. One of the most significant moments that stands out for me happened during my first pregnancy with my oldest son. He was breech, meaning he was positioned upside down, so I underwent an external version. An external version is a procedure where two medical professionals manually attempt to turn the baby while the mother is still pregnant. It's an incredibly painful experience, and in my case, it didn't work—my baby didn't turn.

Loss of Control. Afterward, I was left feeling extremely sore, far beyond anything I had expected. I remember lying in bed, unable to get comfortable. At one point, I couldn't even move to reposition myself, and I started panicking. My husband tried to help, but in the process of trying to shift me, he inadvertently triggered a full-blown panic attack. I remember screaming, "Get out of here!" He didn't understand what was happening, and honestly, neither did I in the

moment. It was a combination of physical pain, discomfort, the inability to move, and the overwhelming sense of losing control over my own body. Being pregnant heightened all of those feelings.

Later that same day, I found myself in the bathroom, rocking back and forth and crying uncontrollably. I kept repeating, "I want this baby out. I want to be done." It was a moment of complete emotional and physical overwhelm—a loss of control that left me feeling helpless and trapped.

Looking back, I realize that pregnancy, for me, has often been accompanied by episodes like this because of the lack of control and the intense discomfort it can bring. This particular instance stands out as one of the most significant because of the sheer intensity of the pain, the helplessness, and the emotional toll it took on me.

Playing with My Son

Comfortable in my Body. I remember playing outside with my oldest son—actually, now that I think about it, my second son must have been a baby at the time. I was about to head to the gym, and it was during a period when I felt mentally and physically comfortable in my body. In the past, I've had moments where I've felt good about how I looked and strong in my body, but those feelings weren't always rooted in healthy reasons. At this point, though, I had been consistently going to the gym, and it was different. I felt genuinely strong, had more energy, and experienced less pain.

Carefree. That day, we were playing on the grass, pretending to be lions, running back and forth. I remember my husband making a comment that stuck with me: "I'm so glad you've been going to the gym because you seem to feel so much better." It really resonated with me because it was true—I felt happy, energized, and free in a way I hadn't in a long time. We lived

in a townhouse complex, so I knew people could probably see me from their windows. But there I was, rolling around on the grass with my kid, roaring like a lion, completely unbothered. I felt carefree, playful, and alive. There's a word I'm searching for—it's like carefree but with a sense of being unburdened. Whatever it is, that's how I felt in that moment.

Movement

The Gym. Going to the gym has always been more than just physical for me. It's about feeling strong and capable. When I move my body and push myself, I become more capable, and that creates a positive cycle where I do more, feel better, and grow more confident. Plus, going to the gym is my time—time to decompress and clear my head. Moments like that day, playing outside with my son, remind me why it's worth the effort. The energy and joy it brings into my life are irreplaceable.

Moving Our Bodies. Watching my mom go through a lot of health issues has also been a wake-up call. It has made me realize how important our bodies are and how crucial it is to move them, love them, and take care of them. I feel like I am much more in that mindset now than I used to be.

Present Experiences of Embodiment

Working Through It All. Now, as an adult, I'm finally working through all of it. My grandma continued living in the same house where it happened, and I wonder if that affected me. Every time I went over there, my body probably reacted, like, 'Am I safe here? When you've experienced trauma, it changes everything. It's a big burden to carry, and for me, it started so early in life that it has shaped everything about how I live and relate to others. It's not like something that happened later, like at 16, where it's a sudden shift you can point to—it's been woven into my entire life.

Postpartum. I'm currently seven and a half weeks postpartum, and I'd say this stage is harder for me than being a year postpartum. I think it's important to acknowledge that because this postpartum experience has been more challenging than my previous ones. Sometimes, though, I do feel gross—like when my hair is greasy, I am leaking milk, I get night sweats, or I feel lethargic. Those moments bring up more of a sense of discomfort or even disgust rather than specific negative thoughts about my body. Honestly, I do not think about my body in a really negative way very often. It is more about those fleeting feelings of being unclean or rundown.

For me, even when I have felt down, especially postpartum, I have had moments where I think, "Oh, I feel frumpy. I feel bigger than I want to be. I feel very swollen lately," which feels strange. However, having kids has really changed my perspective. It has helped me see what our bodies are capable of, how strong they are, and how important it is to find gratitude for that.

When it comes to thoughts about my body, I find myself wanting to move more. I do not like feeling out of energy or out of breath. I want to be able to keep up with my kids, but right now, for multiple reasons, I cannot keep up the way I would like to. I am not as strong as I used to be, and that has been bothering me. Having just had a baby, I am bigger than I would like to be, but I try to focus more on positive things. I think I'd like to have a better relationship with my body than I currently do. That said, I struggle a lot less now.

There are days when I feel inflamed or bloated and think, I feel fat today. But other days, I wake up full of energy, go on a two-hour walk with my kids, and feel amazing. Moving my body always helps me feel better about it. Being around people I feel comfortable with also makes it easier to exist in my own skin. Being married has really helped; feeling cherished by someone regardless of how you look is so meaningful. Plus, having had four kids, I can't help but appreciate what my body has accomplished. It's hard to hate a vessel that has grown life.

That said, on average or overall, I've noticed a significant change in how I feel about myself compared to before. I used to really hate myself—I carried a lot of shame and was teased a lot growing up. Now, though, I put much less importance on looks and external things like that. Usually, when I throw clothes on, I am doing it while walking down the hallway. For example, just today, I went back and forth half-dressed a few times. Right now, I try not to focus too much on thoughts like, "Oh, my body is this or that." Lately, I have been feeling grateful for the energy to take my kids for walks, and that is something I try to be intentional about.

Physical Discomfort. I think I often feel uncomfortable, but it is mostly physical discomfort because I deal with chronic pain. I wish my body worked a little better. I wish I were stronger in certain areas and that some things looked different—just the normal stuff. Something is usually bothering me, like my right arm, for example. I thought I had just pinched a nerve, and I had already seen a chiropractor twice for it. However, I have been dealing with pins and needles in my hand for three weeks now. On top of that, there are odd things, like how my arms feel when I am nursing.

Body Comfort. I think I am most aware of whether I feel comfortable or not during intimate moments. My comfort level can be influenced by everything—comments people make, how my clothes fit, or even my ability to move and play with my kids. It all ties together. Despite this, I have a certain level of comfort with myself. I am not overly self-aware in the sense of worrying about things like, "Is my stomach pooching out?" I know it is, but I do not dwell on it. I do not feel like I need to avoid wearing a bathing suit, doing fun activities with my kids, or dancing around because of how I look. So, while I often feel physically uncomfortable, I would say I feel comfortable with myself overall. Physically, I experience a lot of discomfort.

Fat Talk. I think societal norms play a big role in how we see ourselves. I have worked really hard not to be self-conscious about my size. I have even had to talk to my mom about it. For example, I might take a picture of her with my kids, and she'll say something like, "Ugh, I look so fat." I have had to tell her, "Mom, I'm around your size now. When you talk about yourself like that, or when people tell me I look like you, it makes me feel awful." She didn't really realize the impact of her words until I pointed it out.

Friends. I feel valued by my friends for so much of who I am beyond my physical appearance. It's meaningful that many of them have known me through various stages of my life—when I've been smaller, stronger, hospitalized, bigger, or pregnant. They've seen the full range of my experiences and have consistently shown love and kindness. I think it also helps that these are people who naturally express love toward others. Being surrounded by people who speak kindly of others, who encourage and uplift me, makes such a difference. It helps me feel like a valued person. I also really appreciate friends I can have fun with—it's so much easier to feel comfortable and at ease around them.

I think so many people around me have helped in ways they may not even realize. When you're constantly surrounded by others, how they treat you—their words, actions, and even the space they give you—can significantly impact your journey. For me, the most helpful things were when people gave me space to heal in my own way and supported my process without imposing their expectations. At the same time, I've also been hurt by words or attitudes that were dismissive, critical, or too focused on physical appearance.

Navigating Relationships. The hardest part is how it affects relationships. I feel like I can only get so far with people before it eventually comes up. And when it does, people often don't know how to react. Some treat me differently, others don't know what to say, and some

make it into a much bigger deal, which leaves me feeling uncomfortable. That's been one of the biggest challenges—figuring out how to navigate other people's responses when they hear about it.

Counteracting Negative Thoughts. The most significant mental shift for me has been learning to counteract negative thoughts about myself with positive ones. The practice that helped the most was replacing negative thoughts with two or three positive ones. These weren't necessarily about my looks—because appearances change—but about who I am as a person or things I value about myself. Over time, this helped me shift my relationship with my body. In fact, I feel healthier now, even at a larger size, than I ever did when I was at my fittest.

Trauma therapy has also played a huge role in my healing process. It's helped me unpack so much of what I've carried for years. Healing has been a long journey, but it's brought me to a place where I feel more at peace in my body and within myself. It's interesting how quickly these realizations come once you start reflecting—it's not always comfortable, but it's definitely transformative.

Participant Five: Nicole

Nicole, a White/Irish woman in her mid-twenties, was in her early twenties when she experienced sexual assault.

Experiences of Embodiment during Childhood

Health-Conscious Family. A big factor for me was definitely my family, especially my mom, who was very health-conscious. She always made sure my brother and I were doing things that were active. A running joke with my friends is that I'm going to be 26 on December 15th, and I've never had Lucky Charms. Everyone always reacts in disbelief, and I tell them, "You don't understand. The only cereals we were really allowed to eat were Cheerios, with the

occasional Cinnamon Toast Crunch, and that was about it." That was a big part of my childhood. My dad was also very active and social. I think growing up in the early 2000s and 2010s I felt a lot of pressure to look a certain way. That was partly due to the magazines that were popular at the time. I vividly remember walking into a grocery store and seeing the "best and worst beach bodies" articles, which were really damaging to me as a kid.

Dance. Another experience that harmed my relationship with my body for a while was dance. I remember when I was about 16, I had an instructor who bought costumes for us. She said she bought them based on the size she thought we'd be and handed me a pair of extra-large shorts. When I tried them on, they were too big. I had seen her tell the other girls that she would get them a refund or new outfits if the sizes didn't fit, but when she saw me, she just said, "Oh, I'm too lazy to do more shopping. They fit just fine." I was so upset that I ended up not showing up to the final performance.

Eating Disorder. Looking back, while I tried to shake it off and pretend, I didn't care, I think I actually developed an eating disorder around that time. I would not eat anything all day, work out for four hours, and then have a big meal, which created a cycle of starving, binging, and excessive working out. This went on throughout most of grades 11 and 12. Eventually, I became so weak that I fainted, and that's when I realized I couldn't keep going like this. I knew I needed to find something more sustainable. It's definitely been a journey, but I'm in a better place now, and I'm proud of how much healthier I've become.

Movement. Whenever I've experienced moments of hardship or stress, I've always turned to movement to help me through. I remember being 13 or 14, crying over an assignment, and my dad walking up to me. He said, "Nicole, here's what you're going to do. You're going to put the assignment away, and you're going to go for a run. Come back to the assignment when

you've got a clear mind." That moment really stuck with me and has since become my philosophy.

Even a couple of years ago, after going through a breakup—my longest relationship—I called my friend, and she said, "You know what, Nicole? Here's what we're gonna do. We're gonna go to the gym, and after that, we're going to get sushi and bubble tea." It turned out to be exactly what I needed. Moments like those have shown me how much being in my body and feeling more centered can really help.

Taekwondo. I got into Taekwondo because I was being severely bullied at school, and it reached a point where I just couldn't take it anymore. I went to my parents and said, "Please put me in Taekwondo." Flash forward to when I was 15, and I earned my black belt. That was one of the happiest days of my life—not only because of the accomplishment but also because I got to post a picture of myself with my black belt on social media. After that, no one ever bullied me again, which was amazing. Now, it's a running joke in my friend group, or whenever I tell people about it. They're always like, "Yeah, Nicole seems so sweet and friendly—until you realize she's a black belt!"

It definitely wasn't easy to earn the black belt. It took a lot of training and hard work, and it makes me a little sad when I reflect on it. One of the reasons I stopped wasn't just because I earned my black belt, but also because of the way I'm built—I put on muscle really fast. I got to a point where I was scaring men, and I thought, "Oh, man! I don't want to scare people."

Starting Yoga. As for yoga, it was something I did on and off, but it started around the same time I was getting bullied. I was dealing with some pretty significant mental health issues back then. I had severe anxiety, and I also struggled with something I'm not sure was OCD or self-harm, but I used to wash my hands until they bled—every day for five years. I went to

counselling, but at the suggestion of my teacher, they also put me into yoga and meditation. I was actually really happy about it because it gave me an excuse to skip school—I would usually go during school hours, and the teacher was cool about it. It became a way for me to learn how to stay grounded and use my body.

Starting the Gym. The gym was one of those things I kind of fell into because my mom is a huge gym enthusiast—not the biggest gym rat, but definitely a gym rat. When I turned 18, she got me a gym membership, and I started going with her. Then my brother got a gym membership too. So, yeah, we're all a very fitness-focused family.

Experiences of Embodiment after Sexual Assault

Betrayal of Trust. I was sexually assaulted multiple times in my early twenties, but the worst of it was by a former guy friend. He's blocked on everything now, and I want nothing to do with him. I felt incredibly disconnected. I think I just lost trust in other people because this was a guy I used to work with at Cineplex, and we had reconnected through his friends. He was by far the worst. We had reconnected, and I thought he would be someone I could trust, someone who had my best interests at heart. Now, he's blocked on everything. I felt like it was such a betrayal of trust.

I had this moment where I realized that this was someone I had thought was a genuinely good person, someone I considered a friend. But he acted solely based on his own selfish desires and needs, and that completely crushed me. I think that really affected a lot of my personal relationships. I began to isolate myself and shut a lot of people out. I also have to give myself some grace because I was going through so much at the time. There were days when I wouldn't leave my room, and I can probably count on one hand the number of people I reached out to who weren't family, which was heartbreaking. It got to the point where even my friends were saying,

"Nicole, we're really worried about you." They knew that when I'm not doing well, I tend to go radio silent, which is something I've always done, but it's a bad habit I try to work on. They said, "We know you're like this, but this is a new extreme."

Empty and Hollow. After the assault, I felt like my body wasn't mine. I remember feeling empty and hollow, and it was like I was in a fog. I didn't really know what day it was, and to this day, I can't even really remember what I ate. It's all just a blur, but I do know that I felt unsafe.

Binge Eating. During that time, I binge ate a lot, which was on the other end of the eating disorder spectrum. I went from not eating at all to completely binging. I probably gained about 50 pounds, reaching 220 pounds. I think a big reason I did this was because I thought if I gained weight and became unattractive, maybe he would think I was ugly and leave me alone. That was my recurring thought process.

Baggy Clothes. After the assault, I only wore baggy clothes. I think the reason I wore baggy clothes was because I didn't want anyone to look at me. I just wanted to blend in; I was afraid of drawing attention to myself, especially from other men. At that point, sweats were one of the only things I could comfortably fit into. It makes me really sad when I look back on that period of my life and see how badly I was doing. But it also makes me incredibly grateful now, as I reflect on it, that I'm here. I was 22 then, and now I'm almost 26.

Healing. My family and friends noticed, and I think it was mostly my mom who expressed concern. She said, "Nicole, I'm really concerned about you. This isn't like you." At the time, I was dealing with a lot of stressors, like the death of my ex and my cat, as well as being in a car accident. All of that built up into a mental health crisis. I started therapy at the end of December 2021, and I've been in therapy ever since.

It was a huge transition for me, going from feeling like an empty shell in a dissociated, numb state to slowly healing. As I began to heal, I realized I felt a lot of rage and disgust, initially directed at myself. But over time, that shifted to disgust and anger towards the perpetrator. I think now I've moved into a place of healing, and although I'm not quite at full acceptance, I'm reaching a place of forgiveness.

Rage and Disgust. I remember the rage and disgust I felt towards myself, and I think it was mostly because I didn't do anything to stop it. I kept thinking, "Nicole, you're a black belt. This is someone you could have easily fought off. Why didn't you?" I carried that grief and shame for years.

The Body Keeps the Score. A big piece that really helped me heal after all of that was actually *The Body Keeps the Score*. There's a passage in the book about a woman who was sexually assaulted. She was a fifth-degree black belt, and they said, "This is a woman who could have easily put a grown man in the hospital, yet she froze." They explained that her body entered a freeze response. I remember crying so hard that I had to put the book down because it resonated so deeply with my own situation. Hearing that was incredibly validating. It gave me a reason for what happened and made me realize that there was nothing I could have done. My body protected me in the best way it knew how. I think I went through a transition from feeling disgust and anger towards myself to developing self-compassion and empathy. I realized that my body kept me safe, and now I'm really grateful for it. Looking back, I understand that if I had tried to fight, I probably would have gotten seriously hurt.

Trying to Numb. I think the whole period, at least six months after the assault, was when I felt the most uncomfortable. It was mostly because of the disconnection and all the grief and emotions I was experiencing, as well as my really unhealthy ways of coping at the time. I don't

mind sharing this, but I turned to alcohol a lot—probably more than I should have. At one point, I was on the verge of becoming an alcoholic. I would binge eat and binge drink; it was a really unhealthy situation. I think I was using it to numb myself. I still drink, but now it's more social, I can stick to just one drink. I can even go a week without drinking, so it's no longer a major concern for me.

It was really interesting because there were days when I wouldn't feel anything, but then there were other days when I'd be home alone, and all my emotions would start bubbling up. It felt so overwhelming that I'd think, "Nope, I need to numb this." I really didn't like my body. I think it was because my body couldn't keep me safe—or at least not in the way I wanted it to. I kept thinking, "Why didn't you stop it? No one's going to believe you if you tell." I buried these feelings for about a year, and it wasn't until I told my therapist that she said, "no, that wasn't your fault." After that, I started sharing with my friends and family, and they were all incredibly supportive.

Disclosing the Assault. A big turning point where I started to feel comfortable in my body after experiencing sexual assault was probably the first time, I told my friends and family. Being around them and hearing things like, "We believe you," and "It's not your fault," helped me start to feel that tension and shame dissipate. I began to feel lighter again. Another major factor that helped was, in 2021, when many things were closed. If I remember correctly, there was a period when the gym was closed, but after it reopened, I started going again with my mom and my friend, when she still lived in the city. That's when I began to feel peace and comfort in my body again.

This is My Body. I started to realize, "This is my body, not his. I get to do whatever I want with it." I had to decide if I was going to live for shame or live for myself. I made my body

a place where I felt comfortable again. That included getting back into the gym, getting in better shape, and eating healthier. Now, I allow myself unhealthy foods once a week as a treat, giving myself space to indulge. I also got another tattoo and am planning to get more. I continued to dye my hair, and I began dressing how I used to before the assault. After working through my healing, I started to dress the way that made me feel good again.

I've always really enjoyed dyeing my hair because I like how it looks. I also have three tattoos—two were before the assaults, and one was after. A big part of my journey was reclaiming my body, and that's one of the main reasons I started going through that process. It was my way of saying, "This is me, and this is how I want to look and express myself."

Present Experiences of Embodiment

Ebbs and Flows. My relationship with my body has certainly ebbed and flowed over the past few years. There have been periods where I loved my body, and others, especially after the assaults, when it felt like my body wasn't mine, and it became an unsafe place to be. Through my healing and therapeutic journey, I've been learning to reinhabit my body, which has been incredibly powerful for me. Although there are still things I'd like to change, such as getting more tattoos, I'm actually very happy with my body overall.

Incredible Vessel. Currently, I'm really proud of my body and how it continues to carry me despite all the hardships. I've also come to view it as a truly incredible vessel. For everything my body allows me to do and how it enables me to function with everyone else, I've grown to be much more compassionate toward it. I've come to realize that this body has been through some truly horrible experiences, yet we're still here, still standing, and we're going to keep going.

Body (dis)Comfort. I think my comfort and discomfort with my body definitely ebb and flow. I feel most comfortable when I'm around people I care about, or when I'm heading into

practicum or school, and I put on an outfit that makes me feel good. In those moments, I can walk in and think, "Yes, I'm here, and this feels great." On the other hand, I feel more uncomfortable in situations where I'm very attuned to my body, like at the gym or during yoga.

When it comes to discomfort, I find it creates this real sense of tension in my body. My shoulders get super tight, and I also feel it a lot in my chest—my heart starts racing like crazy. Sometimes, my breathing will pick up, almost to the point of a panic attack, though not quite. It really depends on the level of discomfort. I also tend to feel discomfort when going to events by myself, such as concerts, or even when I go out to a club with friends—although I don't do that very often. In those situations, I become much more mindful of what I wear. Another significant source of discomfort for me is dating. It's part of the reason I took myself off dating apps—going on dates has become a big trigger for that feeling of unease.

Yoga. I've always been on and off with yoga, but I recently got back into it—partly because of school and stress. I've found it to be really grounding. Yoga is so intentional with its movements, placements, and breathwork, and it's taught me to be at peace and notice any sensations in my body. It feels like such a state of flow that I'm able to observe areas of tension and intentionally let them go, which has been really healing for me. Therapeutically, it's been impactful because we often don't realize how much tension we're constantly holding until we do something like yoga and experience that release. A random side note: *The Body Keeps the Score* really advocates for yoga as a form of trauma therapy, especially for survivors of sexual assault, and I can absolutely see why. I've also felt much more at peace overall. Along with yoga, going to the gym has always been my happy place and my escape.

The Gym. When I'm exercising or at the gym, I experience a real sense of lightness. I feel energized and uplifted, and it's such a positive feeling. It's also really helpful for me because

I work out almost exclusively in the women's-only section of the gym. Being surrounded by other women who are just living their lives and doing their own thing feels very reassuring. Whenever I work out, I get this sense of, "I'm getting stronger." It's a feeling similar to what I experienced when I used to do Taekwondo—that real sense of pride, like, "Look at me. I'm a strong, amazing person."

Our Bodies Hold and Remember. I think what I want others to know about young women's experiences with sexual assault is that healing isn't linear. There are some days where I feel great and can just go about my day, and then there are other days when it's a lot harder. A big trigger for me is getting into a car with a man who's not an Uber driver, a family member, or a really close guy friend. That still brings up a lot of tension for me. It's gotten better, but I think it's still there because, as they say, the body remembers. Our bodies hold so much, and they remember so much.

I remember one time I was at a restaurant with my dad, and I thought I saw him. Thank God it wasn't him, but even just seeing someone who looked like him from a distance nearly triggered a panic attack. I started shaking, and I almost had to ask my dad to leave the restaurant. It was an intense reaction, and it made me realize how certain sights or sounds can trigger those feelings. I just wish people understood that it's not about overreacting—it's about protecting myself.

I'm also a big advocate of somatic grounding and bodywork practices, like yoga, to help heal. I really wish more studios or counselling and wellness centers would incorporate this into their practices. But I'm happy to see a shift starting to happen, which is great. I just wish I could go back in time and tell 22-year-old Nicole that it gets better—so much better.

Participant Six: Melissa

Melissa, a Chinese Canadian woman in her early twenties, experienced sexual assault between the ages of 16 and 17 years old.

Cultural Values

I think my parents have never been the type to enforce a patriarchal view. Honestly, for where they come from, they are quite liberal and very open-minded, and I've never had those issues with them. However, culturally, I've experienced this with some relatives. For example, recently, a 90-year-old aunt came to visit, and she has some dementia, so she would repeat things. She often told me, "I like that you're so skinny. Never gain weight because you won't be desirable to men." While it doesn't affect me—because I understand her age and that she holds views difficult to change—I've still encountered these kinds of attitudes in my family.

In some parts of my family, there's still an entrenched belief that lighter skin, small hands, and feet, and being slim are ideal. My parents are from Hong Kong, but my skin colour is darker for someone who's Chinese, and I often get mistaken for being Cambodian or Filipino. Sometimes, relatives will comment on my skin, saying things like, "Stop going out in the sun, your skin is too dark." It's frustrating. There has also been an instance of a male relative who came over for dinner and said things like, "You have a very athletic body, you look so nice, do you play sports?" It makes me feel gross, and I would debrief with my parents about how inappropriate these comments are. I've even said we shouldn't invite them back because they've made me feel uncomfortable in my own home. For them, it's normal, and their wives don't say anything.

I understand that these relatives' cultural upbringing makes them think these comments are okay. It's troubling at times, especially when I think about how some of them have children,

and I hope they haven't passed these views on to their sons. I really hope their sons don't carry this mentality into their relationships with women. I'm fortunate that my immediate family hasn't influenced me in this way, but I've definitely encountered it from my extended family and friends.

As for my parents, sometimes they call me nicknames—as many Asian parents do—that imply me being fat or skinny, or family members might say similar things. But I've learned to just tune those out and interpret them as terms of endearment because they don't really mean anything. My friends are always very supportive, no matter what.

Experiences of Embodiment after Sexual Assault

Learning to Dissociate. Basically, I've been involved in two prolonged instances of sexual assault. The first one was when I felt like I learned how to dissociate. I was really young at the time, so this all happened a long time ago. During the first instance, dissociating felt strange. I remember having nightmares about it or lying in bed thinking, "Did that actually happen?"

By the time the next instance occurred, it felt different. I remember thinking, "Oh, I know how to deal with this because I've been through it before." It became easier to dissociate, and I thought about it less. But for a long time, I carried a lot of shame—not just dissociation, but real shame about my body. I blamed myself for so much of it, which is heartbreaking because I didn't have the resources or support I have today.

Conflict Between Faith and the Sexual Assault. Religion plays a big role in how I view my body now, and I've really come to embrace the idea of being "fearfully and wonderfully made." But back then, it was much harder to reconcile. One of the experiences involved someone from the church—a church friend's husband—and it really challenged my faith. I struggled to

understand how something like that could be part of God's plan for my life. It felt especially painful because I wouldn't have encountered this person if I hadn't been involved in church.

That conflict between my faith and what happened affected how I saw my body. I didn't feel like this body was truly mine or the one I was meant to have because I felt like God shouldn't have allowed this to happen. It made it hard to care for my body; I saw it as something I simply existed in but didn't feel connected to or responsible for. So, yeah, I was very dissociated from my body during that time and didn't care much about it.

Dissociation. I don't think I was ever disgusted by my body—it was never about my weight or appearance. That stuff never really mattered to me. It was more about how I felt detached from my body. During that time, I think I coped by dissociating from my body whenever something traumatic happened. I would mentally remove myself from the situation, and afterward, it became difficult to reconnect with my body because I was so used to dissociating. It wasn't that I felt grossed out or anything; it was more that I didn't feel attached to my body. That's probably the best way to describe it.

My Driving Instructor. I was sexually assaulted by my driving instructor in the car over a period of time, and I felt a lot of shame because I let it continue for a while. Eventually, I stopped taking driving lessons, but I still felt guilty. First, I felt like I had wasted my parents' money because they were paying for the lessons, and when I stopped, I didn't even take my driving test. It took me another two years to finally take it. I kept thinking about how much money I had wasted by not addressing the situation and then not following through with my test. I tried to force myself to take driving lessons again, but I just couldn't do it.

People around me would comment on how I still didn't have my license, saying things like, "Oh, you're this age, and you still don't have your N? Everyone else is driving—you need

to start driving." My relatives would constantly ask, "When are you taking your test? Or when are you getting your license?" I felt like I couldn't tell them what I was going through. Even my parents didn't know. They would ask, "Why don't you want to take lessons? It's not that hard—we'll pay for them. Just get in the car and drive." But I couldn't. I didn't tell them the truth until after I got my license, two years later. Looking back, I realize I was so dissociated and frozen at the time that I didn't know how to remove myself from the situation. It's unfair to blame my younger self for not knowing what to do, but back then, I felt ashamed, and that shame kept me from saying anything about it.

Reflecting at Night. I remember that after it happened, I kind of forced myself to think about it eventually because I had to. It was something I couldn't avoid, and I remember one instance where I pulled an all-nighter because I just couldn't sleep. I was so shocked and overwhelmed by everything that had happened. I had dissociated so much that it didn't even feel like it had really happened to me physically. I just couldn't believe it, and I felt like I had suppressed it to the point where it didn't feel real. But at the same time, I knew very clearly that it did happen.

I remember lying awake all night, trying to reconcile those two sides of my experience, and it was so perplexing. I had never felt that way before. I've never dissociated from my body or memories like that. Normally, when something happens to me, I'm able to acknowledge it and remember what it felt like. In a way, I'm almost glad I was able to dissociate, because at least it helped me escape the physical impact, as much as I could. But I remember that one night, maybe a month after it ended, I spent the entire night thinking about it. It was the strangest thing because those aren't the usual late-night thoughts I have. It was just so disorienting.

I was just thinking about my dissociation, and I wondered, “Can I dissociate right now, while I’m in bed?” Is it something I can just snap into? But I couldn’t, and I realized I didn’t even know how I dissociated in the first place. I can’t replicate it. That night, I felt really strange. I didn’t feel like myself, and that was a very weird experience for me. It was such a random night—it wasn’t even when I first decided to confront what had happened.

Before that, I just didn’t think about it. I was like, “Oh, let’s just ignore it.” I just kept going, driving through life as if nothing happened, while it was happening. It was almost like I was living in a parallel reality, just forcing myself to focus on the usual things during the driving lesson, like, “Okay, what way do my wheels point when I turn? or Am I going the right speed?” I’d think about other things, like, “What are the hazards? Is my speed limit set at 50?” And so on. I kept myself occupied with the routine stuff, blocking out everything else.

Disconnection. I felt pretty disconnected, especially because this happened right before COVID, and then the pandemic hit, which made everything feel even more distant. I’m usually a yapper who tells my friends everything. I love calling my friends, sharing about our lives, and staying connected. So it was really strange for me that I had absolutely no urge to say anything about this experience. I didn’t tell them for a long time, which was so out of character for me. Normally, when I go through something—like a breakup—I talk about it right away. I’m the type of person who needs to talk things out with people to process them. But with this one thing, it was completely different. It was the weirdest feeling because I didn’t want to talk about it at all. I almost never feel like that, so it made me feel even more disconnected.

On top of that, no one would have known to reach out to me. No one expected something like this to happen to me—not even me. For example, if I went through a breakup and people

found out, I'd have friends reaching out to check on me, and we'd talk. But with this, I knew no one would ever reach out because no one knew, and I wasn't going to tell them.

At the time, I was strangely at peace with being disconnected. I think it was because I felt so ashamed back then, and I didn't want to tell anyone. So I was okay with staying disconnected, even though it was unlike me.

Shame. I never spoke out about it at the time. I didn't tell anyone—not even my mom, and I'm really close to her. I didn't share it with her until after COVID, which was probably four or five years after it happened. That shame made me feel like I had to hide everything, and dissociating became the easiest way to cope. If I dissociated, I felt like I didn't have to fully confront that part of myself, and maybe I thought it meant I had less to be ashamed of because I wasn't connecting myself to those experiences. I think I felt shame, maybe because I didn't do anything about it. It happened over a period of time, and at first, I was in denial. I told myself, "Oh, I don't think this is actually happening, so it's okay." But when I finally realized how bad it truly was, I felt really guilty and ashamed for not recognizing it sooner or taking action.

Not Telling My Parents. I think the hardest part was not telling my parents, especially because they were the ones paying for my lessons. I feel like they were probably worried about me or wondering why I didn't want to drive. They never got an explanation until years later. That was really difficult for me because I usually am open to sharing a lot with them. I also used to have late-night "yap sessions" with my mom, but after everything happened, I stopped having those with her because I felt so uncomfortable and disoriented. I felt bad for not telling them, but I wasn't ready to share yet. I also knew that, when I did tell them, they would be heartbroken to know that something like that happened to their child. I just didn't want to put them through that pain.

I'm glad I eventually told my mom, but it was really hard for her to process when I did. Sometimes, I think it might have been even worse if I had told her immediately after it happened. When I finally told her years later, I could say, "Yeah, this happened, but I'm fine now, so you don't have to worry. It was bad, but I'm okay." If I had told her right after it happened, it would have been, "It was bad, and I'm feeling horrible." So, in a way, I think it was easier for both of us when I told her later.

Telling a Close Friend. I remember the first time I told a close friend about what happened. I told her before I told my mom. I just said, "This happened," and because my friend knew me so well, she immediately knew how to support me in that moment. It felt like a really meaningful bonding experience, and for the first time, I felt like someone truly understood.

That day, the shame I felt about my body began to fade. She told me, "You shouldn't be ashamed. It's not your fault," and she really said everything I needed to hear but wasn't telling myself. I had been thinking so negatively about it, blaming myself, but she shifted the blame away from me, saying, "There's no way you could think it's your fault. That's crazy. I remember thinking, it is crazy that I've been carrying this shame for so long." It was a turning point that helped me feel less ashamed of my body.

Peace with my Body. After I told a few more friends, I started feeling more at peace with my body. I allowed myself to accept that what happened was part of my experience, and it was something my body went through. I came to terms with it and viewed it as a learning opportunity. My shame, over time, turned into regret—not for what happened to me, but for not speaking out about it sooner. Looking at the justice system today, I know not much could've been done, but back then, I still wish I had said something. I wish I had spoken up so that the first person could have lost their law license, and the second person would have been banned

from teaching driving lessons. I felt like I could have prevented it from happening to someone else.

But once the shame was gone, I was able to accept what had happened. I became more comfortable with myself. I didn't necessarily forgive the people who hurt me, but I came to terms with the fact that it was part of my story. I realized it was my body that went through it, not someone else's, and I had to accept that. The dissociation helped because, even now, I don't really remember what it felt like in the moment. I was gone from my body, and in some ways, I'm glad for that. But accepting that it happened to *me*—to my body—was a key part of making the connection.

Going to the Gym. I always wanted to start going to the gym, but I was too scared because it seemed intimidating. Then, one of my best friends said she wanted to try, and her boyfriend, who's into fitness, offered to help us. He suggested a simple routine to start with and recommended going three times a week. He told us that within three months, once we did a certain number of reps, it would become muscle memory, and that's when the real progress would start. So, we decided to give it a try, and I've really been enjoying it. I've also been trying to eat healthier. I think I always wanted to go to the gym, but I just didn't know how. Once someone showed me how I really committed to it.

Present Experiences of Embodiment

Self-Acceptance. I believe I have a really good relationship with my body right now—probably the best it's ever been. Obviously, a big part of that is because I recently started going to the gym, which helps a lot. But I've never really been someone who hated the way I look. Like everyone, I have my insecurities, but overall, I think I've always had a relatively positive view of my body. I've just kind of accepted it for what it is. I think a lot of that acceptance comes

from my faith—knowing that God created me in His image. Believing that has been really helpful for me, as it reinforces the idea that I'm supposed to be the way I am. So, yeah, I think I'm in a good mental space about my body right now.

Religion. I think the idea of religion is very hopeful for me. It helps me worry less about small, present-day concerns. Of course, there are days when I look in the mirror—especially after scrolling through TikTok and seeing all these gym influencers who are so fit and buff—and I think, "Oh, I wish I looked like that." But I also remind myself that, in the grand scheme of things, the way my body looks doesn't really matter that much. It doesn't stop me from pursuing what I believe is my calling or reaching my fullest potential. The idea of being "wonderfully and beautifully made" is so comforting, and it applies to everyone, no matter how they look. God doesn't care about what my body looks like, so why should I?

Personal Style. Well, I think over the past four years of university, I've really started to figure out my own style and what looks good on me. I've noticed a mindset shift compared to before. Back then, I felt like I had to dress in whatever style everyone else was wearing. For example, I'd think, "Oh, everyone is wearing crop tops or tank tops," but I wasn't comfortable in them. I'd see others looking great in those outfits and feel like I didn't look as good.

Now, my perspective has changed. I've realized that comfort is more important. Changing up my style has had a big impact on how I feel about my body today. I've discovered that I can dress in ways that feel comfortable to me and still look nice, at least in my opinion, without stressing about my weight or what I'm eating. I've never had any serious issues with eating, but I've definitely thought about it before—probably like everyone does. Sometimes I watch meal prep TikToks or ones about calorie deficits and protein, but that's just because I'm on "gym TikTok" right now. Overall, I think the way I dress and express myself through fashion has

played a major role in helping me feel more comfortable and confident in my body at this point in time.

Make-up and Accessorizing. Honestly, I think learning to do my own makeup has been a big part of it. Before, I didn't wear makeup at all, but as I got older, especially during university, I started learning how to do it. I also learned what fits my features and really accepted that this is the way I look. I figured out what colour palettes look good on me and what types of jewelry suit me. These little things became fun distractions and a way to express myself. I love accessories, so I guess makeup and accessorizing are part of finding my personal style.

Grace. I feel like body image can be really hard on women, and I don't think people fully realize it. It doesn't matter how you look or if you look like a Victoria's Secret model—if something happens to you, you can still feel really bad about your body. There's this narrative that women who look a certain way are always really confident about their appearance because they fit the ideal beauty standard and that everyone must be jealous of them. But that's not true. I have friends who are beautiful and have gone through similar experiences, and they'll tell me that some days, they just don't feel good about themselves. I can really relate because I've been through that, too.

Sometimes people perceive that as being "snobby" or "attention-seeking," but the reality is, there's no universal way that someone's body responds to something like this. Everyone experiences it differently. There's this idea of how someone should respond, but that's not always accurate. Some people think that after something like this, you'll always dislike your body, but for others, that's not the case. It's just so different for everyone. Even in the entertainment industry, there's this idea of how victims of sexual assault are portrayed, showing all the mental struggles they go through. While that's definitely true for many people, it's not always obvious

that someone has gone through something like that, or that they might be struggling with their body image. So, we just need to give each other more grace.

Participant Seven: Rebecca

Rebecca, a Middle Eastern/White woman in her early twenties, was eight years old at the time of the sexual assault.

Experiences of Embodiment After Sexual Assault

Body Discomfort. I was uncomfortable in my body afterward. I remember never wanting to wear shorts around the house or ever wear them at all. That was a big thing for me—I didn't want to do it. I think it was because I felt more exposed in shorts compared to wearing pants. I also refused to look at my body in the mirror, especially after showering. I would just go straight into the shower without looking. It wasn't something I enjoyed at all. I think it was mostly about not wanting to see it and feeling exposed.

Tense and Anxious. I felt really scared. I was always tense and anxious when it came to the subject, especially because of that feeling of vulnerability. It really frightened me.

Pushing People Away. I felt very disconnected. I pushed a lot of people away. In particular, when it happened, the person who had abused me was someone I was close with, which made me want to shut myself off from others. I didn't want to open up to anyone, and I became very angry and mean as a person. It was challenging to trust people.

Self-Blame. It was something I really struggled with. I blamed myself for what happened. I blamed myself for not speaking out sooner because it just festered in my eight year-old brain, which wasn't developed at all. I think there were other things that happened in my childhood that made me feel like bad things kept happening to me. I felt like I was the common denominator, so the problem must be me. I felt unworthy of good things. This fostered a belief

that I was at fault and that all the bad things happening were because of me. I also tried to blame God for a while, but that didn't last long. It just built up an insecurity in me that I was unworthy, and I don't know why in particular, but it just felt like it was easier to blame myself. It was harder to blame other people. I also struggled with wondering if I had just made it all up or if it was just a weird dream that I remembered so vividly. After many counselling sessions, I don't think that anymore, but at the time, I always thought it was my fault.

Uncomfortable in My Own Skin. I think shortly after the event, I was looking in the mirror, getting ready to take a shower when I suddenly burst into tears. It was specifically the act of looking at myself that upset me. I blamed myself a lot, and I think that played a huge role in me not liking myself, and as a result, not liking my body. I also happened to be wearing the same outfit that I had been wearing during the event, and I remember feeling incredibly upset with myself. I felt extremely uncomfortable in my own skin and wished I could just escape it, as it felt gross to me.

Finding Safety. It was someone I had a trusting relationship with before. It took me a long time to open up about the situation to anyone, so I kept it to myself, and that person continued to live in my house for three years after. This played a huge role in me feeling unsafe consistently. Once everything was aired out and they moved out, I felt much safer. It still took some time, but the physical removal of that person helped. I also felt more supported by others because I had finally talked to people about it, and they were aware of what had happened. This support was really important. That was a big event in changing my sense of safety. Moving away was another significant change—it removed me physically from a harmful environment, and I felt much safer once I was away.

I'm not sure if there's a specific moment when things changed, but there were certain times when I began to feel safer. That sense of safety helped me view my body more positively because I felt less vulnerable in certain situations. I think that feeling of safety was a major factor. Also, being able to disconnect from it—having a complete change of scenery, like moving away from my hometown—played a huge role in rediscovering myself. It helped me create a new narrative that wasn't focused on being abused. Additionally, having people around me who never tore down the way I looked, but made it feel like a more comfortable space, was important. My friends and my husband helped create an atmosphere where my body felt like a safe space. I'm not sure if they did anything specific, but the constant reassurance and affirmation were definitely significant.

Confident and Comfortable. A couple of years ago, I bought new jeans, and I felt like I had hit the jackpot when they fit perfectly because I feel like that's so rare. I remember doing a little fashion show for my boyfriend at the time and just feeling super confident and comfortable. I felt good about myself.

My Rock. I met my husband when I was 16, and I think I was still really distraught with myself at that age. I struggled a lot with trusting people and opening up. But he, the way he is as a person, made me feel super safe; he was steadfast in his love. He always made me feel safe. I could talk to him about anything, and I trusted that if I shared something with him, he wouldn't betray my trust or use it against me. I don't know what it was about him, but he was so easy to trust at a time when I really needed someone I could rely on. He continued to grow with me as I was going through my own struggles. It was definitely hard, and he saw some of my worst moments, but he remained a constant support for me. Now, we're married at 24, so it's been a while. He's been my rock as I've transitioned from the more negative feelings I had to where I

am now. Everyone should be a great person, but that's not always the reality. He was a great person when I really needed one.

Present Experiences of Embodiment

Body Comfort. Currently, I do like my body. I value it and try to treat it with respect. To me, that means eating foods I enjoy, while also choosing foods that make me feel good. I also make time to exercise and prioritize my health and well-being. Overall, I like my body.

I generally feel comfortable in my body. I have embraced the fact that my body changes and has many different shapes and sizes. I do not find my worth in the way my body looks so I do not focus on it much. Sometimes I feel discomfort in my body. This can come from feeling bloated, eating poorly the day before, or clothes fitting differently. Social media doesn't have too much of an effect on me, although there are times when I see fitness influencers and think, "My body could look like that if I worked harder." Sometimes that does affect how I feel. I also find that I feel more uncomfortable in my body during the summer when more of it is exposed. Overall, I do feel comfortable in my body.

Externally, I generally feel comfortable in my body because I think it looks good. Of course, that's subjective, but I feel confident about my appearance, and that makes me feel more comfortable. Internally, I have an acceptance of myself. I like myself more than I did as a child, I no longer blame myself for the bad things that have happened to me. Now I enjoy looking at myself and that mental shift was a big change in the way I view my body.

My Husband. My husband plays a huge role in this. He is supportive of the way I look, constantly giving me compliments, and loving me no matter what. My body changes all the time, but his love has never wavered. That reminds me that my appearance doesn't fully define who I

am, and there are other qualities that make me beautiful. But overall, my husband has played a huge role in helping me feel comfortable in my body, always being a constant cheerleader.

Safe Relationships. I also went to counselling, but not until I was 19 after I had moved away—over 10 years after the experience. That allowed me to work on myself and process my emotions, which helped improve the way I viewed myself. Even though it was mental, the struggles affected how I wanted to see myself. I didn't physically see my mental state, but it made me feel gross, which led me to believe I looked gross as well. By working on myself mentally, I was able to view myself from a more positive perspective. Additionally, having safe relationships and focusing on people who made me feel safe and never shamed me for how I looked or felt about my body was incredibly helpful. Being around people who supported and uplifted me was crucial. Those were some of the big factors that helped me.

My Faith. Through it all, my faith played a huge role in the way I viewed myself. There was a time after the event when I turned away from my faith and was really angry, but eventually, it was my faith and support that helped bring me back. For example, I started going to church, which supported my growth in faith. This shift in perspective made me realize that the way God designed me was beautiful and intricate, and that brought me a lot of peace. It changed my mindset significantly.

Participant Eight: Kathranne

Kathranne, a White woman in her early twenties, was 18 years old at the time of the sexual assault.

Experiences of Embodiment After Sexual Assault

Standing up for Myself. The experience happened to me during my first year of university, in the first month. I remember when I was in high school, I wasn't very firm with my

boundaries or beliefs. But after that happened, I became a lot firmer about my boundaries with those around me. I remember thinking that if something like that ever happened again, I could be much more direct and assertive much earlier. I also remember how, when I was in high school, it felt kind of exciting in some ways to feel wanted by others. But then, in my case, it reached a point where I didn't want that anymore. At that moment, I had this realization, "Wait, I can stand up for myself. I can be strong, and I can call out what's happening." I could actually use my voice and say, "I don't like this," whereas before, when it first happened, I felt like it was okay to just go along with it. I didn't want to make a big deal out of things. After it happened, I reflected and thought, "It's good that I stood up for myself; I should have done it sooner, but I'm proud I did." I realized I don't have to be walked all over; I have a strong voice.

Cautious. I was a little more cautious about certain parts of my body. I don't really know how to put this, but I became more aware of specific areas. I remember thinking, "Okay, I was touched here and I could feel his hands on me in those places." I knew he wanted to touch me there, too, and that made me more conscious of my body. I didn't want to be touched in those areas, so it stuck in my mind. This awareness was probably stronger right after the incident, or maybe in the weeks that followed. But when I think about my interactions with men after the assault, I remember feeling hesitant or reserved, but I didn't experience any physical hesitation when I was with other men. I don't want to compare my situation with others, but I know this is something that can really impact a lot of women.

Empowerment. I also remember, right after it happened, I felt like I needed to talk to my friends and say, "Look, we all sometimes want attention, but you can actually say no. You don't have to go with the flow, even if you don't like what's happening." In high school, it's easy to just go along with things, even if you're uncomfortable, especially because no one really

educates you on boundaries. I thought to myself, "I want to teach my little sister that if something like this happens to you, you don't have to just go along with it. You can be strong and stand up for yourself, and that's not being rude—it's your body." After it happened, I definitely felt a shift in my empowerment, and I really wanted to empower my friends, especially those I'm close to.

No Impact. Honestly, I don't think it really impacted my body image. I feel like, in sexual assault cases, a lot of the time—and mine was one of those—I hear people say things like, 'I think I'm only worth my body, and that's the only way people will like me or give me attention.' I did get attention for my body, but I didn't feel that way. Maybe I felt it a little bit, but I didn't really feel any direct correlation from that.

Sadness and Anxiety. After the sexual assault happened, I kind of just went on with my life. I eventually reached a point where I felt a lot of anxiety and sadness, and I remember my sister signed me up for counselling. After about three sessions, the sexual assault somehow came up, and I remember when the counsellor finally brought it up, I realized that it was a bigger deal than I had thought. I hadn't really acknowledged it before, but I think I had been suppressing it, downplaying the effects it had on me. It took counselling for me to recognize that. But I didn't go to counselling specifically for the assault; I went because I was struggling with sadness and anxiety, and the assault turned out to be one of the root causes. That didn't come up until later, during our discussions.

I feel like maybe other people have had similar experiences, but it's okay if that happens. When I told one of my friends about the assault, she asked if I was going to go to counselling for it, and I remember saying, "Oh no, I'm fine." Looking back, I think it's fine that I didn't go to counselling right away after it happened. Maybe I should have, but I think it's okay that I didn't.

At the time, I just felt like it was a normal thing that was causing all this distress, but I couldn't quite name what was causing my anxiety and sadness.

My Now-Husband

Super Uncomfortable. I remember feeling super uncomfortable telling my now-husband about it when we were dating. It was really important for me to talk to him about it, but I felt so anxious. I kept thinking, "I want to tell him this, I feel like I should because this is what a healthy relationship looks like," but I was overwhelmed with anxiety. I didn't even know how to bring it up. I remember feeling so much discomfort. I'm not sure if it was because I didn't feel that same discomfort when I told my girlfriends, but with a man, it felt different. Maybe because he's a man?

Feeling Anxious. Anyway, I remember feeling so anxious, and my body literally wouldn't let me say it. I just kept thinking, "I need to say these words." Eventually, I just said, "I need to tell you something," and he responded, "No, I want to hear it." I was like, "No, no, it's okay," but he insisted, "Tell me what it is." So, I eventually told him, but it was really hard for me. Once I said it, it felt good to get it out, but I still had some anxiety. I think it was partly the people-pleaser in me. He was really supportive, saying, "We can take things slower; I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable."

But I remember feeling anxious about how he might feel. I was worried about downplaying my feelings, saying, "I'm fine now, it's okay," when in reality, it was still hard for me. I didn't want him to feel like he was making me uncomfortable. I think I had a hard time communicating that I was okay but still needed understanding. Anyway, I'm not sure how to explain it—this is probably coming out as word vomit, but I've never really talked about it

before. I just remember feeling anxious about him being hesitant to hold me, and I kept telling him, “It’s fine, I’m okay.”

My Wedding Day. I mean, there have been times, though I can’t really think of any specific ones right now. Maybe on my wedding day, I felt really comfortable in my body. I had my hair and makeup done, and looking back at the pictures, I thought, “Oh yeah, that dress fit me pretty well.” I would say I felt pretty comfortable with my body that day. I felt confident, surrounded by all the people who love me for who I am.

Present Experiences of Embodiment

Being Married. I feel like being married has really helped me on my self-love journey with my body. I’ve been married for about one and a half years now, and it’s made a difference because I feel accepted. Oftentimes, I’ll bring up how I’m feeling about my body—like saying, “I feel fat,” or “I look bad,” or “I don’t want to wear a bathing suit.” My husband is always super supportive and reassuring. He’ll say things like, “No, you’re beautiful. That’s not why I love you. You have so many amazing qualities, and your body is perfect.” So, in a way, being married has helped me deal with my body issues. I know that self-love should probably come from within, but it does feel good to receive that kind of external validation. But, like many women, I’m on a journey to feel better about myself and to feel more empowered with what I have.

Body Dysmorphia. I don’t think my sexual assault has impacted my body in any way. I do feel like I might have some level of body dysmorphia. However, I also feel like that’s pretty common for women around my age. There are definitely parts of me that I wish I could change. I’m pretty sure it’s body dysmorphia. I know I’m within a normal weight range, but I definitely notice that my stomach is a little bigger. If I don’t have perfect posture, it sticks out a lot, and

that affects me—especially when I'm planning to wear a bathing suit or tight clothing. It impacts the way I feel, and, for sure, I avoid wearing certain outfits because of it.

I Feel Frustrated. I feel frustrated because, first of all, I feel annoyed with myself. I know I should be okay with my body because it's a wonderful gift from God. My body is beautiful, everyone's body is beautiful, and I feel like I should love my body a lot more than I do. That part of me is frustrated, asking, "Why am I so caught up in these feelings about my body? It's fine. No one's paying attention to you at the pool or on the beach. It's really fine."

At the same time, I feel frustrated when I look at my body and think, "You did this to me. You're the one who's too tired to wake up for an early morning run. You're the one who cheated on that meal or ate a few unhealthy things." It's like I'm blaming my body and myself.

I also feel frustrated because I feel like I eat a pretty healthy diet, and yet my reflection doesn't seem to match the effort I put in. I think, "Shouldn't my body reflect my diet more than it does?" That disconnect is frustrating, and it just makes me realize that this journey isn't as easy as I wish it were.

Comparison. I feel like I also experience a sense of jealousy about my body compared to other people's bodies. For example, I have friends who are super fit and super skinny, and yet they'll still talk about themselves, saying things like, "Oh, I'm so fat." When they say that, I can't help but think, "Well, what does that make me?" I don't say it out loud, but those thoughts are definitely there. I also feel like I compare myself a lot, and that comparison fuels my jealousy. I'll think about how some of my friends eat unhealthy food all the time but still look amazing. Meanwhile, I have a small stature, and my torso is super short—my ribcage practically touches my hip bones. I catch myself thinking, "If only I were taller, my torso would be longer, and I wouldn't feel so scrunched up." When I see my tall friends—or even my husband, who has

such a long torso—I imagine how much better I'd look if I had their proportions. These comparisons make me feel bad about my own body, and, yeah, they leave me feeling jealous.

The Bible. There are a couple of verses in the Bible that I really try to focus on. For example, the ones that say you're wonderfully made and perfectly made. I forget exactly where it is in the Bible, but I've had it as my wallpaper a few times. It's a Scripture that essentially says your beauty is in your heart, not in your outward appearance.

I feel like I understand and accept that these are the ways I should feel because this is what Scripture teaches. But at the same time, I feel a little guilty for not always aligning with it. Scripture says I'm wonderfully made, but I don't always believe that about myself. And I feel like I should because that's what the Bible says. I feel like I'm constantly reminded, "Don't criticize God's work," and it's frustrating because I know I shouldn't—but I still do.

Self-Reflection. I think what helps me feel better about my body and appearance is reflecting on how far I've come in other areas. For example, I used to have very bad acne and was on an intense medication called Accutane. Over the years, my skin has improved tremendously. I often reflect on that and think, "Okay, my skin is so much better now," and it makes me feel better about myself.

Back in high school—especially in the early years—it wasn't my body that I was concerned about; it was my face. But now that my skin is okay, even though I still have a few acne scars I'm self-conscious about, it's my body that I focus on. I sometimes feel guilty, wondering if I'm just finding a new thing to criticize about myself. It's like, if one day I become super fit and skinny, will I just find something else to critique? Probably. I feel like this is such a common thing in society with all the beauty standards and expectations. There's always something you wish you could change about yourself.

Social Media. It's not just the pictures that get posted in advertising or during events like the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show, but also when friends post pictures or people, I follow share photos of themselves in bathing suits. I don't think it's as much about models and media, because I've unfollowed a lot of those accounts. It's more about when someone I know, like a mutual friend, posts a really great shot of themselves in a bathing suit, and I think, "Wow, that's just a normal person, and they look like that." It sometimes impacts my feelings, which is why I'm trying to spend less time on Instagram and similar platforms.

Consent and Boundaries. When you're in high school, everything feels so laid-back, and you just go with the flow. You don't want to be seen as "a prude" or make things awkward by saying "stop." It's just a weird situation. I don't really know how to put it, but it's hard to draw boundaries in those moments.

Anyway, I feel like there should be much more education on consent and boundaries. As a teacher, I think if I had a female guest come into my class and lead a workshop saying, "You can say no, and you can stand up for yourself," and offering lines you can use if someone crosses your boundaries, I would have really benefited from that. As a teacher now, I'm not sure exactly how I can play a role in this, especially since I teach elementary school, but when I taught high school, I think it would have been incredibly helpful to have a younger female come in and share her experience. Just sharing that kind of message— "It's okay to set boundaries"—could have made a big difference. I've thought about this several times and feel it would have been valuable.

Empowered. It can take time to feel empowered. It can take time to experience the empowerment that can come from surviving sexual assault, at least for me. My experience was more of a minor assault. For any woman who might go through something similar, I would go back to what I said before: it would have been helpful to know that you can stand up for yourself,

you can be brave, and you can be firm. It's your body, and you're in charge of it. You shouldn't feel the need to please others with your body, especially when it's unwanted.

Findings From Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Introduction

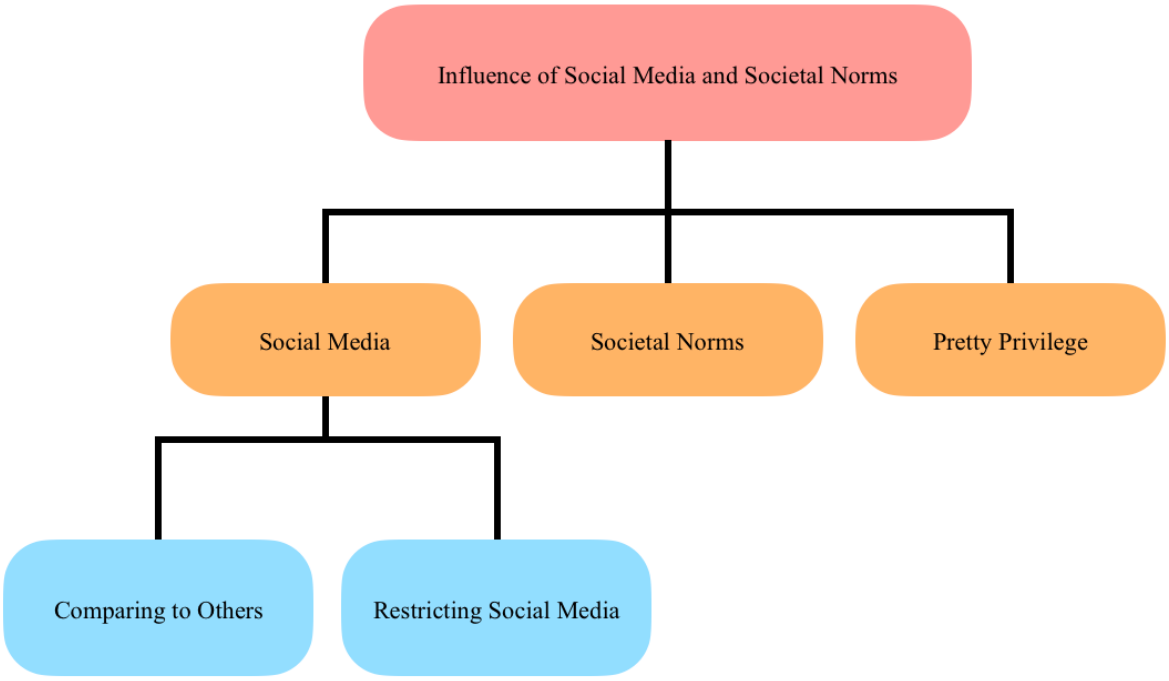
The results of this study illustrate participants' experiences of embodiment following sexual assault, highlighting the ways in which women navigate their relationships with their bodies throughout the healing process. Regarding the organization of the results, the first two themes are related to participants' contexts, the second set relates to post-assault experiences, and the third set of themes speaks to later stages of healing. Participants shared how societal expectations, personal perceptions, and external influences shaped their self-image and body experiences. Their narrative accounts revealed struggles with disconnection, discomfort, and scrutiny, as well as moments of growth, reconnection, and empowerment. From the eight participants' narrative accounts, seven themes were identified through reflexive thematic analysis and are presented in the following sections: (1) Being Perceived and Scrutinized; (2) Influence of Social Media and Societal Norms; (3) Disconnection; (4) Body Discomfort; (5) Connection with Others; (6) Body Comfort; (7) Physical Movement Facilitating Healing; and (8) Renewal and Reclamation.

First Set of Themes

Theme One: Influence of Social Media and Societal Norms

Figure 1

Theme One: Influence of Social Media and Societal Norms



This first theme introduced the broader sociocultural context shaping women's experiences and perceptions of their bodies. Generally, women described how societal norms and beauty standards created pressure for them to fit a specific ideal, leading to struggles with body image. These expectations often resulted in women being overly critical of themselves, making it difficult to feel satisfied with their appearance and contributing to ongoing body image challenges.

Three women recounted the influence of social media, particularly platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and the entertainment industry, on women's perceptions of beauty and body image. Women described being occasionally affected by fitness influencers and the idealized images

portrayed on social media, often wishing they looked like the influencers. Two women shared how they followed fitness influencers on social media, leading them to change their diets and adopt new fitness routines in an attempt to eat better and build more muscle.

The influence of social media was further characterized by women comparing themselves to others. Kathranne expressed that while she has unfollowed models and media accounts, she still feels impacted when mutual friends post photos of themselves in bathing suits, leading her to compare herself to them. Kathranne articulated that this comparison affects her feelings, which is why she's trying to spend less time on Instagram and similar platforms:

> I also feel like I compare myself a lot, and that comparison fuels my jealousy. I'll think about how some of my friends eat unhealthy food all the time but still look amazing. Meanwhile, I have a small stature, and my torso is super short—my ribcage practically touches my hip bones. I catch myself thinking, "If only I were taller, my torso would be longer, and I wouldn't feel so scrunched up."

Visual media platforms shaped how women perceived beauty and their own bodies, often reinforcing Western beauty standards that prioritize traits such as slimness, clear skin, and toned physiques. The impact of social media was not limited to influencers; women also described feeling a sense of "longing" and "jealousy" when comparing themselves to friends or others.

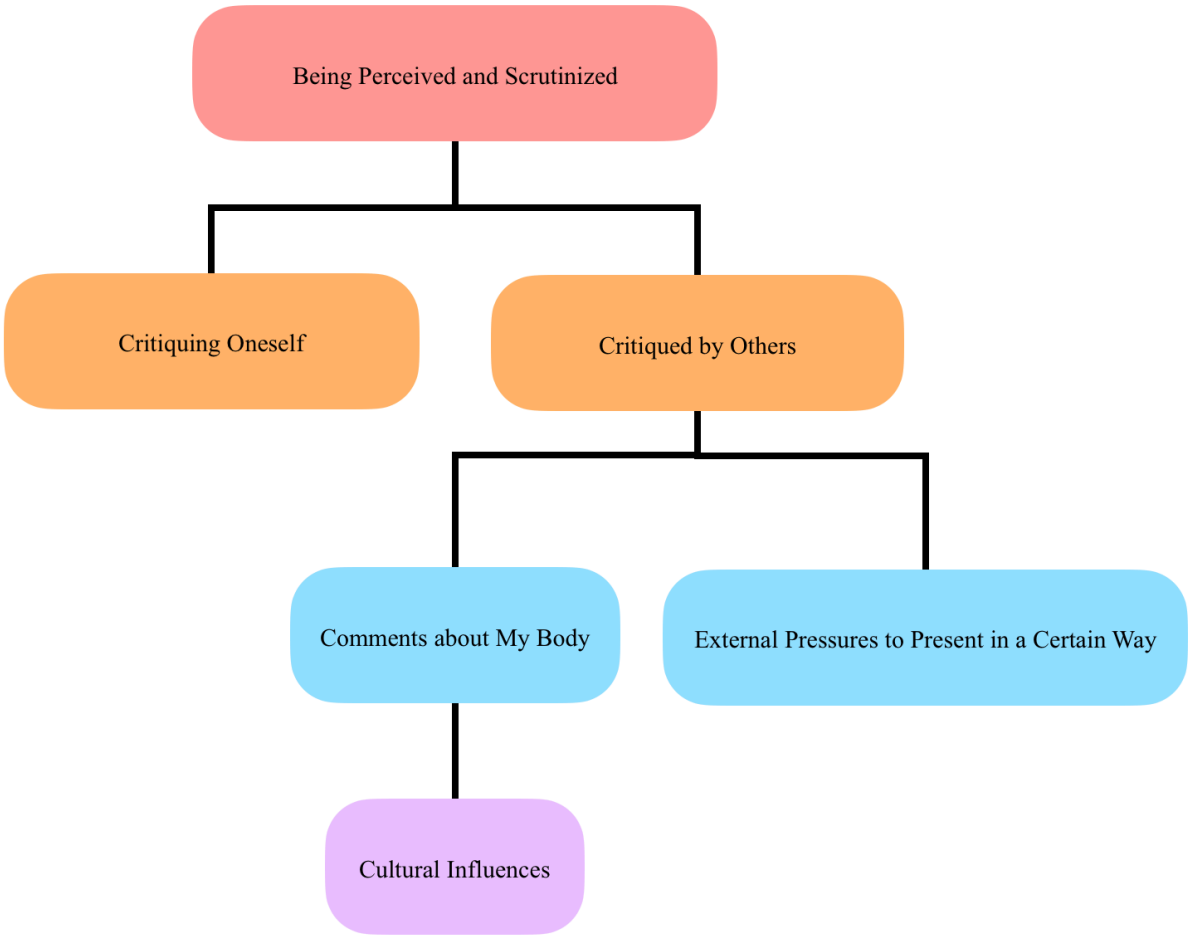
Additionally, some women reflected on the paradox of attractiveness and the societal privileges often afforded to those, such as attention and social interactions. This concept intersected with women's subconscious assumptions about sexual assault, as some expressed the belief that such experiences were only something that "pretty" or "attractive" people went through. Mia expressed wrestling with pretty privilege in the context of sexual assault as "It's a troubling idea that being attractive not only earns you 'privileges' but also makes you a target."

This subconscious belief about pretty privilege was disrupted when the women experienced sexual assault. In the aftermath, some participants discussed trying to change their appearance to appear less attractive in order to avoid being targeted again, relating to a subtheme that will be further explored later in the results.

Theme Two: Being Perceived and Scrutinized

Figure 2

Theme Two: Being Perceived and Scrutinized



A second theme that was identified in participants' narratives and provided more detail about their sociocultural context was the way they experience themselves as being constantly

perceived and scrutinized. Some women expressed a desire to change certain aspects of their appearance, often experiencing body dysmorphia and fixating on perceived flaws. They described scrutinizing their bodies, finding things to criticize, and feeling uncomfortable in their skin, particularly during moments of bloating or weight fluctuation. These feelings contributed to self-consciousness and dissatisfaction, making it difficult to develop a positive body image. For some, these thoughts were persistent, shaping how they viewed themselves daily, while others experienced them in waves, struggling with an internal push and pull between self-criticism and self-acceptance.

Not only did women critique themselves, but they also described being critiqued by others. The women described feeling under constant scrutiny, particularly from men, and fearing being perceived in ways that diminished their autonomy. This external pressure often made it difficult to embrace their own bodies, with fears about how they were seen by others, leading to a reluctance to allow others to perceive them at all. Mia expressed feeling as though she were constantly under a microscope, with the perception of women's bodies by others overshadowing any sense of self-celebration:

> I see how they are perceived by the men in their lives, and while I understand that this is a very heterosexual perspective, the idea of women being constantly perceived seems universal. I see the effects of this in my friends when they stress over what they're going to wear or obsess over things like, "Oh my God, I can't believe I have this!" or "I need to fix this." I want to tell them, "Yes, you're so beautiful, and this doesn't make you any less beautiful." It's not that I'm angry at them for not seeing it; it's just painful to see how we're constantly under a microscope, unable to celebrate or enjoy our bodies as they are.

Eliza echoed these sentiments, feeling "hurt by words or attitudes that were dismissive, critical, or too focused on physical appearance." Two women described how the scrutinizing environments they were in heightened their awareness of their bodies, as they felt they did not meet the expected standards—one noting that her body did not align with the typical image of a dancer, while another felt like her body was sexualized in the sport of water polo.

Furthermore, women shared about the comments they received about their bodies and appearance. Three women described receiving unsolicited comments from family members, partners, and others, with remarks ranging from critiques of their weight and skin colour to dismissive or hurtful comments about their attractiveness. Melissa recalled being given nicknames that implied she was either too fat or too skinny, while Mia recounted instances where parents or relatives directly told them she was ugly. Elise reflected that "growing up with a mom and grandmother who were fatphobic and very critical of themselves definitely shaped" her. Moreover, women frequently expressed that their worth was reduced to their physical appearance.

Some of the women stated that the comments that they received were influenced by strict expectations for Asian women and cultural attitudes of family members. Melissa noted that, unlike some of her relatives, her parents were liberal and open-minded, never enforcing patriarchal views or strict cultural expectations on her. Melissa articulated that certain family members still upheld rigid beauty standards, valuing lighter skin, delicate features, and a slim figure as the ideal:

> Sometimes, relatives will comment on my skin, saying things like, "Stop going out in the sun, your skin is too dark." It's frustrating. There has also been an instance of a relative who came over for dinner and said things like, "You have a very athletic body, you look

> so nice, do you play sports?" It makes me feel gross, and I would debrief with my parents about how inappropriate these comments are. I've even said we shouldn't invite back because they've made me feel uncomfortable in my own home. For them, it's normal, and their wives don't say anything.

Several women attributed the comments they received to being part of the cultural norm within their families and communities. Rather than viewing these remarks as intentionally harmful, they recognized them as deeply ingrained beliefs about beauty and femininity that had been passed down through generations. Some participants noted that relatives saw these comments as casual or even caring, unaware of the discomfort or harm they caused.

One woman described the unique challenge of being caught between two cultures that have their own expectations of how an Asian woman should look. Mia stated that in Western culture, she was often viewed as small or petite, yet within her Vietnamese community, she felt comparatively large and out of place. Mia articulated that she also struggled with the fetishization of Asian women in Western society, which placed a different set of expectations on her appearance and identity. Mia expressed that navigating these conflicting standards made it difficult for her to feel fully accepted in either cultural context:

> Ultimately, I feel like I'm caught between two very different sets of expectations. In Vietnam, I'm seen as too big and tall, while in the West, I'm seen as small but expected to conform to an entirely different narrative about Asian women. It's a challenge navigating these conflicting standards on either side of the world.

This unique experience, as shared by Mia, highlighted the challenges of navigating conflicting cultural expectations about beauty. Furthermore, her experience captured the tension when two different cultures hold distinct beliefs about how Asian women should present themselves. Mia's

account underscores how these cultural pressures can create internal conflict, making it difficult to reconcile personal identity with external expectations. It also reflects the broader theme of how societal and cultural norms shape the way women perceive and present their bodies.

Another aspect consisted of women's constant awareness of being perceived, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that heightened the external pressures they felt to present themselves in a certain way. Women described feeling external pressure to present themselves in a certain way to be deemed acceptable, particularly in terms of appearance. Many noted that societal expectations, such as wanting to look presentable or aligning with unspoken rules, were reinforced by men's perceptions, and influenced by comments from family members, especially parents. Influenced by her parents' emphasis on looking presentable, Eliza expressed that if she does not put effort into her appearance, she feels less confident in her job and how she carries herself. The pressure to conform to these standards often led the women to mould themselves to meet these expectations, feeling that their worth was tied to how they presented themselves in public and how others perceived them.

In summary, the first set of themes illustrates the powerful sociocultural factors shaping women's experiences, particularly through the influence of social media, societal beauty standards, and external scrutiny. Women described comparing themselves to influencers and peers, which led to feelings of inadequacy and pressure to conform. Additionally, the notion of being perceived and scrutinized highlighted how women internalized societal expectations, feeling pressure to present themselves in specific ways while also facing external critiques about their bodies. Cultural norms played a significant role in shaping these experiences, ultimately influencing how women viewed themselves and navigated their identities within these scrutinizing environments.

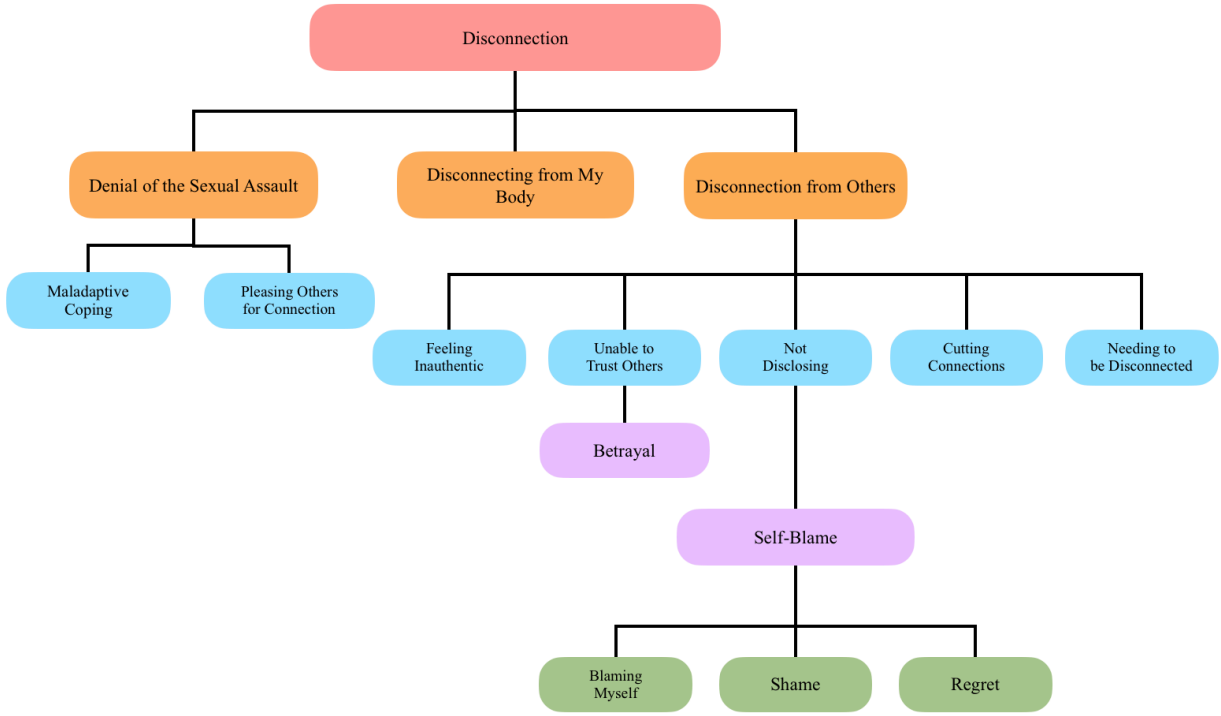
Second Set of Themes

The first set of themes captured the women's sociocultural contexts, while the second set of themes reflected their experiences of embodiment after sexual assault. The first set of themes served as a means to help contextualize their experiences of embodiment post-sexual assault. The next two themes that were identified from the women's narrative accounts are described in further detail in the following section.

Theme Three: Disconnection

Figure 3

Theme Three: Disconnection



A third theme that was identified in the narrative accounts was characterized by facets of disconnection. Some of the women described being in denial of the sexual assault and tried not to think about the experiences. For some women, denial became a means of psychological distancing, allowing them to disconnect from the reality of the sexual assault and avoid fully

processing the experience. Women described not wanting to make a big deal about the sexual assault and some even tried to justify what happened to them. Some of the women's experiences of being in denial of the sexual assault were characterized by maladaptive coping mechanisms, including alcohol to numb, self-harm, and "a cycle of starving, binging, and excessive working out" (Nicole).

For some women, denial of the sexual assault manifested in a deep desire to seek connection and validation from others. They described engaging in people-pleasing behaviours, convincing themselves that their choices were their own, even when influenced by a need for acceptance and love. Some found themselves jumping into relationships or pretending to like certain things to relate to others, believing that connection could fill an internal void after the sexual assault. Eliza described her desire for emotional connection after experiencing sexual assault and how she often overlooked behaviours that may have indicated irresponsibility and disrespect:

> I think it was like, if someone wanted me to do something that made me uncomfortable, I would still convince myself that I needed to please them. I didn't want to feel like I was being pressured into something I didn't want to do, but I would make myself believe that it was what I actually wanted. In the end, I convinced myself it was my decision, even though it might not have been fully my choice.

Several women described the need to convince themselves that their actions were a choice, even when deep down, they felt otherwise. Some rationalized their experiences by believing that if they allowed certain things to happen, it might lead to love or acceptance, using justification as a way to process their discomfort.

Another dimension of disconnection was characterized by women dissociating to detach from their bodies and environment. Many women recounted experiencing dissociation during the sexual assaults and afterward as a coping mechanism to distance themselves from the memories. Some women described dissociation as a way to escape from their bodies, while one participant felt she was watching herself from a third-person perspective. Melissa experienced several sexual assaults and described how dissociation became a coping mechanism, making it difficult for her to reconnect with her body:

> During that time, I think I coped by dissociating from my body whenever something traumatic happened. I would mentally remove myself from the situation, and afterward, it became difficult to reconnect with my body because I was so used to dissociating. It wasn't that I felt grossed out or anything; it was more that I didn't feel attached to my body.

For some women, dissociation became a way to avoid confronting parts of themselves that carried pain, shame, or discomfort, further deepening their sense of disconnection from their body.

Another facet of disconnection identified across seven of the women's narrative accounts was characterized by a disconnection from others. Women expressed not immediately disclosing the sexual assault to their family and friends, which felt contrary to their typical character. Some women described anticipating disapproval and judgment from others and further expressed difficulties in withholding this information from them. Underlying this disconnection from others was a sense of self-blame, as some women internalized the belief that they were responsible for what happened. Shame was a common emotion identified in the women's narrative accounts, which further contributed to not disclosing, as Melissa reflected on feeling the need to "hide

everything," making it even more difficult to open up to others. This was intertwined with feelings of regret and self-directed disgust, as women questioned themselves: "Why didn't you stop it? No one's going to believe you if you tell" (Nicole). Some expressed frustration and guilt for not addressing the situation at the time, reflecting on how withholding the truth deepened their sense of isolation.

Women described a profound sense of inauthenticity in their interactions with others, often feeling as though they were forcing connections while internally struggling with their experiences of sexual assault. Some women shared about being advised not to disclose their sexual assault, which reinforced the feeling that their experiences were something to be buried or ignored. Some questioned their own reality, wondering if they had imagined it, while others remained guarded, staying in control as a way to protect themselves.

Many women expressed difficulty trusting others after the sexual assault, often feeling guarded and hesitant in their relationships. Some women noted they "struggled a lot with trusting people and opening up" (Rebecca) to not only those around them but also themselves, questioning their own judgment and instincts. This lack of trust was particularly evident for some women in interactions with men, where they described feeling "hesitant and reserved" (Kathranne). For some women, this was rooted in a deep sense of betrayal, and they grappled with shattered assumptions about trust, safety, and the intentions of those around them. The betrayal not only fractured their relationships but left them uncertain of whom they could rely upon in the future. Rebecca described how the abuse led her to feel disconnected, especially due to the perpetrator being someone close to her, and how it caused her to push people away:

> I felt very disconnected. I pushed a lot of people away. In particular, when it happened, the person who had abused me was someone I was close with, which made me want to

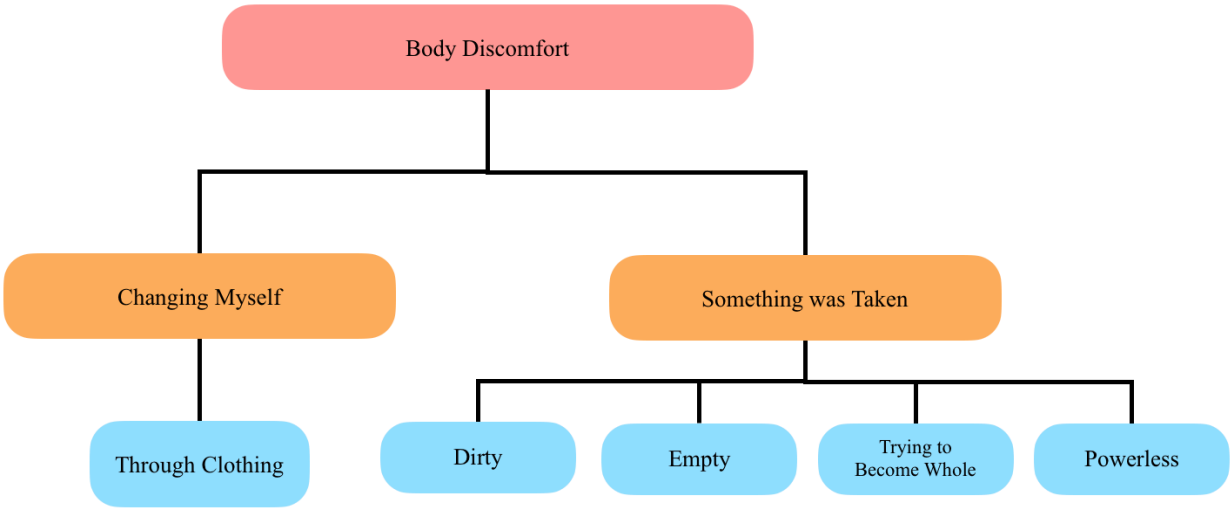
> shut myself off from others. I didn't want to open up to anyone, and I became very angry and mean as a person. It was challenging to trust people.

While struggling to trust others, women echoed similar sentiments of intentionally cutting connections with others as a way to cope. Some pushed people away, avoided conversations, or stopped reaching out, creating distance even from close family members like their parents. Women described feeling isolated, specifically disconnected from others and themselves, "in order to feel safe and start rebuilding very cautiously" (Jillian). Some women expressed feeling at peace with their disconnection from others and had no urge to share about the experience. This struggle with trust demonstrates the lasting impact of sexual assault and the cautious process of rebuilding connections.

Theme Four: Body Discomfort

Figure 4

Theme Four: Body Discomfort



A fourth theme identified in the narrative accounts was characterized by body discomfort. Women described having increased body awareness after the sexual assault, feeling more hypervigilant of themselves and others, being more cautious with certain body parts, and having difficulties caring for their bodies. Two women further articulated feeling uncomfortable with physical touch and not wanting to be touched in certain areas. Six women expressed feeling uncomfortable in their bodies after the sexual assault, like they did not belong in them, describing a sense that their bodies felt foreign and unfamiliar. Jillian articulated, "I was painfully aware (and I thought everyone else was too) that I didn't fit inside my own body, whereby my own skin and the flesh were the thing that you blew up. I was the little person/skeleton trying to fit inside of that skin, and I never did." Experiences of body discomfort were further characterized by some participants expressing a deep dislike for their bodies, avoiding mirrors, and feeling exposed in certain outfits. Women shared experiencing a lack of

confidence, heightened feelings of vulnerability, struggles with body image, and an overall sense of shame about their bodies. Elise recounted, “In high school, I was so aware of my size. I struggled a lot with body image and carried a deep sense of shame.”

A component of this theme consisted of women feeling dirty and powerless and experiencing “this overwhelming wave of emptiness, followed by a deep sense of helplessness” (Mia). They also spoke about feeling like their bodies were empty shells and being unable to do things. Many women expressed a profound sense of loss, as if a part of themselves had been stolen, leaving them feeling defeated and in a fog. Mia further described what it was like to endure the pervasive sense of loss and emptiness, explaining:

> It is the feeling that someone has taken something vital from you, leaving you with this empty shell of a woman. It’s like someone stole a part of your soul, and now it’s entirely your responsibility to rebuild yourself, to create a version of yourself that you can like and live with.

Women described feeling unwhole, constantly trying to piece themselves back together, yet never feeling complete. They noted that this endless cycle left them feeling exhausted and wondering if they would ever truly feel like themselves or even whole again.

Another noticeable characteristic was that many women described the overwhelming urge to change and transform their bodies as a way to reclaim control and avoid future violations. Some women resorted to gaining weight, believing that becoming less attractive would help them avoid drawing attention from men. Women recounted going to extreme lengths to manage their discomfort, often changing their behaviours or appearance in an effort to fit in and make friends. One of the ways some women changed themselves was through their clothing and Nicole expressed:

> After the assault, I only wore baggy clothes. I think the reason I wore baggy clothes was because I didn't want anyone to look at me. I just wanted to blend in; I was afraid of drawing attention to myself, especially from other men.

Women articulated avoiding wearing certain outfits that they once felt comfortable in, as for some, those clothes reminded them of what they were wearing when they were assaulted. They further expressed feeling uncomfortable in particular styles. These changes in appearance and behaviour reflected an attempt to regain a sense of safety and control over their bodies in the aftermath of the assault.

In summary, this second set of themes depicts moments of disconnection and body discomfort. Women described disconnecting from their bodies and others, as well as denying the sexual assault, as a way to distance themselves from the memories. Additionally, women described experiencing body discomfort, articulating a sense that something had been taken from them, which coincided with a strong urge to transform themselves. This second set of themes illustrates the emotional and physical struggles women experienced after sexual assault, as they navigated disconnection, body discomfort, and a deep desire to reclaim control.

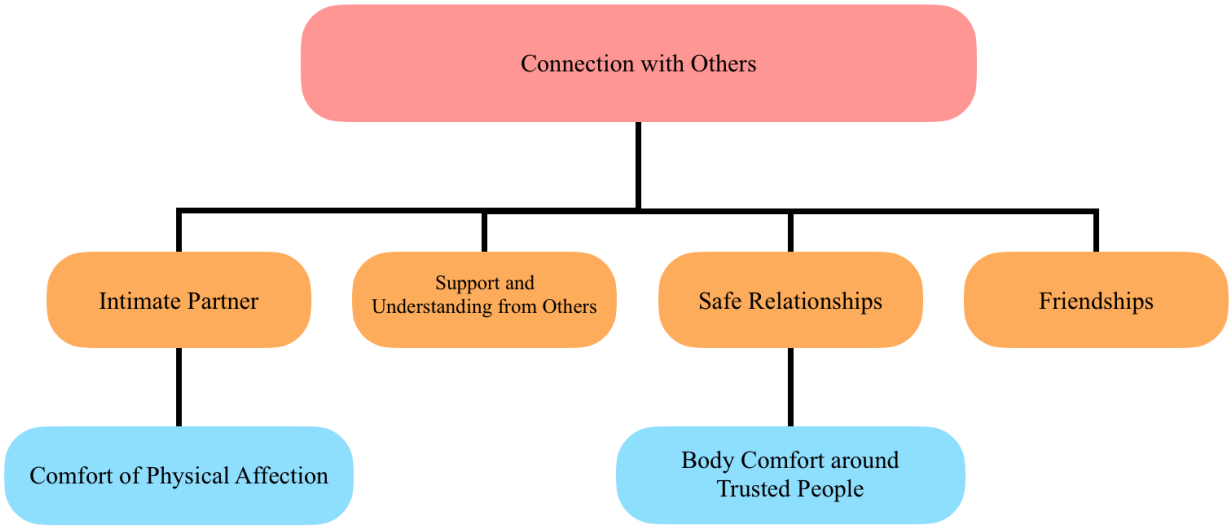
Third Set of Themes

The third set of themes is characterized by women's experiences of reconnecting with others, opening up about and disclosing the sexual assault for the first time. Along with this emotional reconnection, women also reported a growing sense of comfort with their bodies, gradually regaining a positive relationship with themselves. Movement, whether through physical activity or simply re-engaging with the world around them, helped facilitate healing. The three themes that were identified across the women's narratives are presented in this following section.

Theme Five: Connection with Others

Figure 5

Theme Five: Connection with Others



The fifth theme that was identified in women's narrative accounts consisted of support and understanding from relationships such as friendships and intimate partners. As women began disclosing their sexual assault to family or friends, they described a sense of relief, feeling heard and believed for the first time. The support they received provided reassurance, allowing them to feel understood, loved, and accepted. Friendships with other women were often characterized by ease and comfort, providing a space where women felt encouraged, empowered, and valued. These connections empowered them, offering a sense of solidarity and strength and helping to shift the blame away from themselves. Elise described the depth and quality of her friendships with other women:

> I feel valued by my friends for so much of who I am beyond my physical appearance. It's meaningful that many of them have known me through various stages of my life—when

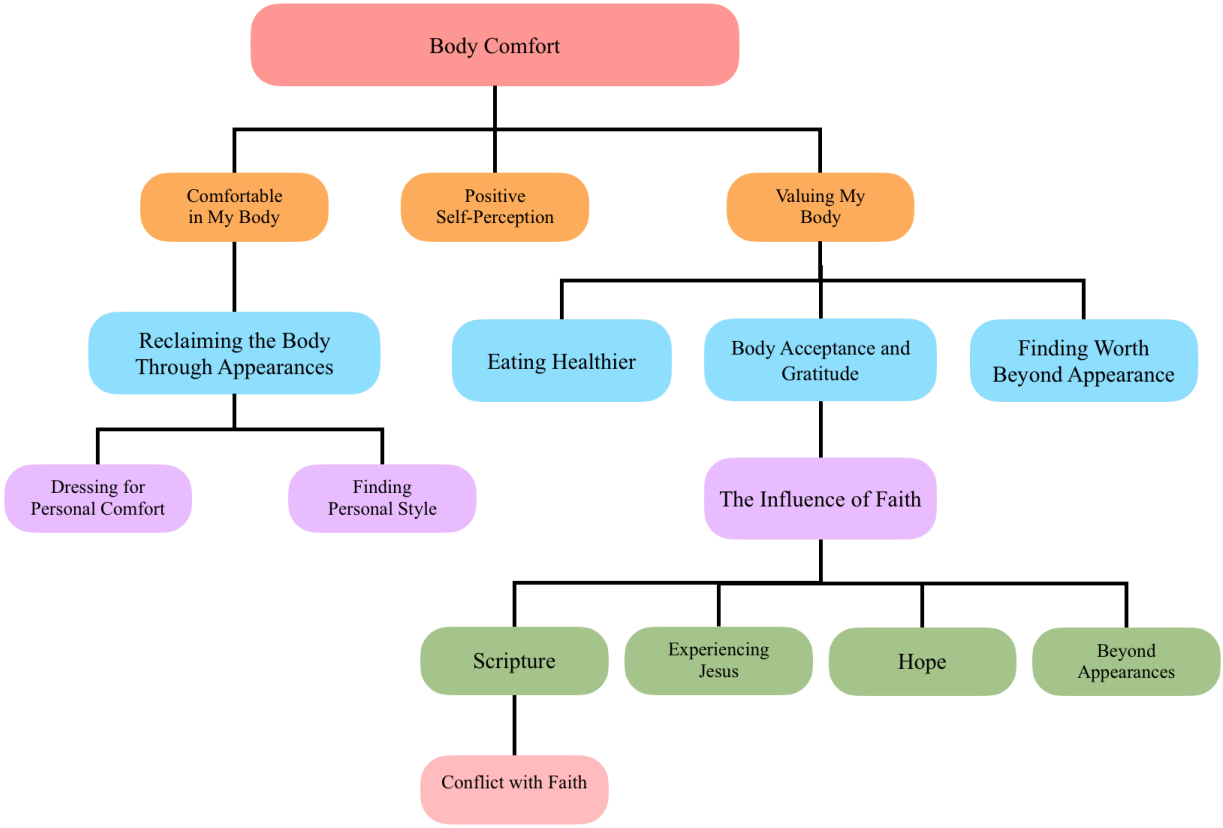
> I've been smaller, stronger, hospitalized, bigger, or pregnant. They've seen the full range of my experiences and have consistently shown love and kindness.

Women described specific relationships that had a quality of safety, which was characterized by trust and acceptance. In these spaces, women expressed feeling comfortable in their bodies, no longer needing to adjust themselves, which helped them feel at peace, less self-conscious, and more confident. Five women described their husbands as a constant source of support, emphasizing their unwavering love and reassurance. They felt cherished and grounded in their presence. Rebecca described the support she received from her husband, "My body changes all the time, but his love has never wavered." Some women further articulated that through their relationship with their husbands, they became more appreciative of physical touch, finding it comforting, healing, and a way to co-regulate.

Theme Six: Body Comfort

Figure 6

Theme Six: Body Comfort



The sixth theme that was identified across the narrative accounts consisted of women viewing themselves more positively, feeling comfortable in their bodies and valuing them. Women described enjoying looking at themselves and developing a more positive view of their bodies, recognizing their beauty and self-worth. They expressed having a better relationship with their bodies and learning to love themselves. Additionally, women described how their "body comfort level can be influenced by everything" (Elise), highlighting the "ebb and flow" (Nicole) of body comfort as they navigated different experiences and environments. Rebecca compared and contrasted how she felt externally and internally about her body:

> Externally, I generally feel comfortable in my body because I think it looks good. Of course, that's subjective, but I feel confident about my appearance, and that makes me feel more comfortable. Internally, I have an acceptance of myself. I like myself more than I did as a child, I no longer blame myself for the bad things that have happened to me. Now I enjoy looking at myself and that mental shift was a big change in the way I view my body.

Women's body comfort was characterized by reclaiming their bodies through their appearance, as they came to the realization that their comfort mattered. Many described shifting their focus to dressing for personal comfort and choosing clothing that made them feel good. Some women reclaimed their bodies by exploring their personal style—getting tattoos, dying their hair, learning makeup techniques, and accessorizing in ways that reflected their identity. Through these expressions, they embraced their femininity. Women articulated that changing their appearance became a way to reclaim their identities and control over their bodies.

Body comfort was further characterized by women appreciating their bodies, embracing changes, and recognizing them as their own. They expressed valuing and treating their bodies with respect. Nicole described how she began to reclaim and fully inhabit her body, embracing it as her own and finding a renewed sense of connection and comfort within herself:

> I started to realize, "This is my body, not his. I get to do whatever I want with it." I had to decide if I was going to live for shame or live for myself. I made my body a place where I felt comfortable again.

As part of valuing their bodies, some women described changing their diet and eating healthier foods that they enjoy and make them "feel good" (Rebecca). Additionally, women expressed acceptance for what their bodies went through and gratitude for how their bodies protected them.

Women described becoming more compassionate toward their bodies, appreciating their ability to endure and grow life, and feeling grateful for their bodies' incredible capabilities. Moreover, women described finding their worth beyond appearance by working to view themselves more positively and learning to focus on their internal value. They emphasized the importance of self-care, counteracting negative thoughts with positive ones, and appreciating themselves.

For some women, finding worth beyond appearance was influenced by their faith, which was characterized by hope and strength through their relationship with God. They also described understanding that in the larger picture, body image does not matter and believed that God cares more than how their bodies look. Some women articulated the role of scripture in helping them understand how God designed them "fearfully and wonderfully" (Melissa). Jillian described her relationship with God and how it took time to truly understand how God sees and loves her:

> While it may sound cliché, I don't think my words could ever fully express how deeply I need Him. I've needed Him through everything. Part of what I learned through that experience was understanding how God sees me and loves me, and while many moms tell their kids, "God knit you together in your mother's womb," it's one thing to hear it and another to truly understand it in your heart. When I began to grasp that, it wasn't just knowledge in my head anymore; it became something I felt within myself. As I started to live that truth, it radiated from the inside out. Now, I feel like I walk differently and live out differently.

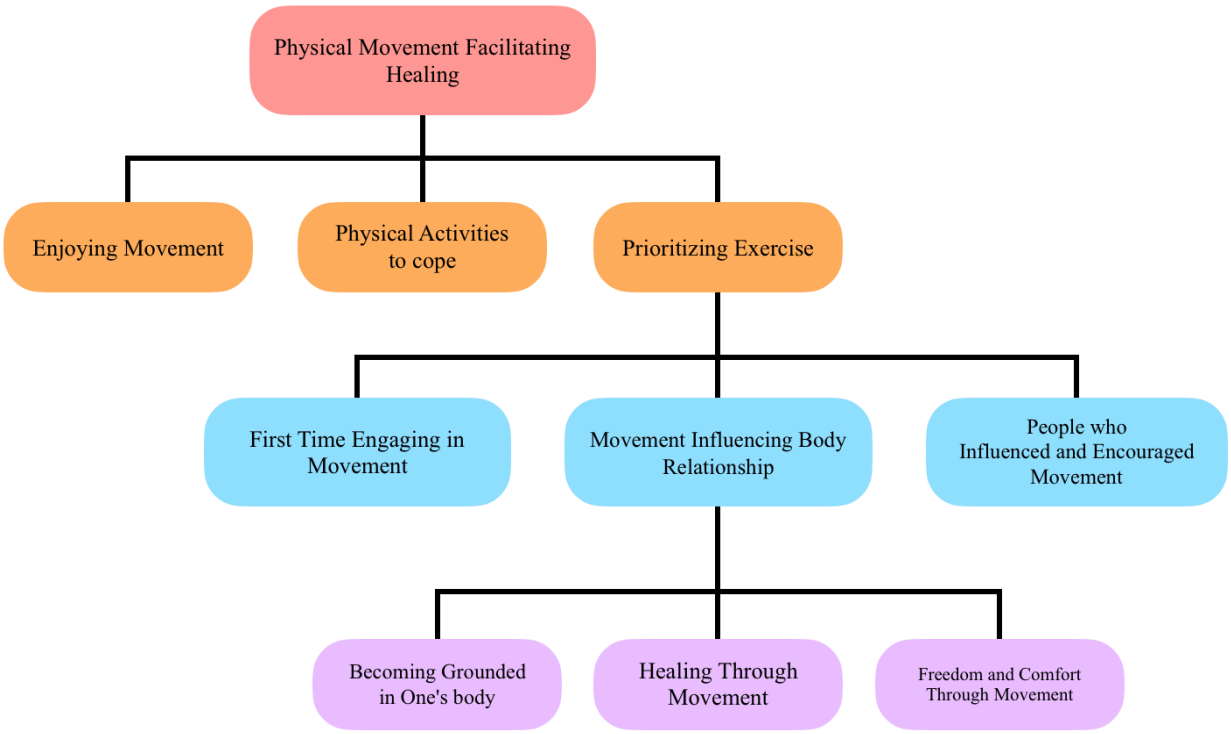
Women echoed a similar sentiment and described the sexual assault conflicting with their faith afterward, feeling guilty for not always aligning with scripture and frustrated with themselves for not fully loving their bodies. Some wrestled with thoughts like, "I should love my body more" (Kathranne) and struggled with criticizing God's work in them. Despite these struggles for some

women, they expressed continuing to read Bible verses and actively striving to love and accept their bodies more.

Theme Seven: Physical Movement Facilitating Healing

Figure 7

Theme Seven: Physical Movement Facilitating Healing



The seventh theme that was identified across the women's narrative accounts was physical movement as an avenue to facilitate healing and reconnection to their bodies. Several women described engaging in physical activities such as yoga, walking, going to the gym, and sports as a way to occupy their minds, build strength, and shift their focus away from the sexual assault. Eliza articulated the importance of starting "physically demanding" activities after the sexual assault: "I shifted my focus to setting goals, improving my stamina, and working on my performance rather than dwelling on the trauma."

Moreover, six women described prioritizing exercise and well-being as part of their healing process. They expressed a strong desire to move their bodies, emphasizing how movement and stretching helped them to learn and better understand their bodies. Some women committed to going to the gym regularly, focusing on building strength and endurance, while others incorporated daily walks and low-impact activities as a way to care for their physical and mental well-being. Women's initial experiences with physical movement were often marked by hesitation, discomfort, or doubt, with some feeling intimidated by the gym, unsure of where to start, or thinking, "This is so dumb" (Jillian). They also described a sense of desperation, feeling like they had nothing left to lose when they first began incorporating physical movement into their lives. Five women described how people in their lives influenced and encouraged physical movement. Some were introduced to the gym by their mothers, inspired by an active father, or guided by a knowledgeable dance instructor. Others found support through shared activities, such as doing yoga as a family or learning how to use the gym equipment from a friend.

Prioritizing exercise was further characterized by women recognizing how movement positively influenced their relationship with their bodies. Women expressed feeling better after a session and described healing through movement, with practices like yoga and dance helping them reconnect with their bodies and process trauma. Jillian articulated that movement played a foundational role in reconnecting with her body and rebuilding trust in herself:

> Learning to live in my own body and move again was foundational. Personally, it was the first thing I had to learn in order to trust myself again. It wasn't about avoiding mistakes; it was about allowing myself to make them and learning through them such as through dance. I fell. I tripped. I turned the wrong way. I didn't put my hand where it

> was supposed to be. I didn't put my foot where it was supposed to be. But that process of trial and error helped me reconnect with my body.

Women described becoming more grounded in their bodies through mindful activities such as yoga, which helped them feel centred and present. Practicing mindfulness allowed them to tune into their bodies, creating a sense of safety, peace, and renewed connection with themselves. Notably, several women articulated feeling uncomfortable when being "very attuned" (Nicole) to their bodies when initially going to the gym or during yoga.

Although there were different initial experiences, women expressed enjoying physical movement, as they felt playful, light, alive, carefree, and able to move effortlessly. Women expressed gratitude for the ability to move, appreciating how physical movement helped them feel stronger and more connected to their bodies. Places that once felt daunting or intimidating, such as the gym or dance studio, eventually became women's "happy places" (Nicole) where they felt empowered and at peace with their bodies. Elise articulated how going to the gym has become an essential part of her routine and serves beyond a physical outlet:

> Going to the gym has always been more than just physical for me. It's about feeling strong and capable. When I move my body and push myself, I become more capable, and that creates a positive cycle where I do more, feel better, and grow more confident. Plus, going to the gym is my time—time to decompress and clear my head. Moments like that day, playing outside with my son, remind me why it's worth the effort. The energy and joy it brings into my life are irreplaceable.

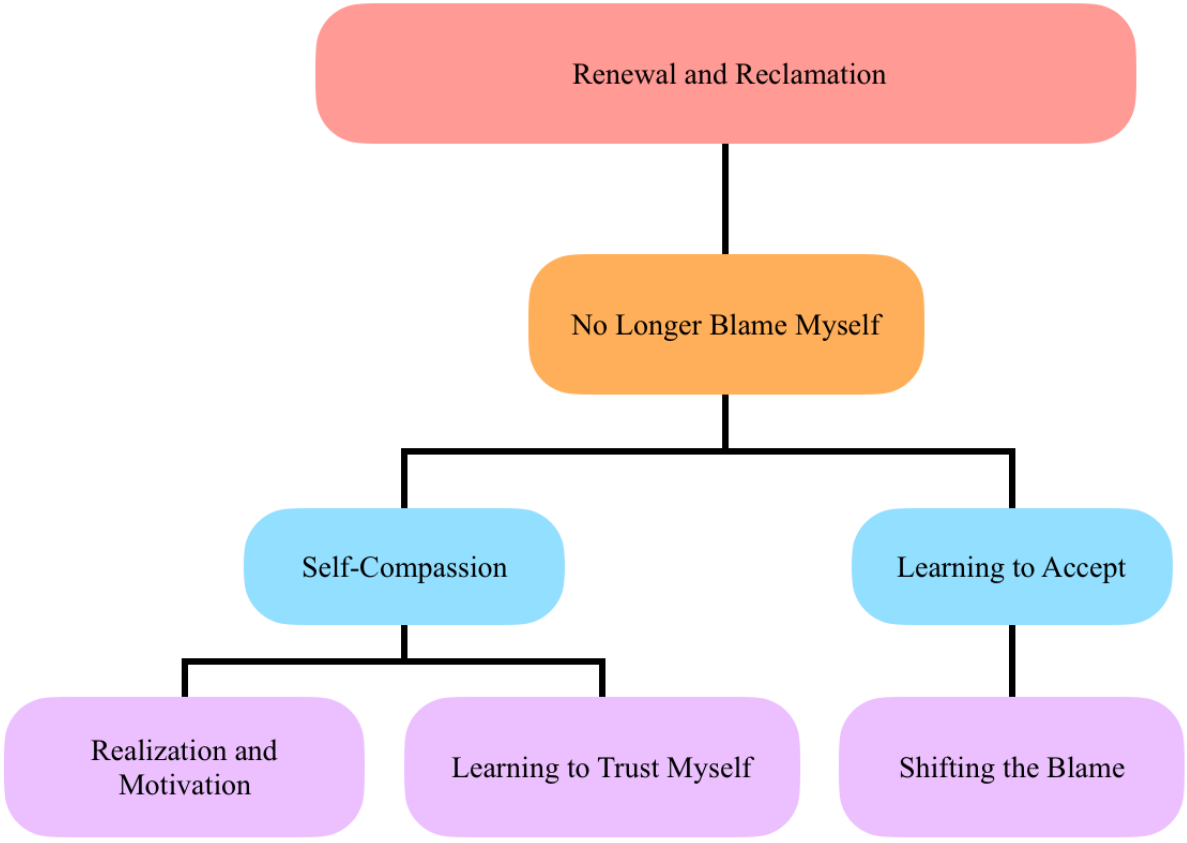
This seventh theme also identified moments of body comfort, body reconnection, and support from others. For many women, engaging in physical activities was one avenue that facilitated healing. They expressed gratitude for the encouragement they received from supportive friends,

family, or partners, who introduced them to physical movement and motivated them to keep going. These experiences stood in stark contrast to the previous set of themes, where they often felt disconnected, isolated, and uncertain about their bodies. The shift toward prioritizing movement marked a turning point, as it allowed women to feel empowered, connected, and more attuned with their physical and emotional selves.

Theme Eight: Renewal and Reclamation

Figure 8

Theme Eight: Renewal and Reclamation



The final theme that was identified in women's narrative accounts was characterized by renewal and reclamation. Women described reclaiming their identity and understanding that their experiences, including the trauma they endured, could never completely erase who they were.

They expressed a growing sense of authenticity and hope in renewal. New environments, such as supportive communities, provided spaces for them to" create a new narrative that wasn't focused on being abused" (Rebecca), one that focused on growth, self-love, and the possibility of transformation. Mia described the transformative process of reclaiming one's identity and rebuilding after experiencing sexual trauma:

> And in order to keep moving forward, to reclaim even a small part of your identity, you have to start sewing together a new version of yourself. It's not that the version of you before was flawed or unworthy, but it's gone, and rebuilding is the only way to continue.

Some women sought counselling as a means to process their experiences which provided them with a supportive space that also facilitated healing. Women expressed that healing is not a linear process but rather a gradual and sometimes uneven journey. Many described how they once felt like a shell of themselves, emotionally distant or disconnected, but over time, they began to experience gradual healing. Some women described this new sense of healing as unfamiliar as they navigated through difficult emotions and slowly started to reclaim themselves. Women acknowledged that this journey and growth takes time and further described that there did not seem to be adequate words to describe this process.

Importantly, women noted a shift in their perspective, no longer blaming themselves for the sexual assault. This shift was characterized by developing self-compassion, giving themselves grace and empathy, and realizing that there was nothing they could have done to prevent the sexual assault. For some women, this was characterized by starting to trust themselves again. One woman had the unique realization that she had a voice, a choice, and the ability to set boundaries, which motivated her to teach other women—especially those close to her—that they, too, can stand up for themselves and say no.

Another important aspect of this process of no longer blaming themselves was learning to accept what happened, with many working toward reconciling their experiences. Some women acknowledged that while they may not have forgiven the perpetrator, they were trying to come to terms with the events and understanding that healing involved accepting the past rather than changing their experiences. Part of this process also included shifting the blame to the perpetrator and recognizing that the sexual assault was not because of anything the women did or did not do.

This third set of themes highlights women's journeys of reconnection, with others and their bodies, as they begin to open up about their sexual assault experiences. Women articulated a growing sense of comfort and self-acceptance, gradually rebuilding positive relationships with themselves. Additionally, physical movement and re-engagement with their surroundings appeared to be an avenue for facilitating healing. These key themes provided further insight into the emotional and physical aspects of women's experiences of embodiment throughout the healing process after sexual assault.

Summary of the Findings

In summary, eight themes were identified from the eight women's narrative accounts, which were organized into three sets of themes capturing context, post-sexual assault experiences, and later stages of healing. The first set of themes captured the broader sociocultural context influencing women's experiences of embodiment. Women described the influence of societal beauty standards and social media on their perceptions of their bodies, leading to feelings of comparison, dissatisfaction, and pressure to conform. Additionally, women described the concept of "pretty privilege" and how societal perceptions of attractiveness intersected with their assumptions about sexual assault, contributing to complex feelings about their appearance

and sense of safety. The second set of themes illustrated women's experiences of embodiment shortly after the sexual assault. Women expressed feeling disconnected from others and their bodies while also experiencing denial of the sexual assault and underlying self-blame. Coinciding with these experiences, women recounted periods of body discomfort marked by heightened body awareness, avoiding their own reflection, and feeling disconnected from and ashamed of their bodies. These feelings were rooted in a sense of emptiness and powerlessness, further provoking a desire to change themselves. Lastly, the third set of themes consisted of women articulating experiences of social support from others and increased body comfort which was exemplified by positive self-perception and valuing their bodies beyond appearance. Women described physical movement as one pathway to healing, noting the positive impact on their mental well-being, relationship with their body, and mind-body connection, which supported a shift toward positive experiences of embodiment.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

The purpose of the present study was to explore young women's experiences of embodiment throughout the healing process after sexual assault. The eight women's narrative accounts and identified themes exemplify how participants navigated their relationships with their bodies, from disconnection and discomfort to reconnection and renewal. This chapter will begin with a personal reflection and then present a discussion of the findings in relation to existing literature on sexual assault, embodiment, and movement as a means of healing. The study's contributions to the literature are examined, as well as the implications for counselling psychology. Finally, the study's strengths and limitations will be reviewed along with recommendations for future research.

Reflexivity Throughout the Research Process

At the outset of this research, I recognized the importance of reflecting on my personal biases, assumptions, and experiences, which could influence my interpretations and decision-making throughout the process. I kept a research journal throughout this process to document reflections on conversations with my supervisor, Dr. Chelsea, as well as my personal thoughts, emotions, and the reasoning behind our decisions. However, engaging in the research process turned out to be a completely different experience as I worked closely with the participants and immersed myself in the data. As previously mentioned, I have my own experience of sexual assault, which involved the process of learning to reconnect with my body. Having become accustomed to being attuned to my body and articulating this self-awareness, I had the subconscious assumption that others would share the same awareness and ability to describe their bodily experiences. This assumption became evident during my interviews with

participants, as I realized that not everyone is as attuned to their bodies, and many have never fully reflected on this connection. This, in turn, impacted their ability to articulate their bodily experiences, often leading me to ask additional probes and even clarify them to provide further understanding.

As the women shared their experiences, I was often overwhelmed with emotions and empathy. I felt as if I was invited to watch their experiences from a window, a position that allowed me to witness their vulnerability and strength. The counsellor in me wanted to step in and provide comfort or solace, but I knew my role was to listen and remain present. The interview process was deeply moving, marked by moments of tears, bravery, passion, and a strong desire for healing. These women's stories pulled at my heartstrings, as their raw emotions and courage left a lasting impact on me. The depth of their pain, resilience, and hope stirred a profound sense of awe within me. During the transcription and analysis process, I found that listening to the interview recordings often brought up a resurgence of emotions. I felt a deep sense of anger and protectiveness toward each woman, coupled with disappointment at the lack of support they received from those around them or the way their experiences were brushed off. As I revisited the interviews, I realized there were moments where I wished I had probed deeper or lingered longer in certain emotional states to gather more insight. However, listening to the recordings also allowed me to better understand the emotional cadence of each story and ensure I maintained context. This process was incredibly valuable, as I started to see recurring themes across the narratives, such as isolation, body monitoring, and reclamation. This was the first time I was able to see the data through a broader lens, deepening my understanding of the shared experiences among the participants.

A challenging part of the research process was organizing the codes into themes and subthemes. I was striving to honour the voices and stories of the participants, which often left me feeling indecisive about the choices I had to make. Additionally, I wrestled with making inferences about the data. Dr. Chelsea helped me through this thought process and how inferring is part of the qualitative research process so long as we are maintaining the context of the codes. When organizing the codes and finalizing the themes, I frequently referred back to the narrative accounts to ensure that I was accurately presenting and making meaningful connections within the data. This collaborative iterative process with Dr. Chelsea helped me refine my interpretations and build confidence in my analytical decisions.

This research study was so much more than collecting data for a project. These women entrusted me with their stories and believed in my capability to convey them to the world through this research. I was especially struck when several women shared that telling their stories through this study was a way for them to find meaning and purpose in their experiences. I came to realize that conducting this research and creating a space for women to share their stories also allowed me to find meaning and purpose in my own experiences. A part of me felt the need to transform my past experiences into something meaningful and impactful. I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to bring my personal experiences into the creation of this research study. As I move into the professional field, I hope to also use my life experiences and the insights gained through this research process to inform my work with future clients. In doing so, I aim to not only attend to the body and the lived experience but also help clients reclaim their sense of self.

Discussion of the Findings

The Findings and Sexual Assault Literature

The findings of this study align with and extend existing literature on the psychological impacts of sexual assault, offering insight into how women navigate embodiment, disconnection, and healing individually and relationally. While prior research has documented depression, anxiety, and shame following sexual violence (Nöthling et al., 2022; Rothman et al., 2021; Short et al., 2021), this study adds depth by illustrating how these emotional responses are intricately linked to the body and to these women's efforts to reclaim agency. Participants described coping strategies such as drinking, self-harm, and disordered eating as attempts to manage overwhelming emotional distress and to regain a sense of control. These findings support exist research identifying such behaviours as avoidance mechanisms that serve to numb emotional pain temporarily but ultimately reinforce shame and self-blame (Alix et al., 2017; Ullman et al., 2014). These narratives emphasize how the internalization of trauma can manifest in efforts to both escape and reassert control, further impacting the healing process.

Dissociation was a particularly salient theme across the narrative accounts. Although definitions of sexual assault vary across studies, creating inconsistency in the literature, research has consistently identified peritraumatic dissociation as a common response from women who experience sexual assault (DeMello et al., 2023; TeBockhorst et al., 2015). Participants in this study described experiencing dissociation and how it became a coping mechanism following the sexual assault as a way to disconnect from their environment, themselves, their bodies, and their memories, offering thick descriptions of what it was like to experience this phenomenon. The participants' experiences align with signs of peritraumatic dissociation, as some described experiencing dissociation during the traumatic events. Some participants described feeling

detached from their bodies, as though they were observing events from a distance, disconnected from their emotions and physical sensations during and after the traumatic experience, which corroborates earlier research (DeMello et al., 2023; Schauer & Elbert, 2010; TeBockhorst et al., 2015). In the narrative accounts, the participants articulated how dissociation became a coping mechanism; this coincides with prior research that suggests dissociation can develop into a sustained, habitual response to trauma, helping individuals to distance themselves from physical and emotional distress (Schauer & Elbert, 2010; TeBockhorst et al., 2015). These rich descriptions offer important contributions to the limited literature on dissociation in the specific context of sexual assault. This study provides insight into how dissociation can function as a psychological coping mechanism while also disrupting positive embodiment. Although dissociation was not the central focus of this research, its presence throughout the narrative accounts suggests that more research is necessary to further understand such fragmentation in the context of sexual assault.

Shame, guilt and self-blame—common themes in trauma research—also played a significant role in participants' experiences (Kline et al., 2021; McElvaney et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2024; Weiss, 2010). Some participants described how these emotions delayed their ability to disclose the sexual assault and created further isolation from others. These findings align with research indicating that guilt and shame often inhibit disclosure and social reconnection after sexual assault (McElvaney et al., 2022; Weiss, 2010). Past studies have found that survivors of sexual assault may initially isolate themselves or delay disclosure due to fear of judgment and burdening and a lack of perceived support (Robinson et al., 2024; Ullman et al., 2020). Some participants, like Jillian and Rachel, described actively withdrawing from others as a form of self-protection, whereas others, such as Eliza and Kathranne, sought connection sooner in their

healing process. These divergent responses illustrate the importance of contextual factors, including personality, support systems, and previous relational experiences, in shaping the way individuals cope post-sexual assault. Despite these differences, most participants recounted a turning point marked by reconnection with others and with themselves. This shift was frequently supported by compassionate relationships and a growing sense of self-compassion. These findings align with research showing that positive social support following disclosure can support the healing process and strengthen a sense of agency and self-worth (Catton et al., 2023; DeCou et al., 2017).

In summary, the findings of this study align with and contribute to the existing literature on the psychological effects of sexual assault, including experiences of anxiety, depression, dissociation, and self-blame. Participants' descriptions of avoidance behaviours, dissociation, and emotional withdrawal reflected well-researched trauma responses, while their journeys toward reconnection in various facets highlight the transformative role of support and relational healing with others and the self. This research deepens the conversation by demonstrating how coping and healing are not solely internal psychological processes but are also related to bodily experiences and social contexts—core insights supported by the by the DTE and increasingly recognized in trauma-informed care.

The Findings and Objectification Literature

The findings of this study indicate that participants' experiences of objectification were central to shaping their narratives of embodiment. As illustrated by the first and second set of themes, many participants described being sexually objectified before and after the sexual assaults. These experiences included sexualization, unwanted attention, and receiving unsolicited comments about their bodies and appearances—patterns that align with prior research (Eshelman

et al., 2024; Haikalis et al., 2018; Hollett et al., 2024; Miles-McLean et al., 2015). Such encounters, as supported by existing literature, often led to harmful emotional and psychological outcomes, including internalized shame and body dissatisfaction (Miles-McLean et al., 2015). The narrative accounts demonstrated how societal norms surrounding attractiveness and femininity were deeply internalized, contributing to self-objectification, manifested through body monitoring, disconnection from bodily needs, and a reduced sense of body agency.

These findings reinforce the objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which posits that women are socialized to adopt an outsider's perspective on their bodies, leading to habitual body monitoring and negative embodiment. Participants' reflections, such as evaluating their worth through an external gaze or adjusting their appearance to be more acceptable, highlight the enduring presence of this internal gaze. These findings align with existing literature on objectification, which posits that women often internalize objectified views of their bodies, leading to self-objectification, body-surveillance, and a diminished sense of agency over their bodies (Eshelman et al., 2024; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Loughnan et al., 2013; Miles-McLean et al., 2015). Additionally, these narrative accounts emphasize how sexual objectification is not a singular event but a cumulative and developmental experience that becomes enmeshed with sexual trauma.

Importantly, the present study also demonstrated how participants started to resist objectification and shift towards more positive experiences of embodiment. As participants progressed through their healing journeys, many described consciously rejecting the objectifying gaze. This included actions like unfollowing specific social media accounts, critically reflecting on beauty standards, dressing for comfort, and cultivating more compassionate, appreciative

relationships with their bodies. For some, these changes were also supported by their Christian faith.

These shifts were psychological and physical, marking a reorientation toward body agency and a new way of relating to the self. Participants began to express gratitude for what their bodies could do, emphasizing care, nourishment, and physical freedom. These findings align with the existing objectification and embodiment literature that lower levels of self-objectification increase positive experiences of embodiment often characterized by decreased feelings of shame, less self-monitoring, and a reduced focus on physical appearance (Gattario et al., 2020; Piran, 2016; Wang et al., 2024; Yue & Tang, 2024). They also echo tenets of the DTE, which frames embodiment as an interplay between sociocultural factors, trauma, and resistance (Piran, 2017).

The Findings and Embodiment Literature

This section explores the intersection of the study's findings with existing embodiment literature, highlighting how participants' experiences align with the DTE, which served as the theoretical framework in the present study (Piran, 2017). The DTE outlines three domains—physical, mental, and social—through which women's experiences of embodiment are shaped (Piran, 2017). In the present study, the women's narrative accounts demonstrated how different familial, social, cultural, romantic, and religious experiences shaped their positive and negative experiences of embodiment. These shifts in embodiment were closely tied to the participants' experiences of sexual assault and the healing process that followed, which demonstrated the impact of sexual trauma on their bodily experiences.

Participants described experiences of negative embodiment marked by what Piran (2017) conceptualized as *corseting*. Physical corseting came in the form of restricted movement,

violations of bodily autonomy, and neglect of body care. Participants also described mental corseting, which was characterized by stories of adjusting one's appearance to meet beauty standards, their body being perceived and scrutinized by others, expectations to be submissive or demure, and restriction of their sexual desires. Additionally, the women experienced social disempowerment in the form of harassment, body shaming, and external judgement, all of which contributed to self-blame and self-objectification.

Yet, these experiences were not static. Many participants described experiences that indicated a shift towards positive embodiment through reconnection, characterized by physical and mental freedom and social empowerment. These experiences included moments of physical freedom and movement, attuned self-care, safety from the perpetrators, and intentional re-engagement with the world. The women articulated experiences of social empowerment, describing empowering relationships and moving away from the perpetrator. These experiences of positive embodiment and social empowerment underscore the transformative potential of reclaiming physical and emotional autonomy in the healing journey after sexual assault.

As previously discussed, the research program contributing to the development of the DTE yielded insights into girls' and women's embodied experiences across the lifespan and also revealed the construct which became labelled the experience of embodiment (EE). In the present study, participants' narrative accounts reflected the dimensions of EE, which included: (a) body connection and comfort versus disrupted body connection and discomfort; (b) agency and functionality versus restricted agency and restraint; (c) experience and expression of desire versus disrupted connection to desire; (d) attuned self-care versus disrupted attunement, self-harm, and neglect; and (e) inhabiting the body as a subjective site versus inhabiting the body as an objectified site (Piran, 2016). In the second set of themes, the women of the present study

described body disconnection and discomfort, restricted agency, neglect of care for their body, self-harm behaviours, and inhabiting the body as an objectified site. These findings reflect and align with negative experiences of embodiment and demonstrate how disruptions in body connection, agency, self-care, and self-perception can manifest in participants' lived experiences. In contrast, the third set of themes marked a shift toward more positive experiences of embodiment. Participants articulated stories about reconnecting with others and their bodies, as well as increased body comfort, agency functionality (e.g., using their voice to express personal views, opinions, and beliefs), attuned self-care, and resisting objectification. In resisting objectification, participants began to appreciate their bodies for their strength, functionality and lived experiences rather than solely for their appearance. The present findings capture the ebbs and flows of the women's experiences of embodiment along a continuum, ranging from negative to positive, which aligns with the DTE and the experience of embodiment construct within which this study is situated.

An important insight from these findings is that changing the body or appearances can be an act of resistance, particularly for women who live in restrictive, inequitable, or unsafe environments. Some participants described gaining weight or wearing baggy clothing after the sexual assault to reduce unwanted attention or avoid being targeted again. These adjustments were a means for creating a sense of projection and distance from sexualized scrutiny. Later in their healing journeys, many of these women described intentionally dressing for personal comfort, experimenting with new styles, or expressing themselves more freely through appearance. In both cases, adjusting appearances was a form of resistance to assert control over their bodies and push back against restrictive norms and environmental conditions that contributed to their objectification or harm.

This resistance is further reflected in acts of advocacy and social engagement. For instance, Kathranne described a desire to share her experience and educate other girls and women about consent and boundaries. Kathranne's narrative account exemplifies the advocacy dimension of the DTE, where experiences of embodiment are extended into collective empowerment, activism, and transformation of social discourse. Moreover, participants' willingness to engage in this study itself represents a form of critical engagement with social discourse. Their voices contribute to the growing body of literature that challenges dominant narratives around sexual assault and healing.

In summary, the participants' experiences of embodiment were closely intertwined with their healing process following sexual assault. The findings illustrate how healing can involve reclaiming physical, emotional, and social agency. This reclamation is not solely an internal shift, but also a response to—and resistance against—broader sociocultural constraints. This study demonstrates how the DTE can extend beyond its traditional applications, enriching perspectives on embodiment and healing post-sexual assault and supporting broader use in feminist and trauma research.

The Findings and Movement Facilitating Healing

The findings of this study emphasize the critical role physical movement plays in facilitating healing, particularly as it relates to the participants' experiences of embodiment. Many participants described engaging in range of movement-based activities, including activities such as yoga, dance, walking, and fitness routines. These physical activities were ways to restore physical strength and represented the restoration of a sense of body agency, providing a direct counter to the disempowering effects of objectification and sexual assault. For several participants, such as Jillian and Nicole, physical movement helped them regain a sense of

mastery over their bodies, empowering them to feel capable and competent despite past body violations. These findings are consistent with existing literature that identifies physical movement practices—including yoga, martial arts, and dance—as powerful therapeutic tools in the context of healing after sexual trauma (Higgins et al., 2024; Nicotera et al., 2024; Schwartz & Page, 2024; Smith-Marek et al., 2018).

Another relevant aspect that was identified in the narrative accounts was the increased connection between body and mind through movement. Participants described these practices as opportunities to tune into their bodily sensations, breathing, and inner states, mindfully reconnecting with their bodies. Activities such as yoga or dance were described as spaces to be present and ground themselves in their bodies. This process aligns with existing literature demonstrating the benefit of physical movement in strengthening the mind-body connection and increasing emotional regulation and self-awareness after sexual assault (Nicotera et al., 2024; Rhodes, 2015). Notably, two participants expressed discomfort when becoming attuned to their bodies during physical movement, underscoring the ambivalence that can arise. Smith-Marek et al. (2018) similarly found that some survivors of sexual assault avoid physical exercise during the initial phase of recovery due to a fear of bodily awareness. This suggests that while physical movement can serve as a powerful tool for reconnecting with the body, the process may initially evoke discomfort, emphasizing the importance of a compassionate and trauma-informed approach to rebuilding the mind-body connection (Smith-Marek et al., 2018).

In addition to strengthening the mind-body connection, physical movement also proved to be a relational and social experience. Several participants described specific people in their lives who introduced or encouraged them to engage in different physical activities. Engaging in movement with others helped reduce feelings of isolation and fostered a renewed sense of safety,

belonging and support. This relational dimension of movement is echoed in recent studies emphasizing the social benefits of group-based practices like yoga and dance in trauma recovery, particularly in promoting social connection and decreasing feelings of alienation (Higgins et al., 2024; Nicotera et al., 2024; Schwartz & Page, 2024; Smith-Marek et al., 2018).

Together, these findings demonstrate that physical movement is an embodiment practice of resistance and reclamation. In environments where trauma, shame, or disconnection have restricted one's relationship with the body, physical movement can become a counter-narrative—one that affirms bodily presence, agency, and worth. Whether through solo practices or communal spaces, movement allowed participants to express care, assert control, and reimagine their bodies as sources of vitality, connection, and healing.

Unique Contributions to the Literature

As outlined in the preceding chapter, eight themes were identified across the participants' narrative accounts: (1) Being Perceived and Scrutinized; (2) Influence of Social Media and Societal Norms; (3) Disconnection; (4) Body Discomfort; (5) Connection with Others; (6) Body Comfort; (7) Physical Movement Facilitating Healing; and (8) Renewal and Reclamation. The findings of this research provide valuable insights into how these women experience embodiment throughout the healing process after sexual assault and the influence of emotional, physical, and sociocultural factors. The participants described experiencing disconnection from their bodies and others as a means of coping with the trauma, marked by dissociation, denial, and self-blame. Over time, this disconnection gave way to a gradual reconnection, where these women began to reclaim their sense of self and body comfort. As they moved through the healing process, the women started to cultivate a deeper appreciation for their bodies and self-worth. Physical movement seemed to play a pivotal role in this journey, serving as an avenue that

facilitated healing and helped women become grounded in their bodies. The findings demonstrate that healing after sexual assault is a dynamic process that involves emotional and physical transformation, as these women worked toward renewal and reclamation of their bodies and the self.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study to apply an embodiment framework to examine the healing process after sexual assault, offering a novel perspective on the intersection of sociocultural factors and bodily experiences. Through the use of an embodiment framework, this study was able to capture the significant role that sociocultural context, such as social media, cultural norms, and religion, plays in shaping women's experiences of embodiment throughout the healing process after sexual assault. The participants described how the following factors influenced the way they perceived, adjusted, and experienced their bodies. Mia's experience uniquely revealed the tension of being caught between conflicting cultural norms, as she navigated the contrasting expectations from Western and Southeast Asian cultural norms regarding how a Vietnamese woman should present herself. Through an embodiment framework, this study provided a lens to explore more closely how sociocultural factors intersect with the healing process after sexual assault, revealing the complexities of how sociocultural factors shape women's experiences of embodiment throughout the healing process after sexual assault.

Another unique contribution of this research to the literature is the depiction of the processes of reclamation and renewal in the healing journey after sexual assault. The participants in this study described how their healing was closely tied to reconnecting with their bodies and finding comfort within themselves, further supported by being around safe and supportive individuals. Many women spoke of feeling as though something had been taken from them after the sexual assaults. Depicted by the words of one participant the idea of "sewing together a new

version" of oneself reflects the intricacy of this transformation—a process of integrating the past into a new "self." Many participants noted that healing was not a linear process, but rather a gradual journey, marked by moments of disconnection and body discomfort before finally reclaiming their bodies and sense of self. There was also a notable shift in the narrative accounts demonstrated by self-compassion and learning to trust oneself again. This process involved accepting what happened, shifting blame away from themselves, and starting to reconcile with the past to move forward. These findings add valuable insight to the literature by emphasizing the unique processes of renewal and reclamation in the healing journey after sexual assault, offering a deeper understanding of what has been less explored in existing studies.

Implications for Counselling Psychology

This section outlines key implications for counselling psychology based on the study's findings, emphasizing how therapeutic practices can better support survivors of sexual assault through integrative, body-centred approaches and by addressing the relational and societal contexts related to trauma. The findings suggest that integrating traditional talk therapy with movement-based or somatic therapies could be beneficial for individuals healing from sexual trauma, specifically sexual assault. Participants described how reconnecting with their bodies through physical movement, such as yoga, dance, and sports, contributed to their sense of empowerment, autonomy, and bodily agency. These findings support existing literature advocating for the incorporation of body-centred approaches in therapy to help clients address the physical and emotional disconnection that often results from sexual trauma (Stirling & Andrews, 2022; Weingarten et al., 2023). Counsellors might consider collaborating with somatic therapists or introducing movement-based practices into therapy, such as guided breathing

exercises or gentle stretching, to help clients re-establish a sense of safety and comfort in their bodies (Price & Hooven, 2018; Weingarten et al., 2023).

Compassion-focused therapy (CFT), and self-compassion in general, are relevant approaches for supporting survivors of sexual assault, particularly in addressing feelings of shame and self-criticism that can accompany their experiences (Bhuptani & Messman, 2022; McLean et al., 2018). Using CFT or cultivating self-compassion can help clients reduce harsh self-judgments and develop a kinder, more understanding relationship with themselves (Bhuptani & Messman, 2022; McLean et al., 2018). This therapeutic approach aligns with the experiences of participants who described the importance of reframing negative self-perceptions and cultivating a sense of acceptance and care toward their bodies. Counsellors can integrate CFT and self-compassion techniques such as compassionate imagery, mindfulness, and self-soothing exercises to help clients develop a more compassionate inner voice, ultimately supporting their emotional healing and mind-body connection (Bhuptani & Messman, 2022; McLean et al., 2018).

Additionally, exploring clients' cultural contexts and belief systems is essential in providing culturally responsive care. Participants in this study articulated how cultural messages about beauty, gender roles, and sexual violence influenced their self-perception and healing process. For example, some women had a subconscious assumption that sexual assault only happens to "pretty people," which later intersected with their personal experiences. Research indicates that attitudes toward sexual assault can vary across cultures, with more traditional societies exhibiting higher levels of rape myth acceptance compared to more egalitarian cultures (Hill & Marshall, 2018). As this study focused on the experience of women, counsellors should create space for clients to explore how societal and cultural expectations surrounding

womanhood within their specific context impact their relationship with their bodies and perceptions of sexual assault. This includes acknowledging the pressure some clients may feel to adjust their appearance or behaviour to meet cultural standards. By validating these experiences and helping clients explore their current narratives, therapists can support clients in developing a more authentic and empowered sense of self throughout the healing process.

In line with the developmental theory of embodiment, the constructivist paradigm, and the critical feminist lens guiding this research, extending the focus of counselling efforts to include those to whom survivors of sexual assault disclose, such as friends, partners, and family members, offers valuable opportunities for strengthening support systems. As demonstrated by the present study's findings and past research, part of the healing process after sexual assault unfolds within relational contexts, and the initial reactions from others can impact the victim's sense of safety, shame, or empowerment (Bhuptani & Messman, 2022; Catton et al., 2023; DeCou et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2024). Creating resources that provide psychoeducation for members of these support networks can enhance their ability to respond with empathy and attunement, thereby supporting the victim's healing process. This approach reflects a shift from viewing healing as an individual task to understanding it as relational and socially embedded. Potential resources could include community-based workshops on sexual assault and supportive communication, short-term consultation services, and the development of peer-led support groups. Such initiatives acknowledge the wider societal and interpersonal dimensions of sexual assault, reinforcing the need for systemic responses that extend beyond the individual.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

While the purpose of narrative inquiry is not to make generalizations, a key strength of this study lies in the depth and richness of the data, which aligns with the purpose of this approach. The collaborative and relational nature of the research process further enhanced the study's integrity. The narrative accounts were co-created through an iterative process in which participants provided feedback and revisions, ensuring that their perspectives were accurately represented. Notably, several participants requested modifications to their narrative accounts, such as altering sentence structures, to protect their anonymity and avoid potential identification by perpetrators. Edits were made to incorporate their feedback, enhancing the authenticity and verisimilitude of the narrative accounts. This collaborative process not only honoured the uniqueness of each participant's journey but also helped build richer, more authentic insights that might have been overlooked in quantitative research methods.

Another strength of this study was the diverse sample, which included eight different participants identifying as White, White/Irish, Vietnamese, Chinese Canadian, and Middle Eastern/White. This diversity expands on previous literature on sexual violence that has predominantly focused on White women's experiences. Though all participants were living in Western society during the interviews, two participants described navigating expectations informed by collectivist cultural values. By intentionally seeking a diverse sample, this study was able to provide insight into how cultural norms, family expectations, and societal perceptions uniquely shaped participants' experiences of embodiment throughout the healing process after sexual assault.

Limitations

Although the intention was to recruit women who had experienced sexual assault, a limitation of this study was that the majority of participants described multiple sexual assaults, including experiences that may be classified as sexual abuse. In Canada, the legal term "sexual assault" encompasses sexual abuse (R. v. D., 2002), but in a clinical context, these terms are often differentiated from one another. Some participants used the terms sexual assault and sexual abuse interchangeably, and given that the study did not probe for details about the nature of the sexual assaults, these distinctions were not clarified. This was evident in the participants' experiences, such as when one participant described being inappropriately touched but stated that it did not impact her relationship with her body. This response contrasted with other participants who reported multiple sexual assaults or ongoing sexual abuse, which impacted their experiences of embodiment more significantly.

Another limitation of this study pertains to the interview format. Only one interview was conducted in person, with the remainder taking place virtually. Although virtual interviews were effective for many participants, they may have limited the depth of connection and comfort that can occur through in-person rapport, particularly given the sensitive nature of the research topic. Subtle nonverbal cues—often critical in trauma counselling—may have been less discernible through virtual interviews.

Religious affiliation was also a notable factor in the sample. Five of the eight participants identified with a form of Christian faith, offering meaningful insight into the intersection of faith and the healing process after sexual trauma. This outcome was not anticipated or intended, as participants were not specifically recruited based on their religious beliefs. Although not necessarily a limitation, a greater representation of diverse belief frameworks would have offered

a broader understanding of women's experiences of embodiment throughout the healing process after sexual assault.

Future Research

The findings of this study offer valuable contributions to the field of psychology and carry important implications for shaping future research on sexual trauma and women's experiences of embodiment. Future research should consider the impact of multiple sexual assaults and varying degrees of severity on the healing process. There may be value in screening participants for the severity, type, and context of their experiences—including distinctions between sexual assault and abuse, the age at which the trauma occurred, and the frequency of such experiences—to gain a more nuanced understanding of how different forms of sexual trauma influence experiences of embodiment. The studies that informed the DTE have demonstrated that experiences of embodiment fluctuate across the life span, with unique strengths and vulnerabilities emerging in relation to age, cultural context, and bodily autonomy. Incorporating these variables into future research designs would help avoid generalizations and ensure that distinct contextual factors are adequately explored and addressed.

Further investigation into the experiences of individuals from specific cultural backgrounds is also warranted, particularly regarding experiences of embodiment after sexual assault. Exploring the experiences of individuals from multicultural or bicultural backgrounds, or navigating conflicting cultural norms, as highlighted in this study, could provide more nuanced insights into the interplay between cultural frameworks and healing. Additionally, examining the role of specific religious or spiritual beliefs would enrich understanding of how these frameworks inform meaning-making, coping mechanisms, and pathways to healing after sexual trauma. These considerations would contribute to the broader discussion of how diverse cultural

and religious experiences shape experiences of embodiment and the sense of self after sexual trauma.

Lastly, future research could further explore the themes of renewal and reclamation of the body post-sexual trauma. While this study touched on the process of reconnection with the body, further exploration of this theme is needed to better understand the various ways women experience renewal and reclamation throughout the healing process. Research dedicated to examining the strategies individuals use to reclaim their bodies, the role of trust and safety in this process, and the long-term outcomes of such reclamation would provide a richer understanding of the healing process after sexual assault. Exploring these dimensions could help identify more targeted interventions for women seeking to restore a positive relationship with their bodies after experiencing sexual assault.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research study was to examine women's experiences of embodiment throughout the healing process after sexual assault. Participants' narrative accounts and identified themes illustrate how societal influences, including cultural norms, media portrayals, and community support, significantly shape women's relationships with their bodies and their healing journeys. Many women initially described a profound sense of disconnection from themselves and others, accompanied by feelings of shame, self-blame, and denial. Yet alongside this disconnection was a quiet and persistent desire to reclaim and rebuild. In the later stages of healing, women described moments of emotional and physical reconnection, including sharing about their experiences and regaining comfort in their bodies. Physical movement—whether through yoga, dance, or sport—served as a means of grounding, reconnecting, and resistance. These forms of movement were often situated within supportive relational contexts, helping

women experience their bodies as sources of strength, vitality, and healing. The findings emphasize the importance of the mind-body connection, self-compassion, social empowerment, and renewal and reclamation in the healing process. By revealing the multifaceted and non-linear nature of healing after sexual assault, this study offers valuable insights into how women navigate their emotional and physical journeys, reclaiming bodily autonomy. Ultimately, this research provides a nuanced perspective on the role of embodiment throughout the healing process after sexual assault, with implications for therapeutic practices and future research in this field. Lastly, the knowledge presented in this study comes from honouring the stories of women who courageously shared their experiences, ensuring that their voices continue to shape and inform our understanding of the healing process after sexual assault. These women's stories challenge dominant discourses on sexual trauma, reminding us that healing is not necessarily about returning to one's former self, but a process characterized by resistance, reconnection, and reclaiming oneself.

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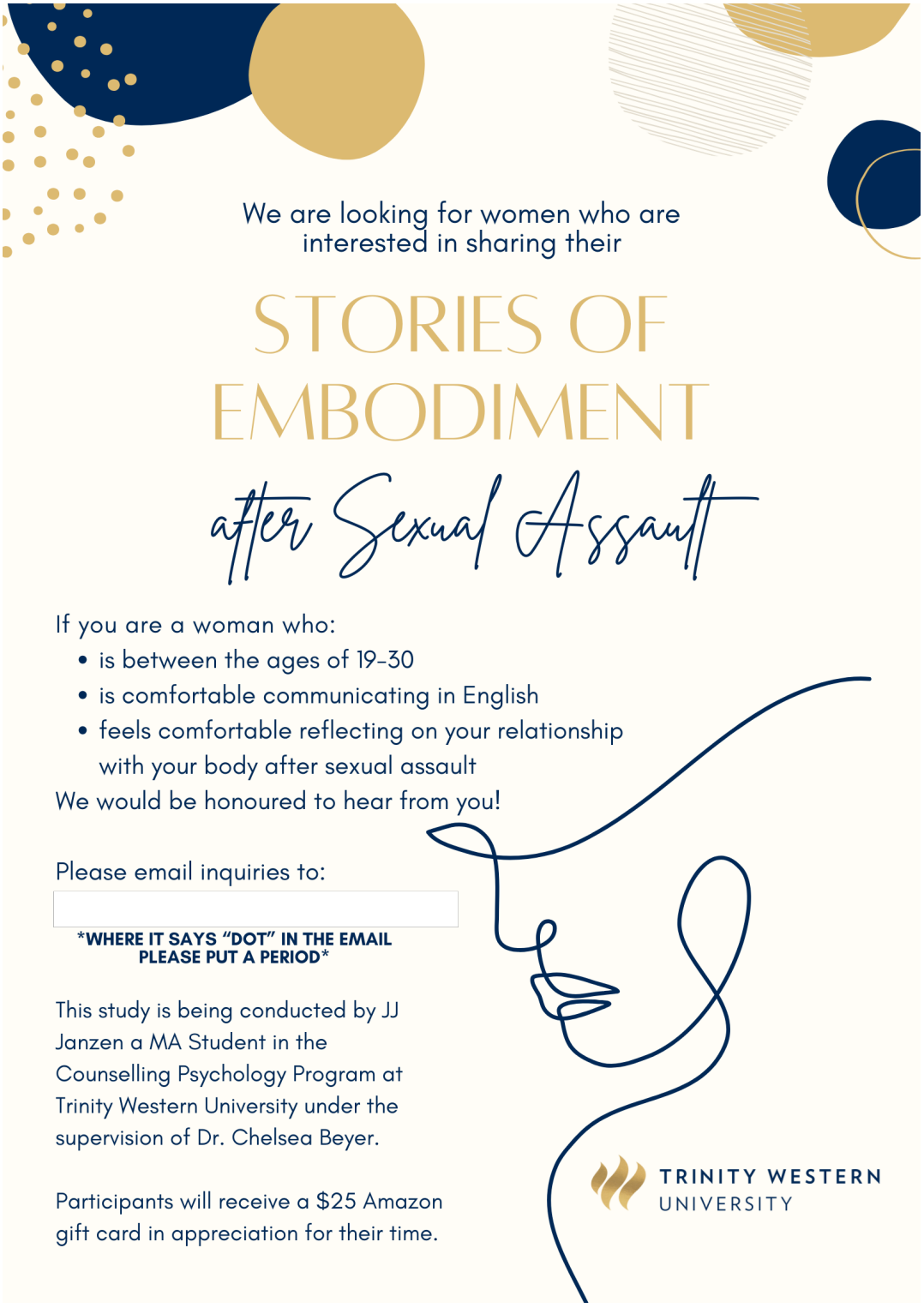
APPENDIX A: Recruitment Poster



APPENDIX B: Digital Screening Questionnaire

Hello, my name is JJ Janzen and I am a master's student in the counselling psychology program at Trinity Western University. Thank you for taking the time to reach out and express your interest in participating in this research study. This research study is part of my thesis and is conducted under the supervision of Dr. Chelsea Beyer.

The purpose of this study is to learn more about women's experiences of embodiment after sexual assault through the healing process. The term embodiment refers to the way that we live in and experience our body. The study involves two confidential interviews, each lasting about one to two hours, which will be recorded. These interviews can take place either at a private space on the Trinity Western Langley Campus or via Zoom. The interview is not an interrogation but rather a collaborative and interactive process designed to explore and understand your stories and experiences. My role is to provide a space for you to share while supporting and facilitating this process.

During the first interview, I will ask questions about your experience of embodiment after the sexual assault and your experience of embodiment through the healing process to the present. I would like to preface that you will not be asked any questions about the sexual assault. Afterwards, I will take the time to review the interview and look for initial themes and patterns throughout your story. During the second interview, I will share my initial findings and collaborate with you to revise any of the themes or patterns. Your input during this time is invaluable for accurately reflecting and capturing the essence of your story. As a gesture of gratitude for your participation in this study you will receive a $25 gift card. This gift card will be provided regardless of whether you choose to withdraw from the study.

To assess your fit with the study, please take the time to fill out this questionnaire. All of the information you provide will remain confidential. If you are not selected to participate in this research study your questionnaire will be destroyed. Please take the time to answer each of the following questions.

Questions		
Are you 19 years of age or older?	Yes	No
Do you identify as a woman?	Yes	No
Are you comfortable communicating in English?	Yes	No
Have you experienced sexual assault and did it occur at least one year ago?	Yes	No
Do you feel that your experience aligns with the study's definition of sexual assault: **"In this research study, sexual assault will be defined as non-consensual sexual behaviours that violate an individual's autonomy and bodily integrity. It includes any** form **of unwanted**	Yes	No

sexual contact, ranging from sexualized touching to attempted or completed penetration, irrespective of gender or sexual orientation. The central tenet of this definition is the absence of consent, underscoring that the victim did not provide voluntary agreement to engage in the sexual activity."		
Do you feel that your experience aligns with this definition: **"…repeated non-consensual sexual acts, often occurring over a period of time, by someone in a position of power or trust…"**	Yes	No
Do you feel willing and able to discuss your experience of embodiment with a female researcher?	Yes	No
Are you available to commit to two interviews, each lasting about one to two hours.	Yes	No
If you feel comfortable, please briefly describe your ethnicity.		
If possible, please briefly describe how you understand embodiment.		

APPENDIX C: Informed Consent Form

Department of Counselling Psychology
Trinity Western University
22500 University Dr
Langley, BC V2Y 1Y1

Date

Reclaiming the Neglected Body: Women's Narratives of Embodiment after Sexual Assault
Letter of Informed Consent

Purpose/Objectives of the Study
My name is JJ Janzen and I am a master's student in the counselling psychology program at Trinity Western University. Dr. Chelsea Beyer is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at Trinity Western University and is the supervisor of this research study. This research study is part of my thesis. The purpose of this study is to learn more about women's experiences of embodiment after sexual assault through the healing process.

Procedures Involved in the Research
By participating in this research study you will be asked to engage in two confidential interviews, plus an optional group discussion, each lasting about one to two hours, which will be recorded. These interviews can take place either at a private space on the Trinity Western Langley Campus or via Zoom.

During the first interview, I will ask questions about your experience of embodiment after the sexual assault and your experience of embodiment through the healing process to the present. Please know that you will not be asked any questions about the sexual assault. If not already chosen, you will be able to choose a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. To protect your privacy, this pseudonym will be used and all identifying details will be omitted.

During the second follow-up interview, you will review your narrative and provide feedback. It is an opportunity for both of us to collaborate to make revisions, ensuring that the findings accurately reflect your experiences. Following, you will be invited to an optional online Zoom group interview with the other participants to discuss the overall findings of the study and provide feedback.

Potential Benefits to Participants and/or to Society

If you have not had such a chance before, this study provides a space for your voice and story to be received in a non-judgemental environment. Another benefit of participating in this study may

be the opportunity for consciousness raising, prompting you to consider how political, societal, and cultural factors have influenced your self-perception and experience of embodiment. Becoming more aware of these contextual factors may relieve any lingering self-blame and help you understand that your experiences are also shaped by wider systemic influences.

The study's focus on the experiences of women post-sexual assault can raise awareness within the community about the experience of embodiment through the healing process. By revealing the impact of sexual trauma on individuals' relationships with their bodies, the research can provide a deeper understanding of these matters and promote empathy and support for survivors of sexual assault. Through women's stories, the study can empower participants and contribute to a sense of collective strength and solidarity. This empowerment can extend to the wider community and encourage others to share their stories and seek support.

Potential Risks or Discomfort to Participants

The risk level of this study is minimal. Although you will not be asked to recount the sexual assault, you will still be asked to share experiences of embodiment after the event which may evoke distress or emotional discomfort. Should you experience any discomfort or distress, the interview will pause, and you can decide whether to resume when you feel ready or withdraw from the study entirely. The first interview will conclude with a debrief of the process. You will receive the gift card and a debrief form with a list of mental health resources regardless of whether you completed the interview.

Participation

Participation in the study is voluntary and you can withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. During the interviews, you can decline to answer any questions if you do not wish to. Furthermore, you are entitled to remove your data from the study anytime during the analysis phase and all of it will be destroyed. To withdraw your data, please reach out to JJ Janzen by 01/01/2025. Data withdrawal will not be possible after this date due to the completion of the analysis for the final thesis project. All your personal information will be kept confidential, with identifying details anonymized in the final project.

Confidentiality

To ensure your privacy, identifying information will be stored separately from the interview data, including your name and contact details. Your name and all identifying details will be kept confidential. You will select a pseudonym for the use in transcripts and research findings. Electronic data will be encrypted and stored on a password-protected computer, accessible only to the principal investigator and primary researcher. All data will be destroyed after 5 years.

There are several limitations to confidentiality as required by the duty to report in certain instances related to your safety and that of others. JJ may need to break confidentiality if there is a disclosure of (1) risk of harm to self or others and (2) abuse or neglect of a vulnerable population (e.g., children, elderly people, etc.).

The final report, without any identifying information, may be shared with other researchers, and laboratories, and be posted to an online data repository.

Remuneration/Compensation
As a gesture of gratitude for your participation in this study, you will receive a $25 Amazon e-gift card. This gift card will be emailed at the end of the first interview regardless of whether you choose to withdraw from the study.

Study Results
The results of this study may be published as part of the graduate thesis, in academic journals and presented at conferences. Should you wish to learn about the results from the study please contact JJ Janzen in April 2025 upon completion of the study. You may contact her at [redacted]

CONTACT FOR INFORMATION ABOUT THE STUDY
Should you have any questions or would like further information on the study please contact the principal investigator via the contact information below. The ethics of this research project have been reviewed and approved by the TWU Human Research Ethics Board (HREB 24G10)

Principal Investigator email address: [redacted]

Supervisor email address: [redacted]

CONTACT FOR CONCERNS
If you have any concerns regarding your rights or welfare as a participant in this research study, please contact the Ethics Grants Compliance Officer at 604-513-2167 or HREB@twu.ca.
The ethics of this research project have been reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Board (HREB 24G10).

Consent
Your signature indicates that you have had your questions about the study answered to your satisfaction and have received a copy of this consent form for your own records. Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. Your signature below indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

_____ _____

Signature of Research Participant Signature Date

_____

Printed Name of the Research Participant

APPENDIX D: Demographic Questionnaire

Please take the time to answer the following questions. All of the information you provide will be kept confidential. The purpose of this questionnaire is to contextualize your story.

1. Name: _____
2. Age: _____
3. Identified Ethnicity: _____
4. Marital/Relationship Status: _____
5. Age at the time of Sexual Assault: _____

APPENDIX E: Interview Guide

Participant Pseudonym: _____
Date: _____
Time: _____
Informed Consent: _____
Demographic Questionnaire: _____

Introduction Statement: Thank you for taking the time to be a part of this research study. As you know, this research study aims to learn more about women's experiences of embodiment after sexual assault. Embodiment is the way that we inhabit our body and how we engage with the world through our body. Although there is a lot of information about the consequences of sexual assault and supporting evidence for trauma-focused therapies, the body and the experiences of the body are often overlooked. I want to better understand the experiences of embodiment after sexual assault, so we developed the present study's research question: *How do women experience embodiment throughout the healing process after sexual assault?*

Please remember that I will not be asking any questions about the sexual assault. To create a safe and supportive environment you have the right to decline answering questions that you are not comfortable speaking to. Do you have any questions?

Before we begin, I recognize that you are coming to share your story and experiences with a stranger. I would like to take the opportunity to briefly share my position in relation to this research topic so that you may know who is sitting across from you.

My position as a researcher is influenced by my personal experiences and background, which shape my approach to studying women's experiences of embodiment following sexual assault. This focus is not only a product of my past experiences, academic interests, and work with clients but also my commitment to contribute meaningfully to the discourse on women's mental health. As a researcher and student counsellor, I strive to put the voices of women and marginalized groups at the forefront.

Questions:

1. What drew you to participate in this study?
2. Tell me about your current relationship with your body.

   Probes

   a. What current thoughts or emotions do you have about your body?
   b. Tell me about the level of comfort or discomfort you feel in your body.
   c. In what ways do you notice external or internal factors influencing how you experience or feel in your body?
      i. Cultural, historical, or societal factors
3. Tell me how you felt in your body following the sexual assault.

   Probes

   a. What thoughts, emotions, or sensations did you notice in your body?
      i. What did that feel like in your body?
      ii. What do you remember seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling then?
   b. How connected or disconnected did you feel from others?
   c. Who was involved in that experience?
   d. Has your experience of your body since that time changed? If so, in what ways?
4. Reflecting on your experiences from the time of the assault:
   a. Tell me about a time when you felt uncomfortable in your body.
      i. Tell me about the environment you were in.
      ii. What did that feel like in your body?
      iii. What do you remember seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling then?
      iv. Who was involved in that experience?
   b. Tell me about a time when you felt comfortable in your body.
      i. Tell me about the environment you were in.
      ii. What did that feel like in your body?
      iii. What do you remember seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling then?
      iv. Who was involved in that experience?
5. More broadly, what do you want people to know about young women's experiences of embodiment after sexual assault?
6. Is there any aspect that we have not discussed yet that you believe is important to share about your journey of embodiment?

APPENDIX F: Debrief Form and Resources

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study and to share your experiences with me. I am honoured to have held space for you and a piece of your story.

When all individual interviews are finished, an email will be sent to organize a follow-up interview to be held via Zoom. During this second interview, I will share my initial findings and collaborate with you to revise any of the themes or patterns (e.g., change, reword, remove, etc.). Your input during this time is invaluable for accurately reflecting and capturing the essence of your story.

You are entitled to remove your data from the study anytime during the analysis phase. To withdraw your data, please reach out to JJ Janzen by 01/01/2025. Data withdrawal will not be possible after this date due to the completion of the analysis for the final thesis project. All your personal information will be kept confidential, with identifying details anonymized in the final project.

Should you need additional support please find the list of mental health resources on the second page.

Thank you once again for your participation in this study. If you have any questions and/or concerns, please feel free to contact me at [redacted] my supervisor Dr. Chelsea Beyer at [redacted]

Kind regards,

JJ Janzen

MA Student

Department of Counselling Psychology

Trinity Western University

Mental Health Resources

B.C. Crisis Phone Line:
1-800-784-2433

Metis Crisis Line:
1-833-638-4722

Repose Therapy
604-799-7573
2633 Montrose Ave, Abbotsford

Treehouse Trauma Centre
778-298-9555
9067 Church St, Fort Langley, B.C.

Shoreline Counselling
604-371-4145
23189 Francis Ave #301, Langley Twp

Fraser River Counselling
604-513-2113 ext. 1
Trinity Western University: 22500 University Dr, Langley
St. Dustan's Anglican Church: 3025 264 St, Aldergrove
Central Heights Church: 1661 McCallum Rd, Abbotsford

S.UC.C.E.S.S:
Services available in Cantonese, Mandarin Korean, and Farsi
604-684-1628
28 West Pender Street Vancouver, B.C.

OR

604-468-6000
#2058 – 1163 Pinetree Way Coquitlam, B.C.

APPENDIX G: Follow-Up Interview Guide Questions

Follow-Up Interview Guide

Questions for Research Participants to Consider

Thank you for taking the time to meet again. The purpose of this interview is to review your personal narrative that I have constructed from our initial interview. As we review the narrative together, your feedback, thoughts, and reactions are essential to this analysis, as we want to honour your voice in these stories. Please consider the following questions:

1. **Fairness**: As we review your narrative, do you feel that you have a voice in shaping these discussions? Is there anything that would help you feel more empowered to share your thoughts and contribute to this process?
2. **Ontological Authenticity**: What contextual factors or influences do you think are most significant in shaping your experiences and does the narrative accurately capture them? Are there any political, cultural, or social elements that you feel should be further emphasized?
3. **Educative Authenticity**: How has your involvement in this research and time reading the narrative impacted you or influenced your perspectives?
4. **Catalytic Authenticity**: How does this narrative resonate with your personal experiences? Are there specific moments or themes in the narrative that you believe could inspire action or provoke thought in others?
5. **Tactile Authenticity**: Do you feel that your input and experiences have been accurately represented in this narrative? Do you feel that there are any voices or experiences that may have been overlooked or underrepresented? Is there anything specific you would like to add or modify to ensure your voice and experiences are fully honoured?
6. **Verisimilitude**: Do you find the narrative to appear true or ‘real?’ Is there anything that does not appear true or ‘real?’

APPENDIX H: Group Interview Invitation

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study and to share your experiences with me. I am honoured to have held space for you and a piece of your story.

I am happy to share that all of the individual interviews are completed, and the data has been analyzed. I would like to invite you to join me and the other participants in an online group Zoom interview to review the final themes and overall findings of the study. While this meeting is not mandatory, your participation and feedback are valuable. Please let me know at your earliest convenience if you can attend.

Thank you once again for your participation in this study. If you have any questions and/or concerns, please feel free to contact me at [redacted] or my supervisor Dr. Chelsea Beyer [redacted]

Kind regards,

JJ Janzen

MACP (In Progress)

Department of Counselling Psychology

Trinity Western University