



## **THE PERVASIVENESS OF STUDENT-ON-STUDENT VIOLENCE AT SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES**

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### *Abstract*

*Universities are frequently considered ivory towers where students and staff freely pursue their ambitions in a peaceful environment. Nevertheless, the experiences of students and staff have revealed that violence is commonplace in most universities. Violence is especially pervasive in South African universities, where students and staff sometimes fear for their well-being due to the normalisation of violence in broader society and failures of campus security. Against this background, this study explored the perceptions of the pervasiveness of student-on-student violence and the manifestations thereof in South African universities. Using a mixed-methods approach and an explanatory sequential design, data were collected from students (n=1370) and staff (n=172) using an online survey at 14 universities and semi-structured interviews with students (n=32) and staff (n=4) at three universities. The findings revealed that most student-on-student violence happens in the form of sexual violence, verbal abuse and physical fights, as well as discrimination and isolation. It is imperative to note that other forms of violence were reported, albeit sparsely. Based on these findings, the study recommends, among others, that comprehensive awareness campaigns be implemented to educate students and faculty about the different forms of violence identified, emphasising sexual and verbal abuse, physical fights, discrimination, cyberbullying, armed robberies, theft, and intimate partner violence. Furthermore, it will also be essential to strengthen reporting mechanisms to guarantee confidentiality and accessibility of services for survivors.*

Keywords: abuse; discrimination; higher education; ivory tower; student wellness; violence

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## **Introduction**

The high levels of violence plaguing South Africa's universities are symptomatic of an education system that is under attack and does not reflect the peacefulness and safety often associated with the pursuit of learning (Ajayi et al., 2021; Hughes, 2020). Globally, some of the most prevalent types of student-on-student violence include gender-based violence (GBV), self-harm, vandalism, hazing, cyberbullying, physical bullying and emotional and verbal bullying (Ada et al., 2016; Chakraborty, 2019; Griner et al., 2017; Hamby, 2017; Mvumvu, 2020). These and other forms of violence affect the learning process and instil fear in educators and students at these institutions, calling into question the safety and security of university campuses for all stakeholders involved (Mootz et al., 2019; Scott & Hargreaves, 2015).

Admittedly, the violence plaguing universities has not gone unchecked, as proven by numerous efforts to curb acts of aggression. The success of these attempts, however, remains questionable (Chothia, 2020; Grobler, 2018; Jacobs, 2012; Jansen, 2018). The most prevalent configuration of violence in universities globally is student-on-student violence (Ada et al., 2016; Garg, 2017; Hughes, 2020). This configuration occurs in varying forms, which come into play due to the power dynamics between the victims and the perpetrators (Ada et al., 2016; Scott & Hargreaves, 2015). According to Stockdill and Danico (2012), there is an insistence on viewing universities as 'ivory towers' (idyllic and untarnished by the inequalities of the 'outside world'). Nonetheless, the reality is that violence occurs globally and is so pervasive that it has taken centre stage in academic debates around violence in educational institutions (Deb et al., 2017; Garg, 2017; Hughes, 2020). It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which South African universities are non-violent. This is because South African universities have a history of protests and incidents of violence (oftentimes carried out by security personnel), which have often garnered more attention and research focus.

Violence in universities is complex, and while education institutions can be subjected to violence like vandalism and arson based, they have, in some instances, been identified as being responsible for violence, chiefly through perpetrating authoritarian socialisation and dysfunctional education systems (Gould et al., 2017; Mncube et al., 2022; De Wet, 2016). Accordingly, the perpetrators of violence in universities are numerous, including students, staff and outsiders (Mootz et al., 2019; Grobler, 2018; Jansen, 2018; Tjonneland,

2017; Scott & Hargreaves, 2015). In some cases, universities have been notorious for perpetuating male-controlled environments where women are relegated to the lower echelons of the socioeconomic strata. It is the contention of Mncube et al. (2022) that in much of South Africa, there are social expectations that women should remain submissive to men. It is similarly alarming that by the time young people in South Africa are eligible for university, approximately 35.4% have been victims of violence (Artz et al., 2016), thus resulting in the notion that school violence is potentially graduating into university violence (Hassan & Ageed, 2015; Joseph, 2015; Ntuli, 2015). Despite stringent measures for reduction, such as policies, disciplinary codes and programmes, violence in South African universities remains (Lunneblad & Johansson, 2019; Leoschut & Kafaar, 2017; Artz et al., 2016; Kreigler & Shaw, 2016). The present research study sought to investigate and understand the nature and perceptions of the pervasiveness of student-on-student violence in South African universities in order to begin reducing and ultimately eliminating such violence.

Sameroff's Transactional Model of Development (TMD) is useful for studying violence in education as it denotes that younger people cannot be studied outside of the contexts in which they develop and are located (Burton, 2008; Sameroff, 1975, 1987). Sameroff (1975) asserts that the transactional model is essential for comprehending how nature and nurture interact to produce positive and negative outcomes in children. For Sameroff (1975), development was the cumulative result of the interplay between an individual, their personality traits, family experiences and resources. The TMD is premised on the belief that socialisation amplifies certain childhood characteristics while minimising those characteristics with which a child is born. This means that life experiences shape their behaviour (Jimerson et al., 2006; Sameroff, 2009). As such, the TMD places emphasis on the family as the primary socialisation institution, where children are trained in social skills, norms, values and customs, among others, in line with their family's beliefs (Sameroff, 1987). This has implications for individuals brought up in violent homes with minimal filial affection and involvement.

Sameroff (1975) argues that an individual raised in a home that exudes negative modelling comes to view negative role models as the norm and negative actions as legitimate. This means that a child raised in a setting where violence is used to resolve conflicts and communicate superiority or abuse others is more likely resort to using violence during their lifetime (Burton, 2008; Taylor &

McKeown, 2019). Violence in universities is viewed as a mirror of the broader social reality of violence bedeviling South Africa. Thus, the TMD assists in explaining the violence in universities and why it unfolds in the way it does. The theory sheds light on why individuals brought up in violence-plagued environments typically engage in violence. This is important, especially in light of studies that reveal that victims eventually (in many cases) become perpetrators of violence (Jennings et al., 2012; Posick, 2013). In addition, this would help explain the nature and dynamics of violence exported from those communities from which the staff and students of educational institutions come.

### **Objectives**

To determine how high student-on-student violence is perceived to be at South African universities.

To discover student and staff experiences of student-on-student violence at South African universities.

### **Methods**

#### *Participants*

The participants for the study came from two samples: a qualitative and quantitative sample. In the quantitative phase, using a simple random sampling technique, data were collected from 1370 students and 172 staff across 14 of the 26 public universities in South Africa, while in the qualitative phase, 32 students and four staff members were conveniently sampled at three universities.

#### *Measures*

This study employed a mixed methods approach, as described by Leavy (2017), to explore the perceptions of the pervasiveness of student-on-student violence and the manifestation thereof in South African universities. Within this approach, the study followed Creswell and Creswell's (2018) explanatory sequential design, which entailed collecting and analysing quantitative data, followed up by collecting and analysing qualitative data to help further explain the quantitative results.

#### *Procedure*

In the quantitative phase, the researcher collected data from students and staff using an online survey that examined the perceptions of the pervasiveness

of student-on-student violence. This was done using a five-point Likert scale to determine how students perceived this violence. This Likert scale was self-designed and modelled to explore the perceptions of the pervasiveness of student-on-student violence and the manifestations thereof in South African universities (*see* Appendix A). This was followed by the qualitative phase in which semi-structured interviews were conducted with students and staff to determine the actual forms of violence happening at their campuses and explain the quantitative results.

#### *Data analysis*

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, as explained by Braun and Clarke (2006). Before conducting the study, the researcher applied for and obtained ethical clearance (MNC011MUT01) from the university's Research Ethics Committee.

### **Results**

In the quantitative phase of the study, participants were asked to rate student-on-student violence at their universities. The participants were asked to select a response varying from "very low" to "very high" on a five-point Likert scale, which had an optional response "No violence experienced" for participants that had not experienced violence. Of the 1370 students who responded to this question, 13.7% and 20.5% believed that violence was very low and low, respectively. A further 34.1% thought that student-on-student violence was moderate, while 20.2% and 8.2% signalled that violence was respectively high and very high. The remaining 3.4% of the students declared that they had not experienced or witnessed student-on-student violence. In the staff survey, 172 respondents responded to this question, of which 8.1% and 30.2% believed that violence was very low and low, respectively. A further 32% indicated moderate violence, while 22.1% and 4.1% reported high and very high incidences of student-on-student violence. The remaining 3.5% of the respondents attested that they had not experienced or witnessed student-on-student violence. Figure 1 below presents the results on student-on-student violence in South African universities.

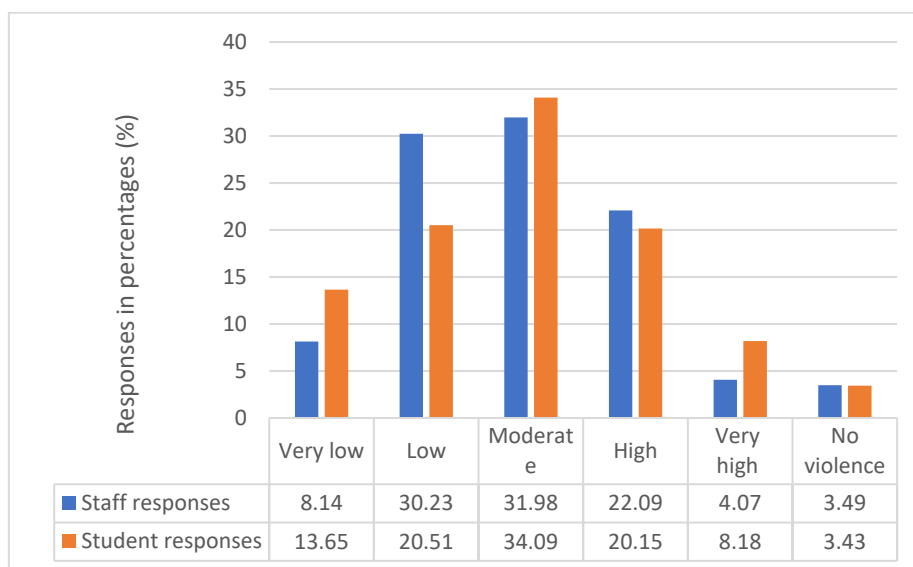


Figure 1. Perceptions of student-on-student violence

The above results reveal that violence is happening in universities at varying rates. The results indicate that most students and staff believe that student-on-student violence at their universities is moderate - this suggests that the violence is seen as being neither exceptionally high nor low. This is troubling for institutions entrusted with the mandate to equip and train students by preparing them for the world of work. The fact that only a small selection of the participants believed that there was no violence is troubling because universities are often viewed as sanctuaries of peace that promote diversity and community (Garg, 2017; Hughes, 2020; Stockdill & Danico, 2012).

In the qualitative phase, participants' responses confirmed the findings of the quantitative survey. Results from the qualitative phase suggest that student-on-student violence is the most pervasive form at their institutions. The findings revealed that violence among students is experienced as sexual violence, physical fighting and verbal abuse. The pursuant section offers a more detailed interrogation of how student-on-student violence is experienced in South African universities.

#### *Sexual violence*

In detailing experiences of student-on-student sexual violence, participants reported that while sexual violence affects all students, female and

non-binary students are more susceptible to this form of violence primarily because it has a gendered basis. A case can be drawn from a student who noted that sexual violence is rife during the registration period, when students have no allocated residences - especially for female first-year students. The student recounted:

*There is student violence here... it happens when new students are registering. I can say there, because of a lack of knowledge, the seniors take advantage and sell them promises on the condition that the new student sleeps with the older ones. This just happens for female students; they are sexually abused by those who know their way around the institution... (Student 18, Uni 1)*

Participants highlighted that sexual violence also happens in intimate partner relationships between students and was somewhat difficult to curtail. This was depicted by Student 4 from Uni 3, who made the following comments:

*There was once sexual violence which happened here between a male and a female student – these people were dating in fact...we then heard that the female student alleged that she had been raped by her boyfriend. The alleged perpetrator said he didn't rape her, and that they were dating in fact. The committee did its investigations but failed to make a decision on the evidence presented. The matter was then taken to the police where a rape case was opened. We already had issues with GBV at the university at that time. What I am trying to raise here is that since women have been in the spotlight of being victimised by males, there is a high incidence of GBV. It keeps on getting worse – there are lots of men abusing women... (Student 4, Uni 3)*

Student 1 from Uni 2 further indicated that sexual violence is experienced frequently by students at that university. The student lamented how gender was central to the experiences of violence, insisting that:

*The level of violence against women by men is really high on campus. Everyone knows the people who have been raped. Everyone knows the story of a girl who was shot by her boyfriend in res. In the first year, I lived in res, and my neighbour - the person I interacted with the most in res...became a national figure after she was raped by her boyfriend and then she committed suicide...We don't know how to stop it. (Student 1, Uni 2)*

Lecturer 1 from Uni 1 recounted the following incident:

*I have heard of rape cases – especially prior to the pandemic when there were those bashes where a lot of alcohol was consumed, and the poor security setup did not help. At some point, after every bash, there would be reports of a student being raped, typically a female student being taken advantage of. I think, in one instance, there was a lady who got gang-raped by some males. The case just died a natural death, or maybe it was finalised, but we never got to hear more about it. I think female students are the ones at the highest risk here. (Lecturer 1, Uni 1)*

#### *Verbal abuse*

The findings of the study further revealed that verbal abuse is experienced between students at universities. Student 7 from Uni 1 commented as follows:

*...there is a lot of verbal abuse...in residences, there is a lot of competition in terms of clothing, so if I come from a poor background where I cannot afford a lot of clothes, other students may start giving me unpleasant names. Because of this, I chose to stay outside residences because students don't really know the consequences of their verbal abuse. Sometimes some people end up committing suicide because they have nobody on their side... Students abuse other students a lot. (Student 7, Uni 1)*

Verbal abuse was also noted to have undertones of homophobia, as revealed by other students who highlighted the lasting impacts of this type of verbal abuse. Student 5 from Uni 3 recalled:

*...it was after working hours, there were no students and no lecturers, and we stayed on campus...the discussion we were having turned to my sexual orientation...basically they were asking "Do your parents know that you are gay?", "Don't you want to have children?" [...] "Maybe you need to be put into a room with a prostitute or sex worker with a huge penis and the penis to harm you" – basically corrective rape, that I will be raped by this man for me to become heterosexual. This was communicated verbally and that had psychological and emotional trauma – these were my friends and people who were part of the students' society ... (Student 5, Uni 3)*

The participants also revealed that this verbal abuse has become normalised at their universities, and this was a cause for concern. An example is Student 11 from Uni 1, who highlighted how verbal abuse happened regularly at university residences. The student recounted:

*I used to have a neighbour who would always fight with the girlfriend, and they would always verbally assault one another. This is common in student romantic relationships. (Student 11, Uni 1)*

The preceding recollection suggests that violence has become normalised and does not seem to get the attention it warrants. A transgender student also commented on how their identity was central to the verbal abuse they experienced by noting:

*[I experience] a lot of instances of microaggressions like name-calling and slurs. There are also ones which are not necessarily queer-oriented...There is no safe space for us [transgender community] to live on campus. Students just don't seem to care about the results of their verbal abuse – they just throw words at others without thinking of the impact... (Student 1, Uni 2)*

#### *Physical fights*

The findings of this study revealed that physical fights between students were also a problem in universities. Although male students were the most involved demographic in this form of violence, some female students were noted to be involved in fights. Some participants believed that the majority of physical fights they witnessed were characterised by alcohol consumption. This was encapsulated in the views of Student 8 from Uni 1, who commented:

*I think for me, the main problem is that we witness most violence when we go out and drink alcohol. That is where most fights happen; no sober person can just wake up and go beat up someone...but after drinking, that is when someone can get the guts to go and fight with someone. You can also recruit your friends and tell them to help you go and beat someone. I know that it happens a lot at this university. (Student 8, Uni 1)*

Similar experiences of violence were also noted at Uni 3, where Student 3 revealed that drunken arguments at the university often resulted in violence. The student explained:

*I think here it is basically violence between students. Most of the time, it starts when students get intoxicated with alcohol. In that process of having small gatherings where you drink, conflicts arise from time to time. It often leads to physical fights and confrontations once people are drunk. Most of the time this happens when alcohol is involved, then conflict arises, and*

*people are not able to resolve their issues, which leads to physical fights. (Student 3, Uni 3)*

The perceptions of the pervasiveness of physical fights at universities were further underscored by participants who revealed that physical fights often degenerated into the use of weapons. Some of the weapons, participants highlighted, include guns, knives, sharp objects, metal bars and frozen water bottles. Student 19 from Uni 1 made the following comment:

*...between students, we see violence majorly when students are drunk. Some will stab one another over a minor issue like dating someone's girlfriend. So, when you are drunk and I meet you, you will fight back and try to get a reputation - I will also fight back and then it becomes a big issue. Issues, for example, stabbing and gunning each other down can happen. (Student 19, Uni 1)*

Incidents of fighting between students at university residences were also reported. Whereas in most cases, male students are the ones who engage in fighting, the experience of Lecturer 1 from Uni 2 revealed that female students also engaged in fighting. The lecturer recounted:

*Obviously, I have seen violence between students usually in the form of physical fights. I can recall one moment in the girls' hostel - two students were fighting. It was a physical fight...I think it was on a Saturday night or so. Besides that, it was quite peaceful, I must say. (Lecturer 1, Uni 2)*

#### *Discrimination and social isolation*

Results from this study revealed that although universities are meant to be inclusive, South African institutions continue to grapple with discrimination and social isolation. A case in point can be drawn from Student 2 from Uni 3, who commented:

*...violence among students which is mainly caused by cultural differences...My institution is mostly dominated by the Xhosas, so when you contest for a role there, people pass remarks such as "He is just a boy and not a man"...it basically comes down to circumcision...tribal issues when practices in my tribe are different from those in this province... It is now a psychological thing where as a Sotho person at my university, I would rather not run for leadership roles because I know that I will not be supported since I am seen as an 'outsider' who is not part of this community. So, psychologically, I am being deprived. (Student 2, Uni 3)*

These sentiments were also corroborated by participants who further revealed that sexual orientation and socioeconomic background were targets of discrimination. To this end, Student 9 from Uni 1 explained:

*We have some lesbians and gays here; those are the most common victims of violence. Also, one's background can influence victimhood – everyone doesn't want to associate with you; they just ignore you. Actually, you won't find any help if you don't have anything in your hand. Some people used to drop out because of their background. I have two students that I know who left because of violence. (Student 9, Uni 1)*

Similar experiences were also noted at Uni 2, where Student 1 recounted:

*In my experience, and the experiences of those around me, student-on-student violence has a very large gender and sexuality motivation. So, a lot of students coming from conservative backgrounds – religious backgrounds, who have been told that things like homosexuality are wrong, are coming in and meeting people who are queer for the first time. A lot of them are defensive...or think that they think that we need to be fixed or changed or just eradicated, I guess. I have had friends who have been beaten up for being gay or being perceived to be gay. I know of people who have been raped because of their gender or sexuality. (Student 1, Uni 2)*

While the findings suggest that most student-on-student violence involves sexual violence, verbal abuse, discrimination and isolation and physical fights, it is imperative to note that other forms of violence were also reported, albeit sparsely. Such experiences involved forms of violence such as cyber violence, which involved cyberbullying. A damning example can be drawn from a student who revealed that some students stole other students' online passwords, maliciously taking tests on their behalf and intentionally failing these tests. Incidents of robberies and theft were also reported - including an account of a student who was robbed by other students armed with knives on campus. This suggests that campus security is a concern that requires urgent attention. In addition, there were also inferences of intimate partner violence, including the experience of a student whose neighbour in the university residence was reported to be fighting incessantly with his partner. Finally, another student reported being bullied and chased out of a shared room by a student who was an alleged gangster. This student noted that his food was being forcibly taken away and his living space had been invaded. It

is alarming that the majority of experiences of violence were reported to be happening on university premises where students are supposed to be safe to pursue their academic aspirations.

## **Discussion**

In light of the preceding findings, assessing these findings in terms of the theoretical framework underpinning the study and the available literature in this regard is essential. Several studies undertaken in varied contexts to understand how violence is experienced between university students appear to corroborate the current study's findings. In most contexts, perceived trappings of power are seen as aiding the perpetrators and silencing the victims into subjection (Pörhölä et al., 2020). This suggests that the violence experienced in universities is symptomatic of violence experienced in the broader South African context. To this end, Kanjiri and Nomngcoyiya (2021) argue that violence witnessed in South African universities - in their specific case, GBV - is rooted in the entrapments of a society that is failing to combat violence. They further argue that institutions of higher learning are a mirror of society and that if GBV is to be eradicated, women need to be empowered (Kanjiri & Nomngcoyiya, 2021). One can further extend this line of argument by noting the extremely high incidence of sexual violence in South Africa, as seen in the report by StatsSA (2018), which reveals that as many as 138 women are raped per 100 000 in South Africa. Over 50 000 sexual offences were reported to South African Police Services in 2018 alone. It is vital to consider Sameroff's (1978) TMD, which argues that delinquent behaviour is sometimes learnt through modelling behaviour and learning from the environment from which one is raised. The violence in the broader South African society thus manifests as an extension of community violence through the process of normalisation (Burton, 2008; Meisels & Shonkoff, 2000; Sameroff, 1975).

It should be noted that discrimination and social isolation were also reported, including homophobia, transphobia, tribalism and classism. This violence is based on identities and is considered to significantly impact one's mental and physical health because it has to do with the 'othering' of individuals and groups of people (Huang & Hashim, 2022). Hosek et al. (2021) reveal that university students suffer violence centred on identities such as race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, class, ability, body size, organisational affiliation and other such aspects. This is supported by the varied experiences of violence between students reported in the qualitative phase above. This finds credence in Sameroff

(1975), who argued that an individual surrounded by negative models tends to esteem those negative role models as enviable and negative actions as legitimate. This foundational argument on which the TMD was founded agrees with the findings presented above, where participants repeatedly echoed that the environment in which one is nurtured contributes to the violence happening in universities. One can consider how ethnic constructs of masculinity, which vary from one tribe to another, have, in some cases, resulted in violent attitudes towards minority groups - the case of a Sotho student who bewailed being referred to and treated as "a boy" because he had not fulfilled traditional Xhosa rites of circumcision as a rite of passage into manhood serves as an instructional example here. Thus, the notion of universities being 'ivory towers' is misleading - perhaps this is the utopian outlook that institutions of learning can only dream of. The present results reveal that this utopia is simply a pipe dream whose attainment will require much work and that there is an urgent need for action to redress violence in universities.

### **Conclusions**

This study explored the perceptions of the pervasiveness of student-on-student violence and the manifestations thereof in South African universities. The study's findings revealed that this configuration was usually composed of sexual violence, verbal abuse, discrimination and isolation and fights. Amongst the less-reported forms were cyberbullying, armed robberies and theft and intimate partner violence. Through this study, it became clear that in most instances where these forms of violence were experienced, the prominent attributes of the perpetrators usually included their perceived positions of power and subtle forms of discrimination based on sexuality, gender or social constructs of masculinity based on tribe-specific rites of initiation into manhood, among other such identities. These experiences contradicted the false perception of universities' standing as 'ivory towers' immune to the ravages of violence.

#### *Practical implications*

Based on the findings, the study recommends implementing comprehensive awareness campaigns to educate students and staff about the different forms of violence identified, emphasising sexual violence, verbal abuse, fights, discrimination, cyberbullying, armed robberies, theft and intimate partner violence. Secondly, it will also be essential to strengthen reporting mechanisms to

guarantee confidentiality and accessibility of services for survivors. Thirdly, institutions must develop efficient prevention and intervention programmes focusing on specific forms of violence and promoting healthy relationships, consent and conflict resolution. It will also be necessary for institutions to adopt and implement zero-tolerance policies towards violence, as this would demonstrate commitment to safety and wellness. Finally, regular research and assessment should be conducted to monitor the prevalence of student-on-student violence and evaluate the effectiveness of implemented strategies. By following these recommendations, South African universities can create safer and more inclusive environments that are violence-free 'ivory towers'.

#### *Limitations and future research directions*

While the quantitative phase of the study was largely representative and more inclusive, the qualitative phase was carried out with institutions that were in only one of the nine provinces of South Africa - Eastern Cape. Additionally, there was a significantly lower participant turn-out at Uni 2, even though invitations for participants had been circulated for five months. Nonetheless, the study contributes to the understanding of the types and prevalence of violence that occurs in South African universities, in a manner that will inform policies and interventions aimed at addressing the scourge of violence.

Given the findings from this study, researchers may consider investigating the impact of different forms of violence in universities. The study's findings indicated that there are diverse forms of student-on-student violence unfolding at universities in South Africa. Further research may be dedicated to specific university experiences, to offer a context-specific outlook on the problem.

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**Appendix A**

**Experiences of violence in universities**

1. Have you been a victim of violence?

Yes	No	Yes, and I know someone else who was a victim	No, but I know someone who was a victim
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2. What form of violence is experienced at your institution? (You can give more than one option).

Sexual abuse	Physical assault	Verbal abuse	Other
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3. Who is most affected by violence at your institution?

Male students	LGBTIAQ+ students	Female students	Male staff	LGBTIAQ staff	Female staff	People from outside the university
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4. Who perpetrates this violence?

Male students	Queer students	Female students	Male staff	Queer staff	Female staff	People from outside the university
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5. Please rate the following configurations of violence at your university.

	Very low	Low	Moderate	High	Very high	No violence experienced
Student-on-student violence						
Student-on-staff violence						
Staff-on-staff violence						
Staff-on-student violence						