

A Thematic Analysis of the Anonymously-disclosed Secrets of Undergraduate Psychology

Students

Nuha Limbada and Jamie Traut



Supervisor: Dr Maxine F. Spedding

The University of Cape Town

Department of Psychology

Word Count: 10477

Plagiarism Declaration

1. We know that plagiarism is wrong. Plagiarism is using another's work and to pretend that it is one's own.
2. We have used the American Psychological Association (APA) convention for citation and referencing. Each significant contribution to this work or works of other people in this literature review has been attributed appropriate credit; the intellectual property has been cited and referenced.
3. This literature review is our own work.
4. We have not allowed, and will not allow, anyone to copy our work with the intention of passing it off as their own work.
5. We acknowledge that copying someone else's work, or part of it, is wrong, and declare that this is our own work.

SIGNATURE: Jamie Traut and Nuha Limbada

Acknowledgements

We would like to give thanks to our supervisor Dr. Maxine F. Spedding for her continuous support, feedback and motivational words throughout the duration of this research process. We would also like to thank Kyle Quintao for his help in the design and creation of the research study website. Lastly, we give thanks to The University of Cape Town for the use of their facilities, such as their online library, without which this research would not be possible.

Abstract

The act of secret disclosure may be understood to be a social process, which in turn also maintains and/or enforces socio-cultural norms. Individuals who conceal secrets may face negative mental health implications. It is appreciated in the results of this research that anonymous disclosure is able to alleviate some of the pressure that the secret keeper may feel to manage or to anticipate the response of the person they are disclosing their secret to. Thus, methods of anonymous disclosure whereas individuals are able to feel some of the benefits of disclosure, yet feel protected against social stigma, were integral to this research. One such method of anonymous disclosure is the PostSecret project started by Frank Warren in 2004, which was used as an inspiration for the data collection of this research. The main aim of this study was to explore what kinds of secrets would be disclosed by our sample under conditions of anonymity. Our sample of 24 secrets were anonymously submitted to the research website by University of Cape Town undergraduate students. A thematic analysis was done using Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach, identifying seven main themes. Namely these were 'imagery and symbolism', 'isolation and loneliness', 'body dissatisfaction', 'secret crush or secret relationship', 'sexual trauma/rape', 'shame, hurt and fear' and 'independence from parents'. Under a critical realist framework we aimed to comment on the underlying socio-cultural factors that sit at the real level of what makes up the experienced realities of the secret holders.

Keywords: secrets, thematic analysis, critical realism, mental health, anonymous disclosure

Secret-keeping is a common practice, and some argue it is a condition of social beings (Derrida & Ferraris, 2001). Secrets are kept or revealed in the process of social interaction and are commonly defined by scholars as actively and intentionally concealing information from others (Slepian, Chun, & Mason, 2017). This definition is arguably limited and perhaps lacks the depth secrecy as a human experience deserves. It lacks the acknowledgement of the wider socio-cultural factors that shape the secrets individuals keep and share (Squire, 2015). Although the literature recognizes that secret-keeping is a complex meaning-making process, influenced by both intrapsychic and contextual factors, these socio-cultural factors are rarely discussed. Past research on secrets has orbited around the impact of concealment and disclosure of secrets on well-being. It has lacked in-depth analysis and understanding, mainly due to restrictive data-collection techniques (for example; little sample diversity and shallow categorization of secrets) (Benedetti, 2011). This study aims to provide an in-depth exploration of what secrets are likely to be kept and how they might be informed or shaped by socio-cultural norms and discourse. This study also intends to serve as a means to better understanding secrecy as a social process.

The Effects of Keeping a Secret

Past research on secrets has aimed to showcase the harmful effects concealment may have on the secret keeper (Baumann & Hill, 2016; Benedetti, 2011). Secret concealment has been linked to lower levels of life-satisfaction, impaired executive functioning, mental fatigue and interpersonal relationship difficulties (Critcher & Ferguson, 2014; Slepian et al., 2017; Slepian, Kirby, & Kalokerinos, 2020; Slepian, Masicampo, & Ambady, 2014). Consequently, disclosure is at the core of many psychotherapeutic practices, as it can benefit patients. However, studies have shown that between 90% and 93% of patients admit to having concealed secrets from their therapists due to feelings of shame or embarrassment around the secret (Baumann & Hill, 2016; Benedetti, 2011; Daniel, 2015; Farber, 2020; Slepian et al., 2020).

Critcher and Ferguson (2014) found that concealing secrets during interviews led to participants, after only 10 minutes, experiencing interpersonal, physical and cognitive deficits, such as mental depletion and reduced visuo-spatial ability. Slepian et al. (2017) investigated these results and found that secret concealment led to mind-wandering, such that people tend to think excessively about their secret(s) when performing secret-irrelevant, mundane tasks. This is fatiguing and lowers overall well-being. Regarding physical burdens of concealment, one study found that preoccupation with secrets led to decreased accuracy when judging hill slant and

made physical tasks seem more difficult (Slepian, Masicampo, & Galinsky, 2016; Slepian, Masicampo, Toosi, & Ambady, 2012).

In contrast, other research has found that keeping a ‘major’ secret led to fewer negative symptoms (for example depressive mood, chest pains and/or nausea) (Kelly & Yip, 2006; Maas, Wismeijer, Van Assen, & Aquarius, 2012). These studies argued that it is not the process of secret-keeping which has negative implications, but rather the personality trait of being secretive. Concealment presented with positive effects when the level of cognitive preoccupation (mind-wandering) an individual experienced was low. Additionally, positive effects on quality of life were found in adults when the individual frequently kept secrets yet did not fixate on the burden of the secret (Maas, Wismeijer & Van Assen, 2018).

The Effects of Sharing a Secret

Research concerned with secret disclosure has shown that sharing secrets is linked to increased interpersonal and emotional competence and better adjustment in adolescents (Frijns, Finkenauer, & Keijsers, 2013). Similarly, Kaushansky et al., (2016), found that adolescents with a chronic illness are more likely to share their secret with those they feel can relate to their experience, as it provides a sense of comfort and normalization. Thus, often disclosure is goal-directed and is used to strengthen social bonds as well as alleviate feelings of shame (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010; Slepian & Bastian, 2017).

Yet, the focus of most research has been on the impacts of concealment and disclosure within a therapeutic setting, primarily using quantitative research designs that use broad categorical measures to classify secrets (Baumann & Hill, 2016; Slepian et al., 2017; Slepian et al., 2020). There is little comment on secret disclosure external to a therapeutic setting which arguably limits the depth of prior analysis of secret content. This is a significant critique, as there are a growing number of outlets for the anonymous sharing of secrets such as blogs, facebook communities and other online platforms. Research supports that anonymous disclosure is influenced not only by the shield anonymity provides against judgement and shame, but also by socio-cultural factors (Rodrigue, 2012).

The Anonymous Disclosure of Secrets

There has been an increase in platforms that offer anonymity, one being the PostSecret mail art project. The project, created by Frank Warren in the United States, invites individuals to creatively express and post a secret anonymously to him (Warren, 2020). Warren also advocates

for mental health and suicide prevention (Magill, 2020). What started as an experimental art project in 2004 has grown phenomenally over the years. Secrets are uploaded to a public blog (postsecret.com), exhibited and displayed in books (Motter, 2012). The blog is currently the most visited ad-free blog globally and now showcases a profound variety of secrets (Warren, 2020). Yet, there is limited research on this and why it is so popular. However, these findings provide some insight into how and why disclosing secrets anonymously might contribute to the complex meaning-making process in which a sense of self can be developed (Smirnova, 2016). Anonymous disclosure has been found to be based on a need for individual authenticity or congruence - that is the balancing of an internal sense of self and an outward expression of identity (Slepian et al., 2017; Smirnova, 2016). Social roles may be maintained through concealment while anonymous disclosure relieves the burden of withholding multiple identities, particularly if these identities are perceived as socially deviant (Smirnova, 2016). Platforms such as Facebook and PostSecret act as safe spaces which offer a protective cloak of anonymity as well as a sense of community, ultimately contributing to well-being (Rodrigue, 2012; Sideri, Kitsiou, Kalloniatis, & Gritzalis, 2017; Smirnova, 2016). Rodrigue's (2012) research suggests that the medium of disclosure is important and PostSecret allows individuals to express themselves more robustly, through a combination of image and text. Rodrigue (2012) suggests that in the case of trauma, the image-text format allows the individual to be more aware of their experience, consolidating it as something highly important without the pressure of judgement, which creates a sense of empowerment and agency.

There is evidence that disclosure and concealment are products of sociocultural and political issues and discourses (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010; Fleming & Kruger, 2013; Squire, 2015). Particularly when the secret is of a sexual or traumatic nature (or deemed culturally taboo). For example, the concealment of HIV status and sexual assault is influenced by the perceived stigma created by social discourses (Daniel, 2015; Rodrigue, 2012; Squire, 2015). Squire's (2015) research attests to this socio-political impact on secrets, suggesting that an individual may continue to deny their HIV status despite obvious physical indications of the illness. Secrecy can be used to consciously cope with internal and external shame brought about by a harsh socio-political environment.

Similarly, women who have experienced sexual trauma often do not disclose the experience due to social stigmatization via discourses of victim-blaming (Fleming & Kruger,

2013). Concurrently, disclosure is sometimes used to protest harmful social discourses, the secret becomes a tool of agency (Fleming & Kruger, 2013; Mackworth-Young, Bond, & Wringe, 2020; Rodrigue, 2012; Squire, 2015). Research such as that of Fleming and Kruger (2013) is particularly important to understand the socio-cultural influences that affect secrecy and shape it. Fleming and Kruger (2013) offer insight into the type of information South African women may feel forced to keep secret. Through a feminist lens they reveal a gendered experience of sexual violence, suggesting that harmful social norms and discourses that cause shame, create a taboo that results in concealment. They demonstrate how socio-cultural issues like those produced within a gendered, patriarchal society can heavily influence how taboos may be created and maintained through the act of secret-keeping. Yet research of this nature is scarce and is often a single case study. With the exception of Fleming and Kruger (2013), it is also geographically limited, as mostly Western samples with little diversity are used. Therefore, it is difficult to apply the key theories and concepts explored in previous studies to a South African context (Farber & Hall, 2002). It is also important to note that Fleming and Kruger's (2013) study was conducted through a feminist lens with particular aims, questions and objectives. While this is an important viewpoint and not problematic in itself, it is arguably limited as there may be a risk overlooking other interpretations of the data when using such a particular lens.

In-depth qualitative research of secrets as subjective experiences, with a more explorative theoretical framework, is thus needed in order to gain insight into what secrets individuals are likely to keep and/or disclose anonymously more broadly. Particularly to better understand what may be considered secret-worthy or taboo. This is useful in order to aid our ability in developing interventions and outreach efforts which facilitate healthy disclosure which may otherwise be silenced by their socio-cultural contexts. This seems particularly important given that anonymity-based platforms such as PostSecret are becoming exceedingly popular. In order to uncover this, a comprehensive analysis of anonymously submitted secrets would be valuable.

Aims and Objectives

Aim

The main objective of this research was to explore the content of secrets of undergraduate students in the Psychology Department at The University of Cape Town under the conditions of anonymous disclosure. This study used the format used in the PostSecret project (Poletti, 2011).

Understanding more about the kinds of secrets that students keep may tell us more about the experiences or phenomena that are deemed taboo, and possibly contribute to mental health problems.

Research Question:

What kinds of secrets do undergraduate students keep and how are these secrets disclosed under conditions of anonymity?

Sub-question:

Are there any themes or patterns that are evident in the secrets that students disclose when their identities are kept anonymous?

Theoretical Framework

This research was concerned with participants' subjective experience of reality and how expressions of reality are influenced by context. Thus, a critical realist/contextual ontology formed the lens through which the data was understood and interpreted. This theory required the understanding of participants' experiences and expression of these experiences as a subjective reality that is influenced by and sometimes a product of socio-cultural elements (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun, 2017). A critical realist approach views reality on three intertwined levels, that is the empirical, the actual and the real level (Fletcher, 2017). This is particularly applicable to the study of secrets as the question interrogates the secrets' content as the subjective reality of the individual as they experience them (empirical level). Further, this research proceeded with the assumption that there are socio-cultural mechanisms underlying the subjective expression of a secret which is deemed meaningful by the individual (real level). The actual level may consist of the socio-cultural and individual influences that act as causal systems or mechanisms that produce the secret as well as the act of disclosing the secret (de Souza, 2014). Thus, a critical realist ontology provides an appropriate lens through which the information deemed secret-worthy, may be explored. This lens is arguably also appropriate for an inductive thematic analysis due to how reality is viewed.

Methodology

Research Design

This project was of a qualitative research design, using thematic analysis to examine underlying patterns in the content of the secrets. The current research was focused on subjective, individual experience and aimed to gather rich data in order to gain insight into the particular

human experience of secrets. A qualitative research method was appropriate under these conditions as qualitative research is primarily concerned with extracting and exploring how individuals and groups make meaning of reality (Forrester & Sullivan, 2018; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). Secrets, secret-keeping and sharing is an extremely personal phenomenon that, as demonstrated above, has profound influence on mental health. Yet it is still an under-researched phenomenon, thus there is arguably a compelling need to make qualitative inquiry into such a common and influential occurrence (Slepian et al., 2017).¹

Participants

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, there is less focus on making generalisations about our findings and more on exploring a phenomenon in-depth, therefore convenience sampling was used as a sample of undergraduate students is easily accessible to the researchers (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016; Marshall, 1996). Only participants over the age of 18 and registered as undergraduate students in the Psychology Department at the University of Cape Town were used in the sample. The SRPP (Students' Research Participation Program) at UCT was utilized in order to recruit participants on a voluntary basis. The researchers are aiming to recruit around 50 participants, as this is a novel approach to data collection, and it is difficult to estimate how many people may respond to the recruitment advertisement.

Data Collection

Participants were asked to create a physical display of their secret, resembling a postcard using whatever means they feel expresses their secret best, but were encouraged to utilize both image and text. The participants were instructed, once the postcard is completed, to upload an

¹ Although this research is underpinned by a critical realist ontology, it does not follow a particular methodological approach such as phenomenology. Rather this research is of descriptive inquiry, seeking to gain an understanding of the actual secret content - the actual life experience expressed in the secret, so will follow a generic qualitative inquiry design (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). Essentially, the researchers are investigating the phenomenon of disclosing a secret anonymously, not how the individual makes sense of the phenomenon. A generic qualitative method is also needed within this research, over a particular qualitative approach, as the data being collected as well as the method of collection is unique and not traditional (e.g., interviews or questionnaires) (Percy et al., 2015). Instead, both image and text were collected via an online platform. Inspired by the PostSecret project, this multimodal approach of visual and textual data allows for a richer, more qualitatively substantive data set (Reavey & Johnson, 2017).

image of their postcard to the anonymous upload section of the research website (see Appendix E). This could have been done either by participants taking a photo of their postcard and uploading as an image file, or by scanning the postcard and uploading that file.

Procedure

To recruit participants, a SRPP advertisement providing information about the study was communicated in the form of a mass email to all undergraduate students (see Appendix A). If a student met the requirements and would like to take part in the study, there were directions to follow the link provided at the end of the advertisement to the research website (uctpostcardsecretproject.com). There they were again provided the study information, instructions and ethical details in the form of an informed consent form (see Appendix C). At the bottom of this page, participants were asked to indicate their informed consent by checking/clicking on an electronic box. After this, the participant was navigated to a different page of the website which provided the space to anonymously upload their postcard. The collected secrets were stored in a secure place and only the researchers and supervisor have access to them. After the participant uploaded their secret, a random code was generated which acted as proof of participation, the participant was also asked to send a photo of this code to an email address which had been created for the research project (secretsprojectuct@gmail.com) along with their student numbers and course codes in order for their SRPP points to be allocated. Each participant was offered a choice between being awarded two SRPP points for participation in this study, which may be carried over into next year. Or alternatively, a chance to win a R500 shopping voucher through a raffle.

Data Analysis

The current research aimed to explore ‘what’ secrets individuals may disclose and any patterns or themes that might emerge in both the content and the ways the secrets are represented. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis (TA) was used to identify emerging themes and organize the data into patterns of meaning. TA is a widely used, highly accessible and flexible tool of analysis which enables the researcher to extract rich meaningful codes and themes from qualitative data (Terry et al., 2017). The data collected in this research is unique in that both image and text will be analyzed, so a flexible method is required. TA is also useful for types of research that are relatively new and under-researched (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, familiarization of the data was done first, requiring the researcher to look at the data analytically and critically, noting initial ideas. Reading and re-reading each of the secrets and paying close attention to the imagery allowed for development of provisional ideas that enhanced later analysis of the entire data set (Terry et al., 2017). *Phase 2* of TA consists of coding the preliminary ideas that were highlighted during the familiarization phase (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This coding allowed for the systematic identification and creation of labels, splitting the data into meaningful segments (Terry et al., 2017). Both semantic and latent coding will be carried out. Initially, semantic coding was done in order to formulate explicit meaning within the data (Terry et al., 2017). Latent coding required a more in-depth examination of the data - acknowledging the socio-cultural context within which the data is generated (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Joffe, 2012). *Phases 3, 4 and 5* required theme identification, development, redevelopment and labelling (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Due to the reiterative nature of the phases, TA produced rich interpretations of the data (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

Ethical Considerations

Before commencing with the study, approval was obtained from the ethics committee at UCT's Psychology Department (see Appendix B).

Informed Consent

Participants were provided with and required to tick consent boxes after reading the online informed consent form - which informed them about the study, as well as the potential risk and/or benefits that come with participation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017) (see Appendix C). It was made clear to participants that their participation in the study is entirely voluntary and will bear no negative consequences if they choose not to participate.

Participants were also made aware of the exhibition of their anonymous secrets that informed the second part of this project. This second phase entailed the exploration of responses to the secrets that are disclosed within this research. This second part of the project was carried out by a different research team as its own individual research project and participants had the option to choose to not have their secret included in the exhibition. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw their secret at any point after submission should they change their minds. However, participants were made aware that in order to withdraw, they need to identify their

secret to the researchers. They were also given the option to consent to the exhibition separately from the disclosure part of the study.

Potential Risks and Benefits

While participants' disclosure of secrets is entirely anonymous, there are emotional and psychological implications. Participants may have become distressed during the process of creating the postcard and may have experienced intense emotions associated with the secret. In an effort to minimize these effects, a list of contact numbers and resources including the Student Wellness Centre at UCT and various crisis hotlines were made available to participants, on the consent form (see Appendix D) as well as the projects website. Although there are no direct benefits to participation, the building of knowledge and understanding may be an indirect benefit. Participants were able to contribute to a better understanding of an under-researched phenomenon.

Protection of Privacy and Confidentiality

To ensure the anonymity of our participants, the project's website had a facility which allowed the postcards to be uploaded anonymously. Participants were asked to refrain from providing any identifying information on the postcard, as neither the researcher nor the participants should be able to discern the identity of any participant by their postcard. Therefore, identifying information which was required from the participant in order for them to be allocated SRPP points (student number, course code, etc.) or for their names to be put into the raffle was gathered completely separately. If students wished to withdraw their secrets from the experiment after submission, they may do so, however this required the student to be willing to identify their secret postcard to the researchers in order for it to be removed from the data set. This was made explicitly clear on the consent forms so that participants are aware of this potential risk of their secret submission.

Reflexivity

Qualitative research aims to create understanding around how meaning is constructed and seeks to treat participants as experts into their own lives and experiences, so the process of reflexivity should permeate throughout the research (Palaganas, Sanchez, Molintas, & Caricativo, 2017). Reflexivity is present when researchers are able to understand and reflect on how their contextual identities and perspectives inevitably have influence over, and interact with, both the participants and the research itself at every stage of the research process (Dodgson,

2019). It is essential in the research process to ensure rigour and relevance of research implications (Shaw, 2010). Researcher characteristics such as race, culture, age, gender identification as well positionality can come into play when conducting qualitative enquiry (Corlett & Mavin, 2017). There is also a power imbalance to be aware of, between researcher and participant - especially when working with an undergraduate student population (Etherington, 2007). Although participants remain anonymous and will have had minimal contact with researchers, participant perceptions of the researchers as being in a position of power may impact what secret an individual may have chosen to disclose.

Reflexive journals were kept by the researchers in order to reflect on and record personal responses and assumptions made about the secrets disclosed. Frequent meetings with the research supervisor were had, especially during the data analysis phase of the study. The research is dealing with highly personal data. Secrets are a part of an individual's reality and in analyzing them the researchers inevitably brought their own reality into the interpretation (Terry et al., 2017). Being reflexive throughout the TA process limited the chances of premature or underdeveloped identification of themes, thus enhancing the richness aimed for within qualitative analysis.

Significance

The research into the content of secrets is scarce. The current research provided an insight into what individuals deem secret-worthy and add to the knowledge and understanding of this common but understated phenomenon. Anonymous secret sharing sites are growing in popularity, particularly with increasing online social platforms (Sideri et al., 2017). The current research is novel in that it utilizes PostSecret as a template to gain this insight into a South African student population's anonymous secret disclosure behaviour. Thus, the current research is innovative and novel as it qualitatively dives into an area that has hardly or arguably not been studied within the field.

Results

A total of 24 secrets were submitted by participants via the project's website. Through a reflexive thematic analysis of each secret and then the secrets as a whole data set, we identified seven main themes: isolation and loneliness, body dissatisfaction, sexual trauma/rape, secret crush/relationship, shame, hurt and fear, imagery/symbolism and independence from parents. These themes were compiled and decided on by coding individual features of the secrets and

then finding common themes among them and dividing them into the most suitable theme or category. Some themes also consist of several sub-themes, summarized in Table 1. Themes were based on what we empirically saw, but due to the nature of the data being a once-off, snippet of the participants experience, results are seeped in our interpretations.

Table 1

Themes, sub-themes and the secrets that were identified to fit them

Themes and sub-themes	Secrets
Imagery and symbolism	2, 7
Isolation and loneliness	
Mental health issues and isolation	4,12,13,15
Lack of trust and loneliness	17, 20
Body dissatisfaction	14, 15
Secret crush or secret relationship	8,18,23
Sexual trauma/ rape	1, 10
Shame, hurt and fear	
Feelings and fear of inadequacy or inability	5, 9, 11
Embarrassing and inappropriate	6, 16
Ashamed and hurt: violent secret thoughts	22, 24
Independence from parents	3, 19, 21

Note. All figures in the secret column refer to the secret number and all corresponding secrets can be found in appendices F-L

Imagery and symbolism

As we looked at image-text as a whole and examined text both individually as well as a collective or as interacting to create meaning (Rodrigue, 2012) - one of the most significant features of all the secrets was the imagery, background and symbols or lack thereof, that participants used. There were several noteworthy physical features of the secrets from the choice of color, of image and background all, in our analysis, potentially conveyed its own meaning. Each secret's image or background had a unique quality to it, instead of creating themes for the elements or qualities that were identified for more than one secret we will be commenting on and interpreting the background of the image in relation to the main themes we identified below.

There was one phenomenon that occurred twice within the sample that we believed deserved its own title sub-theme under imagery and symbolism. Secrets 2 and 7 (see Appendix F) consisted of only images with no text in the foreground to elaborate upon the secret. This left the secret very much open to interpretation and vague. Yet, images are often representative holding symbolism and connotations. Secret 2 consisted of an image of a striped rainbow background or what we take as representative of the LGBTQ + pride flag. The rainbow in that order in that style is symbolic of LGBTQ + social movement and community. We cannot determine the reality of the secret holder at the deeper levels, only at the empirical, we can speculate the secret has something to do with the pride movement. There are no signs of negativity towards the movement thus we believe it suggests support, an exploration or statement concerning sexuality or perhaps even a 'coming out'. Secret 7 is even less telling, with an image that isn't as recognizable. Secret 7 consists of an image of an 'Art and Furniture' book upon which a pink tiara sits. Our own socio-cultural backgrounds might lead us to interpret these symbols of femininity, richness and elegance. Could be the secret holder's dream or ambition? Could it be an ideal they wish to reach, cannot reach or has reached?

While we were met with these questions during the analysis process, due to the interpretive nature of the analysis, the questions became less about what the secret holder is trying to say and more about why they have chosen to reveal their secret in such a manner. These secrets are arguably an ideal example of how secrets can simultaneously be revealed and still be withheld. These secrets allow a snippet into the experiences of the secret-holder, other secrets in

the sample brought up this same ambiguity (see secret 1 in Appendix J). One of the most significant things this withholding of information while still revealing a secret brought up for us is that it is suggestive of the real level socio-cultural and causal mechanisms are at work to perhaps simultaneously cause the revelation of the secret as well as the withholding of information. Suggesting that there are perhaps social discourses at play, perhaps preventing the admittance or revelation of a secret in full.

Isolation and loneliness

Mental health issues and isolation

The secrets in this theme varied in the exact type of mental health issue expressed. The term depression or a variation of it like ‘depressing’, appeared in two of the 24 secrets: secrets 4 and 13 (see Appendix G). There is an experience of depression due to a specific circumstance in secret 4. Secret 4 communicates that the secret keeper feels dissatisfied and upset with the lack of friendships created during their time at university due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This lack of fulfilling friendship mimics, as explained by the secret keeper, their time in high school where they also felt as though they lacked the important relational connections that come with friendship. We have interpreted this lack of socialness or isolation to contribute to and be a burden of their experience of depression.

In secret 13 however we see an opposite experience, where the individuals experience with depression made them feel ‘special’. The secret as we interpret it, may not express an experience of depression as the others may do, but describes an experience of specialness because of depression. None-the-less we can see the burden of mental health and social perceptions of it coming through how it is felt or explained to be felt by the secret holders.

To add to this, secrets 4 and 13’s images are significant in connection with the secrets text. Both secret holders chose sunset/scenery images. A distorted female figure with her head hung in her knees that seems to be fading or blowing away into the sunset makes up the background of secret 4. The image on the postcard seems to relate to the secret content, it depicts a lone and darkened silhouette with pieces of its body seemingly tearing or flying away from itself. This image could be interpreted as the missing relationship connection, which is resulting in feelings of incompleteness, just as the silhouette has pieces missing and is incomplete. While an image of a purple sunset by an empty pool side resort sits in the background of secret 13. Both images, in our interpretation, highlighted this sense of isolation and loneliness.

Secret 12 (see Appendix G) there are several instances or references within the secrets text, to a deep sense of depressive thinking, loneliness and hopelessness. ‘Anxiety’ and ‘suicidal feelings’ are mentioned and we found a profound sense of loneliness and hopelessness within the secret holder's expression of feelings of not being able to confide in anyone due to an experience of rejection. The image chosen by the secret holder we found expresses a sense of darkness and distress with an image of a distorted figure. The background seems to be an image of a drawing with a black charcoal-like medium that creates the smudged, distorted look. This dark imagery emphasizes or accentuates the content of the text - the image-text interacts to produce an impactful, emphasized statement.

Secret 15's secret holder seemed to describe a deteriorating state of mental health, expressing multiple mental health issues. The secret holder makes four separate but connected statements with three of them revolving around their struggle with mental health and disorders. Three out of the four statements refer to the interpersonal challenges individuals with mental health issues undergo. For example, the secret holder expresses their mental health issues makes them the most unfavored and no one around them believes mental disorders are real. The image the secret holder chose was a painting of a butterfly, which we might understand as a desire to change, grow if we look at the symbolism of a butterfly to reflect metamorphosis. It may also represent or connote beauty, vibrance or freeness and even fragility. The colors are bright and light in contrast to the narrative content of the secret's text. Although we cannot be sure of the true meaning of the image, we can acknowledge its significance and contribution to the overall secret and the way it is presented.

Lack of trust and loneliness

‘I can't even trust this website to open up to it’ is what ends the text in secret 17 (see Appendix G). The secret holder expresses their inability to ‘trust’ or ‘confide’ in others. This is explained to cause them to be isolated which in turn causes a feeling of loneliness. We found there to be a sense of irony in this. The secret holder simultaneously reveals a secret while holding back information, as with the secrets that had no text. The secret holder ironically expresses they cannot even trust the website by confiding in the website. We found the secret holder to be keeping or protecting their secrets and perhaps themselves. Yet, we interpreted their willingness to submit a secret suggestive of a need to open up- a step towards opening or a struggle to do so. To add to this, the secret holder chose an image of two girls hugging which we

interpreted to be representative of a close relationship. The image perhaps highlights the isolation and loneliness expressed in the text, as we interpret the image to express what the secret holder feels they are lacking or what they desire. None-the-less there is clear indication of a lack of trust and a sense of loneliness expressed in the secret.

Secret 20 details an experience by the secret keeper in which they had to undergo an abortion alone and with no support (see Appendix G). Although the secret says that the reason for the secret abortion was that they did not want anyone to find out, it isn't exactly too clear as to why they did not want anyone to find out, so we will not speak to or speculate on that (although questions around whether it is socio-cultural conditions and attitudes which contributed to this feeling) .We have however interpreted how the secret holder conveyed their experience. We found their use of the phrase 'entirely by myself' to poignantly express this sense of isolation and perhaps even loneliness The image on this postcard is of a colorful, vibrant ocean and sunset consisting of shades of pinks, blues and purples. This may seem out of place and not relating to the core secret content, the abortion, however when we consider another important detail expressed in the text, it becomes clear. The secret keeper explains that in order to cope with this experience, they would stare at the ocean, describing it as being their "safe space". This is interesting, as it can be interpreted that perhaps in order to aid the disclosure of their secret, the participant chose to include their calming and safe stimulus as their dominant imagery.

Body dissatisfaction

Secrets that mentioned body dissatisfaction or desire to change their body suggest that this dissatisfaction comes from social ideals around body image. Secret 15 explicitly reveals that they 'allow idealistic model bodies to dictate how I *should* look' as one of the mental health related statements revealed in the secret. We have understood this statement to represent a sense of dissatisfaction due to the surrounding statements about the burden and challenges of living with a mental disorder and the themes of isolation and feelings of rejection found in the secret. The inclusion of the words 'allow', 'dictate' and 'should' - further suggest a feeling of forcedness or boundness to social norms or ideals of what a body should look like. The secret holder seems to be admitting to a sense of defeat by 'allowing' model or ideal versions of bodies to perhaps push them into having a distorted sense of mental health in terms of their body perception and satisfaction. Secret 14 (see Appendix H) reveals a dissatisfaction with the

individuals own genitals- specifically the size. The secret holder feels they need to ‘pretend’ it doesn't affect them when it does as they describe to be ‘constantly’ on their mind. The image emphasizes the secret holder’s fixation on their genitalia as it seems to be an image of them or a body under the bed covers. Although there is ambiguity and we cannot be sure if it is a photo of their body or the area of their body concerned in the text. This was suggestive in expressing a sense of isolation, embarrassment even, as they are hiding their body under the comfort of the covers perhaps. Although, there is no explicit mention of a negative feeling towards their genitalia or dislike - no explicit term or word that expresses a like or dislike of the size of their genitalia. The image in combination with the secret holders needing to pretend they are not concerned about it suggests a sense of dissatisfaction or even perhaps embarrassment. We are also caused to ask the questions: “Why do they feel the need to pretend?”, Why has it become something of so much concern?”. Perhaps it is the same socio-cultural mechanisms and discourses of idealistic body types suggested in secret 15- the real level mechanisms coming into play.

Secret crush or secret relationship

The secrets identified during coding to fit under this theme all relate to the concealment of romantic feelings or relationships. Some of these secrets pertain to the concealment of the secret keeper’s romantic feelings for their love interest from the love interest themselves (which in two secrets, numbers 8 and 18, are the secret keeper’s best friend) (see Appendix I). The images on these two postcards are both brightly colored, number 8 being of a faceless figure, which may represent the secret keeper or their love interest. The image on secret number 18’s postcard is simply the text/secret against the image of an open blue sky. These images may relate to the secret content as the brightness could indicate a sense of optimism or openness about what is to come/about what may transpire between the secret keeper and the one they are admiring. Additionally, the images may also represent a sense of unrequited love, the open sky is where the secret exists in relation to its place on the postcard, just as the situation between the secret keeper and the one they have feelings for is up in the air, not tangible yet. Another secret under this theme, secret 23, discloses that the secret keeper is already involved in a secret relationship, and for one reason or another, it cannot be disclosed within their friendship circle (see Appendix I). The image used on the postcard is one of a note-writing application on the secret keeper’s cellphone, which seems to fit the secret content. This is because although the secret is being

displayed on a phone screen, a device which many university students contact their friends on and maintain relationships on, it is not depicted to have been a message that was sent to anyone or in a chat with a friend. Thus, even though it involves the secret keeper's intimate friendships, it is still kept private. We could interpret the use of the phone screen to be suggestive of the message being typed, never to be sent or yet to be sent.

Sexual Trama/rape

The two secrets placed under this theme both consist of very clear text that either says "sexual abuse" in secret 1, and "rape" in secret 10 (see Appendix J). However, whilst secret 10 discusses in fair detail the secret keeper's suspicions surrounding their traumatic past, as they are unsure about their possible rape as a child, secret 1 is more ambiguous. The text in secret 1 only consists of two words which take up most of the postcard in bold, unmissable text: "sexual abuse". Furthermore, the rest of the postcard is dark, but there is a face visible in the background of the text which depicts a person crying. So, what can be gathered of this is that sexual abuse has previously been present in the secret keeper's life or might still be present. The image on this postcard could indicate, because of the text's boldness, that perhaps this traumatic sexual abuse is as dominating in their life as the text is as dominating of the postcard. Perhaps the imagery and text represent the large, overpowering effect this trauma has had on the secret keeper. This postcard is interesting as it only states two words, yet the way the participant has chosen to express or communicate these words on the postcard can be interpreted or understood in many different ways.

In contrast, although secret 10 has more text and more explanation behind the secret's content, the text is small and is placed in between images of phasing moons, it does not dominate the postcard entirely. This could represent the secret keeper's hesitation to own their secret and let it dominate their life and/or the postcard as they are unsure if it happened. The symbolism of the moon's changing faces is also interesting to note, as it could represent a passing of time, or perhaps even a distance between the secret keeper and the secret itself. So, whilst both secrets express a similar trauma and both postcards have darkened images, one takes full ownership and the secret is dominant, whilst the other secret can be said to be more insidiously or tentatively depicted.

Shame, hurt and fear

Several of the secrets possessed or expressed some sort of hurt, fear and shame. To us it seemed that these three elements, while they could be considered themes in their own right, appeared connected and often all identifiable within one secret. Yet, as with the other themes identified, sub-themes were needed in order to be as representative and inclusive of the secrets as possible.

Feelings and fear of inadequacy or inability

‘I don’t think’ is the beginning of the secret statements in two of the three secrets that were identified to fit into and create this sub-theme. The center of secrets 5 and 9 (see Appendix K) is this feeling and/or fear of inadequacy. Secret 5 reveals the individual does not feel good enough and believes they will ‘ever’ feel so. They do not explain why- they simply state this feeling of inadequacy and the fear that it will not pass. What was particularly interesting about this secret is its background or choice of image. The secret holder a layered background that depicts a sparkled beach/ ocean scene and then an image of a hand mirror or looking glass through which, the ocean scene is still shown in place of a reflection or glass. Finally, in a third layer there is a cartoon figure or character holding what seems to be a bouquet of hearts. This at first seemed to add a lightness to a secret that carries a somber, concerned and emotive information. The mirror without a reflection perhaps emphasizes the self-conscious nature of the secret. The figure holding the hearts could be interpreted as the secret holder expressing a need or desire for love, attention and affection or could represent the secret holder's own love, attention and affection to be given.

Secret 9 reveals feelings of inadequacy in terms of finding a job. The secret holder seems to have a sense of fear of not finding an appropriate job due to feelings of not having the ‘skills’ or ‘talent’. The text begins with ‘I don't think’, we found this to set a tone of uncertainty and interpreting the secret as a whole we see that this uncertainty in themselves increases into a strong feeling of negativity. Their use of the terms ‘nothing’ and ‘anything’, we interpreted to communicate a sense of negativity and finality in their perception of their abilities. The image consists of office supplies and suggests a work environment. We interpreted this to be representative of the text, perhaps suggestive of what the secret holder believes they are incapable or inadequate to be a part of- depicting what they say they don’t think they can do.

Embarrassing and inappropriate

Secrets 6 and 16 (see Appendix K) were placed under this sub-theme. Secret 6 reveals that the secret holder is embarrassed or ashamed of being in a situation which forced them not to shower for a week. The secret initially sets the scene - the circumstances that drove the secret holder to compromise or 'sacrifice' on their hygiene. We found the use of the word 'sacrifice' to express a feeling of forcedness, as if they had to give up their hygiene. To add to this the secret holder uses the term 'punish' to describe the consequences of being late for school, something we interpreted to highlight this sense of being forced and ashamed. The secret holder expressed they were particularly embarrassed of the fact that they did not shower when they had the opportunity at night. The image, like the beginning of the text in the secret, which consists of a cartoon figure showering, we have interpreted to simply set the scene and add a visual aid to the scenario in the secret.

Secret 16 reveals the secret holder reads and listens to 'not safe for work' (NSFW) content about fictional characters. NSFW usually implies content that is of explicit or inappropriate nature. Urban dictionary defines it as internet slang that often entails online content that is of sexual and profane nature (Urban Dictionary, 2017). Our own socio-cultural backgrounds meant we immediately recognized the acronym and we understood or interpreted this to be something individuals feel the need to hide or are often ashamed of. The secret holder includes images of the fictional characters they perhaps speak of in the text- although these images, as we interpret them, are not of NSFW or explicit nature. They are perhaps 'safe' examples of the types of the fictional characters that the secret holder reads and listens about. Thus, the images are not exactly what the secret holder looks at as they read and listen to this content, not view images and videos. There is thus, a layer of the secret still being withheld, and we interpreted this hiding of the actual content to express a sense of shame or shyness, perhaps even fear.

Ashamed and hurt: violent secret thoughts

Secrets 22 and 24 both reveal the secret holder to harbor violent thoughts about killing people. Secret 22 describes these thoughts to occur when the secret holder is in conversation. The secret holder describes these thoughts of hurting the other person to occur due to their own experiences of being hurt and let down. We found the main theme in this secret not to be shame but hurt. We interpreted the secrecy to be an indication of shame, however. We found the image the secret holder chose to contrast the heaviness of the secret. It is an image of a dog with its

head out of the car window. The image, as we interpreted it, seems playful, light and has a comical quality to it. This contrast has significance as it caused us to question why the secret holder chose this image although we cannot speculate the reason - we can acknowledge the images impact as with several other secrets.

Secret 24's image on the other hand speaks directly to the secret. The image depicts a figure in a black hooded outfit facing a cloud of red smoke in the background and reads 'GENOCIDE' with the definition of the word below. The text reveals the secret holder to harbor violent thoughts about killing a certain group of people, whom they have 'so much resentment for' - expressing their sense of hurt. Immediately in the beginning of the text the secret holder expresses their sense of shame, describing themselves of not being proud of this experience. We found this sense of shame to be reiterated and highlighted at the end of text as the secret holder reassures us as the receivers of the secret, that they are 'working on getting rid of these thoughts'.

Independence from parents

Two of the 24 secrets expressed that the secret was particularly or specifically kept from their parents. Both secrets single out their parents as the ones who cannot or do not yet know something they have done. Secret 3 begins with the statement 'I haven't gotten round to telling my folks a lot about me' (see Appendix L). The secret holder then continues to essentially list the decisions they have made, that they have not informed their parents about. The secret holder mentions four, what we have interpreted as, major life decisions or changes that they are keeping from their parents. They express the reason for this is due to their parents being 'conservative' and that it would require 'strength' to have the conversation with them. We interpreted this secret to express a feeling of or a step of independence from the secret holder's parents- particularly as one of the changes they made in their lives in a change of degree. They reveal secret experiences that we have interpreted as especially connected to their parents' conservativeness, those being the questioning of their sexuality and sexual activeness and their experimentation with drugs. Our own socio-cultural backgrounds and experiences with coming to university and the sense of independence and experimentation that comes along with it contributed to our interpretation of the secret. Our own experiences with socio-cultural norms and conservative notions lead us to interpret the secret holder to have a great deal of reluctance and understand this reluctance.

Secret 21 reveals another experience in which the secret holder seems to be taking a step away from their parents. Yet, they seem to be more final and determined in their decision not to tell their parents about their tattoo. They express that ‘no one can ever know’ - the secrecy is emphasized here by their use of language. Their parents are singled out as the individuals who ‘especially’ can never know. Our own socio-cultural backgrounds informed our thinking of a tattoo as something of a representation of ‘growing-up’, even rebellion which is sometimes part of the journey of independence away from one's parents. The secret holder however does not reveal the exact reason however, as to why they can never tell anyone, especially their parents.

Secret 19 (see Appendix L) was interpreted to express a sense of financial independence from the secret holder's parents. They describe their parents to be unable to provide an allowance for them and as a result they sell their nude pictures for the money. They describe this experience as a ‘side hustle’, we interpreted this to highlight the secret holder's youth and perhaps expresses a tone of excitement or satisfaction with their ability to be resourceful. We found there to be a sense of confidence in this secret, particularly due to the image of the secret which consists of a back/side profile of naked female figure in what looks like a bathroom. We cannot be sure if it is the secret holder or not, but we interpreted the image to represent the nude pictures the secret holder speaks of and to highlight the secret holder's sense of their own maturity. Suggesting a sense of pride in their work or in their independence.

Discussion

The objective in this study was to simply explore what secrets our sample of undergraduate psychology students at UCT. Our main question set out to uncover what kinds of secrets and how these secrets are disclosed under conditions of anonymity. We found that there are themes and patterns evident in the kinds of secrets and how those secrets are disclosed in the secrets submitted by participating students. As table 1 summarizes, we uncovered or found seven main themes which emerged from the analysis of each secret as a unique entity and then as grouped or collective. The secrets were diverse, and each secret was unique and often held more than one point of - secrets often revealed several elements. There were commonalities and shared elements across secrets that helped us formulate these themes and sub-themes.

The thematization and categorization of the secrets

It is worth discussing the thematization of the secrets themselves in this research project. When considering researcher reflexivity, it becomes clear that the way main themes and sub-

themes were chosen and worded, as well as what secrets fall under them, is inherently a difficult one. This is due to the fact that what we as the researchers deem to be the most important or defining, and thus what we categorize them under, may not actually hold the same weight to the secret keeper. For example, we categorized secret 14 under the main theme of “Body dissatisfaction” (see Appendix G). This is because the secret directly relates to a physical, bodily concern. However, perhaps the secret keeper is truly more concerned with the repetitive and intrusive nature of the thoughts, rather than the thought content itself. This would mean that the secret would perhaps be more accurately placed under the main theme which deals with mental health and isolation. Therefore, it is important to consider that the way in which the secret keeper themselves would categorize their secret, or which part of the secret holds most weight for them, would very likely be different to that of the researcher’s/interpreter’s opinion.

This point is also insightful when considering why individuals may choose only to disclose their secret(s) under anonymity. Under anonymity, the secret keeper does not have to concern themselves with a possible poor response from the receiver of the secret, or a response that is ignorant or uninformed which may focus on the wrong or less important parts of the secret. Such poor responses may make the secret keeper feel invalidated, and oftentimes when disclosing a secret, the secret keeper may not want to be put under the additional pressure of feeling like they have to explain themselves or their feelings towards their secret. Thus, it became increasingly difficult to answer the question of what or why without imparting too much of our own preconceptions and ideas onto the secret. The question of how the secret was disclosed became increasingly important and perhaps more appropriate. Several discussion points arose out of this shift in focus.

The interaction between image and text

One of the main ways in which we analyzed how the secrets were disclosed is through how they were visually presented. The images or backgrounds used in the secrets sometimes appear to reveal something extra about the secret holder themselves, or about how the secret holder feels about their secret. For instance, in some secrets the background image seems to juxtapose the secret content. However, from the researcher’s perspective, we can only speculate that this is a juxtaposition. In reality, the image may correspond perfectly to the text in a way that is only truly understood by the secret keeper. Thus, by looking at the relationship between

the image and text in this way, it can be appreciated that instead of focusing on what the secret said and what the photo depicts, what should be of main interest is how and why the pair work together and were chosen by the secret giver to express themselves. This finding is similar to that of Rodrigue (2012), who demonstrated the significance of the interaction between image and text in the analysis of trauma in a secret submitted to the PostSecret project.

A submitted secret is still a kept secret

One of the most significant observations we made is perhaps the complexity of what a secret is- of how it can be simultaneously kept and revealed. The secrets with no text exemplify this as we as the receivers of the secret, with no other context, are unable to truly know what the secret is. Yet, even the secrets with text often left much to interpretation. As Squire (2015) comments in their definition of a secret, secrets are partial, they are known by some and concealed from others and always evasive as only the secret holder knows their reality. The secrets in the theme independence from parents are perhaps an example of this. We understand their secrets are already shared with others, and yet, their secrets remain secret from their parents. We found this to show how complex a phenomenon a secret can be, showing the experience of how a secret remains even though it is not a secret to everyone anymore, only to the intended target (being the parents).

Secret 17 especially and the secrets under 'lack of trust and loneliness' demonstrate this. The secret holder reveals a secret that describes an inability to open up- there is a secret or secrets within a secret. We found that as the receivers of the anonymously disclosed secrets, we are only allowed a snippet into the experience of the secret holder. Some secrets described explanations for why they feel as they do. Some secrets simply stated their actions or thoughts with no explanation. Secret 1 consisted of one statement. A highly impactful statement coupled with an impactful image, and while we may understand the statement and categorize it as sexual trauma due to our own knowledge and backgrounds, we will never know what exactly the secret holder experience with sexual abuse is. The Secrets are thus layered, as the critical realist framework posits, there is an empirical level of reality, an actual and a real. We as the researchers are afforded a look at the empirical level primarily and may only speculate about the real level.

Researcher, participant power imbalance

It is important to note here the significance or the impact of the researcher-participant dynamic as it may be a reason parts of secrets were left to interpretation. Although participation was anonymous and remote, there perhaps remains a power imbalance. The participants were aware we would be looking at and analyzing their submissions. This could have influenced their choice of what secrets and how they revealed it. Although most secrets were of a heavy and emotive nature- the secret holders seem to feel comfortable enough to submit such intimate secrets. Yet, we know from previous research that clients in therapy, often conceal secrets or do not disclose fully due to feelings of shame or embarrassment, it is possible that our participants felt similarly (Baumann & Hill, 2016; Benedetti, 2011; Daniel, 2015; Farber, 2020; Slepian et al., 2020).

Possible socio-cultural mechanisms at the real level

A critical realist/contextual framework was used in this study. This means we understood the secrets to reflect the reality of the secret holder - yet this reality has three interconnected levels. The results section reflects our observations at the empirical or observable level. Yet, under this framework we can speculate and acknowledge that there are underlying causal mechanisms that because what is observable (Fletcher, 2017). These causal mechanisms can be of a socio-cultural nature. We found that there were various points at which the mechanisms could come into play. To begin with the content of the secrets may have been influenced by socio-cultural factors and conventions that can sometimes dictate what we should keep concealed or what we can comfortably disclose (Evans-Lacko & Knapp, 2014).

All the secrets within the sample possessed an element that could have been interpreted to indicate underlying socio-cultural factors. Secrets that consisted of explicit mention of or symbolism of sex and sexuality perhaps have connection to discourses around sex and sexuality. We identified the pride flag in secret 2 as representative of the LGBTQ+ community due to it being socio-culturally significant. Related to this is the matter of conservatism: secret 3 highlights as their reason for not disclosing certain things in their life, including their questions of sexuality and their sexual activity, to their parents. This brought up discourses around socio-cultural ideals and perhaps judgements held by groups of people in society, around sex and sexuality. The finding that several secrets were identified under the sub- theme mental health issues and isolation perhaps speaks to the increases in mental health related issues as well as socio-cultural stigmas around illness (Squire, 2015) and shame around mental health (Slepian et

al., 2020). We found this again when analyzing the secrets themed as body dissatisfaction- that there are possible socio-cultural mechanisms involved in pushing the secret holder to feel as though they should be concerned with their body image. There are perhaps socio-cultural mechanisms behind why the secret holder in secret 1 did not reveal the experience with sexual abuse they may have had. The same discourses around shame and stigma found by Fleming and Kruger (2013) in their exploration of the non-disclosure of sexual violence South Africa. This brought up again when we looked at secret 10.

Thus, we may interpret each secret and the secret holder to be influenced by various socio-cultural norms, ideals, judgements and biases. These mechanisms may have caused the secrets that have been disclosed here, to be disclosed under anonymity, as well as caused certain aspects of the secret to remain concealed. Or perhaps we may go as far as to speculate - caused the secret holders to experience what they reveal in the secret. Even though these speculations remain just that and are subject to our own socio-cultural backgrounds and knowledge it seems evident that the secrets disclosed in this study do indicate underlying socio-cultural mechanisms. Or at the very least can be interpreted to indicate this as previous research has demonstrated (Rodrigue, 2012).

Suggestions for further research and limitations of research

Although the sample size is relatively limited, at 24 secrets submitted in total, this study has the potential to be conducted on a much larger scale with a more diverse population group (as this sample only consisted of undergraduate UCT psychology students). It is clear that people are open to anonymously disclosing their secrets and it is a good sign that despite how novel the study is, there was such an interesting and thought-provoking collection of secrets collected. Furthermore, different analytical frameworks to ours could be used to analyze the data which may produce additional valuable discussion around anonymous disclosure.

Conclusion

Secrets are a complex phenomenon that have yet to be defined adequately and secret keeping is a common and social condition. There are both negative and positive impacts of both concealing and disclosing secrets and anonymous secret disclosure is increasing in popularity. This study explored what undergraduate psychology students at UCT would disclose under anonymity. We found the secrets were unique, yet we were able to identify seven main themes from the sample. These themes were based on our interpretation of what was empirically

observable about the secrets primarily, yet we also interpreted elements of the secrets more deeply and explored the underlying meanings indicated by the secret. We found the sample of secrets to be highly emotive and often heavy, intimate and sometimes shocking and heartbreaking. This made it difficult to be less subjective and we often had to check our own biases, beliefs and socio-cultural influences.

We mainly found that secrets are layered, often simultaneously disclosed and concealed as we are accessing a snippet of the secret holder's experience. The secrets in our sample were often layered with meaning through the use of image and text. Finally, we were able to interpret and speculate that certain socio-cultural underpinnings influence what the secret included (and didn't) and how it was conveyed, in accordance with previous research.

References

- Baumann, E. C., & Hill, C. D. (2016). Client concealment and disclosure of secrets in outpatient psychotherapy. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 29(1), 53-75.
doi:10.1080/09515070.2015.1023698
- Benedetti, J. M. (2011, November). Embroidered confessions: an interactive quilt of the secrets of strangers. In Proceedings of the 8th ACM Conference on Creativity and Cognition (pp. 313-314).
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2017). Ethics in qualitative psychological research. In Willig, C., & Stainton-Rogers, W. *The SAGE Handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (pp. 259-273). London: SAGE Publications Ltd doi: 10.4135/9781526405555
- Chaudoir, S., & Quinn, D. (2010). Revealing concealable stigmatized identities: The impact of disclosure motivations and positive first-disclosure experiences on fear of disclosure and well-being. *Journal of Social Issues*, 66(3), 570-584. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.2010.01663.x
- Corlett, S., & Mavin, S. (2017). Reflexivity and researcher positionality. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative business and management research methods*, 377-399.
doi:10.4135/9781526430212.n23
- Critcher, C. R., & Ferguson, M. J. (2014). The cost of keeping it hidden: Decomposing concealment reveals what makes it depleting. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 143(2), 721-735. doi:10.1037/a0033468
- Daniel, M. (2015). Keeping the secret: how HIV-positive children in Iringa, Tanzania, respond to the perceived need for silence and secrecy. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 27(1), 11-23. doi:10.2989/17280583.2014.947995
- Derrida, J., & Ferraris, M. (2001). *A Taste for the Secret*, ed. Giacomo Donis and David Webb, trans. Giacomo Donis, London: Polity.
- de Souza, D. E. (2014). Culture, context and society—The underexplored potential of critical realism as a philosophical framework for theory and practice. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 17(2), 141-151. doi:10.1111/ajsp.12052

- Dodgson, J. E. (2019). Reflexivity in qualitative research. *Journal of Human Lactation*, 35(2), 220-222. doi:10.1177/0890334419830990
- Etherington, K. (2007). Ethical research in reflexive relationships. *Qualitative inquiry*, 13(5), 599-616. doi:10.1177/1077800407301175
- Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American journal of theoretical and applied statistics*, 5(1), 1-4. doi:10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11
- Evans-Lacko, S., & Knapp, M. (2014). Importance of social and cultural factors for attitudes, disclosure and time off work for depression: findings from a seven country European study on depression in the workplace. *PloS one*, 9(3), e91053. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0091053>
- Farber, B. A. (2020). Disclosure, concealment, and dishonesty in psychotherapy: A clinically focused review. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 76(2), 251-257. doi:10.1002/jclp.22891
- Farber, B. A., & Hall, D. (2002). Disclosure to therapists: What is and is not discussed in psychotherapy. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 58(4), 359-370. doi:10.1002/jclp.1148
- Fleming, K., & Kruger, L.-M. (2013). “She keeps his secrets”: A gendered analysis of the impact of shame on the non-disclosure of sexual violence in one low-income South African community. *African Safety Promotion Journal*, 11(2), 107-124.
- Fletcher, A. (2017). Applying critical realism in qualitative research: methodology meets method. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 20(2), 181–194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2016.1144401>
- Forrester, M. A., & Sullivan, C. (Eds.). (2018). *Doing qualitative research in psychology: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications Limited.
- Frijns, T., Finkenauer, C., & Keijsers, L. (2013). Shared secrets versus secrets kept private are linked to better adolescent adjustment. *Journal of Adolescence*, 36(1), 55-64. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2012.09.005
- Joffe, H. (2012). Thematic analysis. *Qualitative research methods in mental health and psychotherapy*, 209–223. doi:10.1002/9781119973249.ch15
- Kaushansky, D., Cox, J., Dodson, C., McNeeley, M., Kumar, S., & Iverson, E. (2016). Living a secret: Disclosure among adolescents and young adults with chronic illnesses. *Chronic Illness*, 13(1), 49-61. doi: 10.1177/1742395316655855

- Kelly, A. E., & Yip, J. J. (2006). Is keeping a secret or being a secretive person linked to psychological symptoms? *Journal of Personality*, 74(5), 1349-1370. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6494.2006.00413.x
- Maas, J., Wismeijer, A. A. J., & Van Assen, M. (2018). Associations between secret-keeping and quality of life in older adults. *The International Journal Of Aging And Human Development*, 88(3), 250-265. doi :10.1177/0091415018758447
- Maas, J., Wismeijer, A. A. J., Van Assen, M., & Aquarius, A. E. (2012). Is it bad to have secrets? Cognitive preoccupation as a toxic element of secrecy. *International Journal of Clinical and Health Psychology*, 12(1), 23-37. Retrieved from <https://psycnet.apa.org/>
- Mackworth-Young, C., Bond, V., & Wringe, A. (2020). Secrets and silence: agency of young women managing HIV disclosure. *Medical Anthropology: cross-cultural studies in health and illness*. ISSN 0145-9740 <https://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/id/eprint/4656155>
- Magill, K. (2020). PostSecret Project founder to speak at AU. The Eagle. Retrieved from <https://www.theeagleonline.com/article/2016/02/frank-warren-au>
- Marshall, M. N. (1996). Sampling for qualitative research. *Family Practice*, 13(6), 522-525. doi:10.1093/fampra/13.6.522
- Motter, J. L. (2012). The PostSecret project: PostSecret, <http://www.postsecret.com>. *Studies in Art Education*, 52(4), 342-346.
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1). doi:10.1177/1609406917733847
- Palaganas, E. C., Sanchez, M. C., Molintas, V. P., & Caricativo, R. D. (2017). Reflexivity in qualitative research: A journey of learning. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(2), 426-438. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication>
- Percy, W. H., Kostere, K., & Kostere, S. (2015). Generic qualitative research in psychology. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(2), 76-85. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss2/7>
- Poletti, A. (2011). Intimate economies: PostSecret and the affect of confession. *Biography*, 34(1), 25-36. doi:10.1353/bio.2011.0000
- Reavey, P., & Johnson, K. (2017). Visual approaches: using and interpreting images. In Willig, C., & Stainton-Rogers, W. *The SAGE Handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (pp. 354-373). London: SAGE Publications Ltd doi: 10.4135/9781526405555

- Rodrigue, T. K. (2012). PostSecret as imagetext: The reclamation of traumatic experiences and identity. In A. Ofra & W. Lauren (Ed.), *The future of text and image: Collected essays on literary and visual conjunctures* (pp. 40-66). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing
- Shaw, R. (2010). Embedding reflexivity within experiential qualitative psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 7(3), 233–243. doi:10.1080/14780880802699092
- Sideri, M., Kitsiou, A., Kalloniatis, C., & Gritzalis, S. (2017). Sharing secrets, revealing thoughts and feelings: perceptions about disclosure practices and anonymity in a FB university students' community. *International Journal Of Electronic Governance*, 9(3/4), 361. doi: 10.1504/ijeg.2017.088216
- Slepian, M. L., & Bastian, B. (2017). Truth or punishment: Secrecy and punishing the self. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 43(11), 1595-1611. doi:10.1177/0146167217717245
- Slepian, M. L., Chun, J. S., & Mason, M. F. (2017). The experience of secrecy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 113(1), 1-33. doi:10.1037/pspa0000085
- Slepian, M. L., Kirby, J. N., & Kalokerinos, E. K. (2020). Shame, guilt, and secrets on the mind. *Emotion*, 20(2), 323-328. doi:10.1037/emo0000542
- Slepian, M. L., Masicampo, E. J., & Ambady, N. (2014). Relieving the burdens of secrecy: Revealing secrets influences judgements of hill slant and distance. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 5(3), 293-300. doi:10.1177/1948550613498516
- Slepian, M. L., Masicampo, E. J., & Galinsky, A. D. (2016). The hidden effects of recalling secrets: Assimilation, contrast, and the burdens of secrecy. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 145(8), 27-48. doi:10.1037/xge0000194
- Slepian, M. L., Masicampo, E. J., Toosi, N. R., & Ambady, N. (2012). The physical burdens of secrecy. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 141(4), 619-624. doi:10.1037/a0027598
- Smirnova, M. (2016). “I am a cheerleader, but secretly I deal drugs” Authenticity through concealment and disclosure. *Symbolic Interaction*, 39(1), 26-44. doi: 10.1002/symb.208
- Squire, C. (2015). Partial Secrets. *Current Anthropology*, 56(S12), S201-S210. doi: 10.1086/683299

- Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology*, 17-37. doi:10.4135/9781526405555
- Warren, F. (2020). Half a million secrets. Ted.com. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/frank_warren_half_a_million_secrets?language=en
- Willig, C., & Stainton-Rogers, W. (2008). *The SAGE Handbook of qualitative research in psychology*. London: SAGE Publications.

Appendix A
Students' Research Participation Programme (SRPP) Advertisement

Tell us your secret and get 2 SRPP points and stand a chance to win a R500 shopping voucher!

Dear student,

Do you have a secret? What if you could share that secret without anyone knowing it was yours? How would you express that secret? We are two Honours students in the Department of Psychology at UCT and coupled with our research supervisor, Dr Maxine Spedding, we are interested in the kinds of secrets that students keep and how they would choose to illustrate them when there is an opportunity to do so anonymously.

Who may participate

In order to participate in this study, you must meet the following criteria:

- Be 18 years of age or older
- Be registered as an undergraduate psychology student at the University of Cape Town

How to participate

This study involves you, the participant, to create and submit a digital postcard which tells your secret anonymously to our research website. To do this, use a combination of text and image in any way you choose to share your secret. You can either create a physical postcard and take a photo of it or you could instead take a photo and digitally impose text on the photo and upload it to our study website (please visit postsecret.com or @postsecret on Instagram for some examples of real postcards exhibited for the PostSecret project). Upon completion of your upload, a proof of participation code will be generated which you may then send to our research study email (secretsprojectuct@gmail.com), along with your relevant SRPP information, so that your 2 SRPP points may be allocated to you and. If you wish to be entered into the raffle for a R500 shopping voucher, please include your name and contact details. An online exhibition of all the secrets will be created and we will send you the website address so that you can see them all. We will only

include your secret in the exhibition if you give us permission to. Submission of secrets will be open on the website from now until the 14th of August.

Risks and Benefits

There is some risk to participating in this study. Your secrets, although anonymous, will be displayed online and you may experience emotional distress during the creation of your postcard. Therefore various helpline numbers are provided below, which will also be emailed to you upon receipt of your participation code. If you should choose to withdraw your secret at any point after its submission, you will have to identify your secret to the researchers so that it may be pulled from the data set and destroyed.

The indirect benefits of this study include the contribution to our understanding and knowledge of secret content and disclosure behaviour and is an opportunity to participate in novel research.

Confidentiality

The researchers and supervisor will have access to your secrets and the secrets will be stored in a secure space. However, with your permission, we would like to create an exhibition of all the secrets that we collect, in which case, your secret will be on a public online platform, but you will remain anonymous. The submission of your secret (to be done on the website) will be kept completely separate to your SRPP or raffle ticket information (via email) so that even the researchers and supervisor will be unable to link the anonymous submission to the names of those who have submitted secrets.

The possible exhibition of an image of your secret on the study website will **not** contain your personal/identifying details and if this study should be published your personal details will **never** be divulged or included in the publication.

Participants may choose to withdraw secret submission at any time by contacting the researchers, supervisor, or by emailing the research study email address.

If you wish to participate in this study, please follow this link to get started:

uctpostcardsecretproject.com

If you wish to gain more information and insight into the inspiration for this project please follow the link (<https://postsecret.com/>)

Useful contact information for help and/or questions:

Jamie Traut (Researcher): 076 359 6800/trtjam006@myuct.ac.za

Nuha Limbada (Researcher): 082 470 0642/ lmbnuh001 @myuct.ac.za

Dr Maxine Spedding (Supervisor): maxine.spedding@uct.ac.za

Rosalind Adams (Ethics committee member): Rosalind.Adams@uct.ac.za

Mental health helplines and services:

LifeLine National Counselling Line: 0861 322 322

Student Wellness Services: 021 650 1020/17

Urgent/ 24hr Helpline:

(SADAG): 0800 456 789

(SADAG) UCT Student Careline: 0800 24 25 26

Sexual Violence:

UCT's Sexual Assault Response Team (SART): 072 393 7824

Campus Protection Services: 080 650 2222 (this number is behind your student card as well for any other emergency)

Substance abuse:

Alcoholics Anonymous South Africa- National helpline: 0861 HELPAA (435 722)

Narcotics Anonymous SA- National 24-hour helpline: 083 900 MY NA (083 900 69 62)

Website: www.na.org.za

SA National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (SANCA) – Western Cape: (021)
945 4080/1 or www.sancawc.co.za

Appendix B
Application for Ethical Approval Form

**UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY
APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL TO CONDUCT PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH**

Section A	Proposal Identification Details	To be completed by all applicants
Section B	Study Information	To be completed for all studies
Section C	Financial and Contractual Information	To be completed by all applicants
Section D	Declaration on Conflict of Interest	To be completed by all applicants
Section E	Ethical and Legal Aspects	To be completed by all applicants
Section F	Checklist	To be completed by all applicants



Section A: Proposal identification details.

1. Title of the proposal/protocol: A thematic analysis of the anonymously-disclosed secrets of undergraduate psychology students.			
2. Has this protocol been submitted to any other Ethical Review Committee?		Yes	No X
2.1 If so, list which institutions and any reference numbers.			

2.2 What was/were the outcome/s of these applications?			
3. Is this proposal being submitted for ethical approval for an amendment to a protocol previously approved by this committee?	Yes		No X
3.1 If so, what was the previous protocol's reference number?			

4. Investigator details

4.1 Principal Investigator (if a student project, the student is the principal investigator):

Title	Initials & Last Name	Department and Institution	Phone	Email	Signature	Date
Ms	N. Limbada	Psychology, University of Cape Town	082 470 0642	N.Limbada@hotmail.com		18/04/2020
Ms	J. Traut	Psychology, University of Cape Town	076 359 6800	jamietraut@gmail.com		18/04/2020

4.1.1 (If different to 4.1 above) UCT Principal Investigator

Title	Initials & Last Name	Department and Institution	Phone	Email	Signature	Date

4.2 Co-investigators: (if a student project, add the supervisor's name here)

Title	Initials & Last Name	Department and Institution	Phone	Email

Dr	M. F. Spedding	Psychology, University of Cape Town	021 650 3425	maxine.spedding @uct.ac.za
----	----------------	--	-----------------	-------------------------------

5. Is the study being undertaken for a higher degree?	Yes X	No
If yes:		
5.1 What degree? Bachelor of Social Sciences Honours in Psychology		
5.2 Student name: Nuha Limbada and Jamie Traut		
5.3 Supervisor name: Dr Maxie F. Spedding		
5.4 In what department is the degree? Psychology		

Section B: Study Information (summarize the information contained in the proposal).

6. Who will act as participants in the study?

Registered undergraduate psychology students at the University of Cape Town who are over the age of 18.

7. Estimated number of participants:

We are aiming to have around 50 participants.

8. Estimated duration of study:

The data collection aspect of this study is set to be completed by August and the research project final will be handed completed by November.

9. Location of study (e.g. UCT, school, hospital, etc., where you will gather data from the participants):

The data will be gathered online via a website created specifically for the research study and SRPP details or contact details for raffle will be collected via email.

10. Recruitment: Please describe how and from where the participants will be recruited. Attach a copy of any posters or advertisements to be used.

Participants will be recruited using the SRPP system at The University of Cape Town. The SRPP advertisement can be found under Appendix A of this document.

11. Vulnerable groups: Are there pre-existing vulnerabilities associated with the proposed participants, e.g., relating to pre-existing physiological or health conditions, cognitive or emotional factors, and socio-economic or legal status?

No.

If yes, explain briefly what vulnerability would entail in the study, and how you propose to safeguard participants' wellbeing.

12. Risks: Briefly describe the research risk associated with your study, i.e. the probability and magnitude of harms participants may experience. Minimal risk means that the probability and magnitude of harm due to participation in the research are no greater than that encountered by participants in their everyday lives.

The participation in this study poses slight risk, as their secrets, although completely anonymously, will be displayed on the research website publically should they consent to it. Participants may become distressed whilst creating their secret postcards. Additionally, participants will be

18. Does the protocol comply with UCT's Intellectual Property Rights Policy (including ownership of the raw data)?	Yes X		No
--	-----------------	--	----

Section C: Financial and contractual information

19. Is the study being sponsored or funded?	Yes		No X
If yes: 19.1 Who is the sponsor/funder of the study?			
19.2 Are there any restrictions or conditions attached to publication and/or presentation of the study results?	Yes		No X
19.3 Does the contract specifically recognize the independence of the researchers involved?	Yes		No X
(Note that any such restrictions or conditions contained in funding contracts must be made available to the Committee along with the proposal.)			
20. Will additional costs be incurred by the department?	Yes		No X

20.1 If yes, specify these costs:

Section D: Statement on Conflict of Interest

The researcher is expected to declare to the Committee the presence of any potential or existing conflict of interest that may potentially pose a threat to the scientific integrity and ethical conduct of any research in the Department. The committee will decide whether such conflicts are sufficient as to warrant consideration of their impact on the ethical conduct of the study.

Disclosure of conflict of interest does not imply that a study will be deemed unethical, as the mere existence of a conflict of interest does not mean that a study cannot be conducted ethically. However, failure to declare to the Committee a conflict of interest known to the researcher at the outset of the study will be deemed to be unethical conduct.

Researchers are therefore expected to sign **either** one of the two declarations below.

a)

As the Principal Researchers in this study (Nuha Limbada and Jamie Traut), we hereby declare that we are **not aware** of any potential conflict of interest which may influence my ethical conduct of this study.



Signature:

Date: 18 April 2020



Signature:

Date: 18 April 2020

Section E: Ethical and legal aspects

21. Have you read the UCT Code for Research involving Human Subjects (available from the UCT website)?	Yes X		No
--	-----------------	--	----

Section F: Checklist

Application form	1 electronic copy	X
Covering letter and all other correspondence (e.g., ethics approval from other bodies, letters to parents, etc.)	1 electronic copy	X
Detailed proposal, including a 200-word summary/abstract	1 electronic copy	X
Consent/Assent form/s	1 electronic copy	X
Participant information sheet/Debriefing form (if separate from consent form)	1 electronic copy	X
Other documents (e.g., advertising posters)	1 electronic copy	X

IMPORTANT NOTES:

- All applicable sections of this application form must be filled in OR justified why not.

- All applicable signatures must be sought
- All additional number of copies must be included with application
- All incomplete applications will be returned to the applicant, leading to delays in review.

Version February 2017

Appendix C
Informed Consent Form

CONSENT FORM



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Study Title:

**A thematic analysis of the anonymously-disclosed secrets of undergraduate
psychology students**

RESEARCHER: Jamie Traut & Nuha Limbada

SUPERVISOR: Dr Maxine Spedding

Dear student,

You are being invited to participate in a research study being led by researchers from the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town. The purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of secret-keeping/anonymous secret disclosure behaviour among UCT students. The reason why we want to know more about this is because keeping and sharing secrets is a common social practice that may have mental health impacts. There are also growing platforms for anonymous sharing of personal information, yet there is a lack of research about this phenomenon. This study invites you to anonymously submit a secret via an online platform, which may later be displayed on this website for the second part of this research project (also completely anonymously). If you would like more information on the inspiration behind this research, please visit <https://postsecret.com/>.

Why are you being invited to participate?

You are being asked to participate because you are a UCT undergraduate student studying within the Department of Psychology.

What does participation involve?

Should you agree to take part in this study and give consent after reading this form, you will be invited to create a digital postcard that includes both image and text to convey your secret. Please use text and any images to share your secret (please visit PostSecret's Instagram page, @postsecret, for examples of real-life secrets people have shared anonymously). You may create the postcard by hand or digitally. When completed, this should be uploaded onto the website in the form of an image file. The website has been designed so that you cannot be identified in any way nor associated with the secret that you upload. The researchers will be able to access your anonymously uploaded file and will analyse it in accordance with the research purpose without knowing your identity.

Thereafter you will be directed to another web page on which a random code will be generated which will act as proof of participation. You will be invited to send a photo of this code to an email address which has been created for the research project (secretsprojectuct@gmail.com), please include your student number and course code in order for your 2 SRPP points to be allocated. If

you would like to enter the raffle to win a R500 shopping voucher please include your name and contact details.

As part of a larger two-part project, we would like to create an online exhibition of all the secrets that we collect. If you consent to it, your secret may form part of an exhibition of secrets on the same website and the anonymous image of your secret will be displayed. Your secrets may be used in the second study which looks at the responses to anonymously shared secrets. A very small group of UCT students will be invited to respond to secrets displayed in the online exhibition. If you upload a secret and do not consent to the exhibition of the secret as well it will not be put up on the website. Your secret will remain anonymous and your identity will not be known if you do choose to consent to the exhibition. Participating in this study is entirely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate and there will be no consequences if you decide not to.

Please note submission of secrets will be open on the website from the 7th of September until the 21st of August.

What will it cost to participate?

While there are no direct costs associated with participating in the study, participating will take approximately 30 + minutes of your time depending on how creative you choose to be. You may incur data usage costs if you are not using Wi-Fi as this study utilizes an online platform. You may also incur travel and/or printing and scanning costs if you don't have free access to a printer/scanner should you choose to scan your secret instead of taking a photo of it and then uploading it.

What will you get in return?

In exchange for your participation, you will receive two student research participation points (SRPP). These points will be carried forward to the next year. You may also opt to enter a raffle to stand a chance to win a R500 shopping voucher in exchange for your participation.

What are the risks associated with participating?

Participating in the study is likely to hold some risk to you as your secret will be analysed by the researchers and potentially be put on the website for the exhibition, should you decide to give consent to that. Some participants may find that talking about certain subjects is distressing, leading to the experience of some discomfort. You are free to choose not to disclose a secret that you feel is too personal or may cause you distress- there are no rules demanding a certain type of secret as long as you hold it as truth. Again, there will be no consequences for you in these instances. If you do find that participating in this study has made you feel uncomfortable or has brought up difficult or painful feelings, a list of possible resources that you can use/contact will be provided to you via email. If you have questions or concerns about the study, please feel free to contact either the researcher or the research supervisor with the contact details provided below.

Are there any benefits to participating?

There are no direct benefits to you as a participant. We hope that the information gathered in this study will help us to understand more about secret disclosure under anonymity. We hope that you derive some benefit from making an important contribution to our understanding of this, as this is quite novel research.

How will your identity and information be protected?

The website used throughout this research will allow for anonymous upload of your secret, we will have no personal information of you that can be traced back to the secret. Your consent form, SRPP and raffle ticket information will be kept and dealt with completely separately to your secret via email. The secret will only be uploaded on to the website, which again, is anonymous.

The information that you provide us with will be used to write an Honours thesis and may be published in an academic journal. From time to time, the popular media also takes an interest in the research that we produce. However, all of your identifying information, including your name and any other information that makes you identifiable to someone else will **not** appear in this research report or in any publications.

What happens if you change your mind about participating?

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary, which means that you are welcome to change your mind about participation without consequence to you. If you decide to participate in the research project, you can decide to stop at any time and you will not need to provide any explanation for why you would like to stop. However, withdrawing from the study after you have submitted your secret will mean you will have to provide the researchers with your details and identify your secret. Only the researchers will have access to your information and your secret. Your data will then not be used in any shape or form within the study and your secret will be virtually destroyed.

If you have questions about the study, please feel free to contact the following people:

Jamie Traut (Researcher): 076 359 6800/trtjam006@myuct.ac.za

Nuha Limbada (Researcher): 082 470 0642/ lmbnuh001@myuct.ac.za

Dr Maxine Spedding (Supervisor): 021 650 3452 / maxine.spedding@uct.ac.za

If you have any questions, comments or complaints about your rights as a study participant, please contact Ms Rosalind Adams at the Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town: 021 650 3417 or rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za

I have read / have been read the information contained in the consent form and I am satisfied with my understanding of the study, the possible benefits, risks and alternatives. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction. I hereby voluntarily consent to participate in the research study as described. I have been offered copies of this consent form.

Please tick box: Yes **No**

I give permission to the researchers to display an image of my secret on an online exhibition for others to view.

Please tick box: Yes **No**

Appendix D

Emergency Mental Health Contact List

Mental health helplines and services:

LifeLine National Counselling Line: 0861 322 322

Student Wellness Services: 021 650 1020/17

Urgent/ 24hr Helpline:

(SADAG): 0800 456 789

(SADAG) UCT Student Careline: 0800 24 25 26

Sexual Violence:

UCT's Sexual Assault Response Team (SART): 072 393 7824

Campus Protection Services: 080 650 2222 (this number is behind your student card as well for any other emergency)

Substance abuse:

Alcoholics Anonymous South Africa- National helpline: 0861 HELPAA (435 722)

Narcotics Anonymous SA- National 24-hour helpline: 083 900 MY NA (083 900 69 62)

Website: www.na.org.za

SA National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (SANCA) – Western Cape: (021) 945 4080/1 or www.sancawc.co.za

Appendix E

Research Website Mock-up

UCT postcard secret project.

Welcome to the UCT postcard secret project website. Below you will find information on this study and instruction on how to participate. We thank you for your time and consideration to be apart of this project, which has been inspired by the work of Frank Warren and the PostSecret project. Please visit <https://postsecret.com/> for more information on the PostSecret project.

The name and photo associated with your Google account will be recorded when you upload files and submit this form. Not jamietraut@gmail.com? [Switch account](#)

* Required

Consent form

CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Study Title: A thematic analysis of the anonymously-disclosed secrets of undergraduate psychology students

RESEARCHER: Jamie Traut & Nuha Limbada

SUPERVISOR: Dr Maxine Spedding

Dear student,

You are being invited to participate in a research study being led by researchers from the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town. The purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of secret-keeping/anonymous secret disclosure behaviour among UCT students. The reason why we want to know more about this is as keeping and sharing secrets is a common social practice that may have mental health impacts. There are also growing platforms for anonymous sharing of personal information, yet there is a lack of research about this phenomenon. This study invites you to anonymously submit a secret via an online platform, which may later be displayed on this website for the second part of this research project (also completely anonymously). If you would like more information on the inspiration behind this research, please visit <https://postsecret.com/>.

Why are you being invited to participate?

You are being asked to participate because you are a UCT undergraduate student studying within the Department of Psychology.

What does participation involve?

Should you agree to take part in this study and give consent after reading this form, you will be invited to create a digital postcard that includes both image and text to convey your secret. Please use text and any

create a digital postcard that includes both image and text to convey your secret. Please use text and any images to share your secret (please visit PostSecret's Instagram page, @postsecret, for examples of real-life secrets people have shared anonymously). You may create the postcard by hand or digitally. When completed, this should be uploaded onto the website in the form of an image file. The website has been designed so that you cannot be identified in any way nor associated with the secret that you upload. The researchers will be able to access your anonymously uploaded file and will analyse it in accordance with the research purpose without knowing your identity.

Thereafter you will be directed to another web page on which a random code will be generated which will act as proof of participation. You will be invited to send a photo of this code to an email address which has been created for the research project (secretsprojectuct@gmail.com), please include your student number and course code in order for your SRPP points to be allocated.

As part of a larger two-part project, we would like to create an online exhibition of all the secrets that we collect. If you consent to it, your secret may form part of an exhibition of secrets on the same website and the anonymous image of your secret will be displayed. Your secrets may be used in the second study which looks at the responses to anonymously shared secrets. A very small group of UCT students will be invited to respond to secrets displayed in the online exhibition. If you upload a secret and do not consent to the exhibition of the secret as well it will not be put up on the website. Your secret will remain anonymous and your identity will not be known if you do choose to consent to the exhibition. Participating in this study is entirely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate and there will be no consequences if you decide not to.

Please not submission of secrets will be open on the website from now until the 14th of August.

What will it cost to participate?

While there are no direct costs associated with participating in the study, participating will take approximately 30 + minutes of your time depending on how creative you choose to be. You may incur data usage costs if you are not using Wi-Fi as this study utilizes an online platform. You may also incur travel and/or printing and scanning costs if you don't have free access to a printer/scanner should you choose to scan your secret instead of taking a photo of it and then uploading it.

What will you get in return?

In exchange for your participation, you will receive two student research participation points (SRPP). These points will be carried forward to the next yer.

What are the risks associated with participating?

Participating in the study is likely to hold some risk to you as your secret will be analysed by the researchers and potentially be put on the website for the exhibition, should you decide to give consent to that. Some participants may find that talking about certain subjects is distressing, leading to the experience of some discomfort. You are free to choose not to disclose a secret that you feel is too personal or may cause you distress- there are no rules demanding a certain type of secret as long as you hold it as truth. Again, there will be no consequences for you in these instances. If you do find that participating in this study has made you feel uncomfortable or has brought up difficult or painful feelings,

participating in this study has made you feel uncomfortable or has brought up difficult or painful feelings, a list of possible resources that you can use/contact will be provided to you via email. If you have questions or concerns about the study, please feel free to contact either the researcher or the research supervisor with the contact details provided below.

Are there any benefits to participating?

There are no direct benefits to participation. We hope that the information gathered in this study will help us to understand more about secret disclosure under anonymity. We hope that you derive some benefit from making an important contribution to our understanding of this, as this is quite novel research.

How will your identity and information be protected?

The website used throughout this research will allow for the anonymous upload of your secret, we will have no personal information of you that can be traced back to the secret. Your consent form and SRPP information will be kept and dealt with completely separately to your secret via email. The secret will only be uploaded on to the website, which again, is anonymous.

The information that you provide us with will be used to write an Honours thesis and may be published in an academic journal. From time to time, the popular media also takes an interest in the research that we produce. However, all of your identifying information, including your name and any other information that makes you identifiable to someone else will not appear in this research report or in any publications.

What happens if you change your mind about participating?

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary, which means that you are welcome to change your mind about participation without consequence to you. If you decide to participate in the research project, you can decide to stop at any time and you will not need to provide any explanation for why you would like to stop. However, withdrawing from the study after you have submitted your secret will mean you will have to provide the researchers with your details and identify your secret. Only the researchers will have access to your information and your secret. Your data will then not be used in any shape or form within the study and your secret will be virtually destroyed.

If you have questions about the study, please feel free to contact the following people:

Jamie Traut (Researcher): 076 359 6800/ trtjam006@myuct.ac.za

Nuha Limbada (Researcher): 082 470 0642/ imbnuh001@myuct.ac.za

Dr Maxine Spedding (Supervisor): 021 650 3452 / maxine.spedding@uct.ac.za

If you have any questions, comments or complaints about your rights as a study participant, please contact Ms Rosalind Adams at the Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town: 021 650 3417 or rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za

I have read/have been read the information contained in the consent form and I am satisfied with my understanding of the study, the possible benefits, risks and alternatives. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction. I hereby voluntarily consent to participate in the research by uploading an image/test postcard of my secret anonymously to this website for the researchers to look at, analyse and comment on in their thesis. *

Yes

No

Please upload the image of your postcard here. *

 Add file

I give permission to the researchers to display an image of my secret on an online exhibition for others to view and respond to. *

Yes

No

We thank you for your participation. Please capture this QR code as evidence of your participation and send it to secretsprojectuct@gmail.com along with your student number and appropriate course code to receive your SRPP points.



Resource list- please feel free to contact any of the below organisations should you require any support and/or assistance.

Mental health helplines and services:

LifeLine National Counselling Line: 0861 322 322

Student Wellness Services: 021 650 1020/17

Urgent/ 24hr Helpline:

(SADAG): 0800 456 789

(SADAG) UCT Student Careline: 0800 24 25 26

Sexual Violence:

UCT's Sexual Assault Response Team (SART): 072 393 7824

Campus Protection Services: 080 650 2222 (this number is behind your student card as well for any other emergency)

Substance abuse:

UCT's Sexual Assault Response Team (SART): 072 393 7824

Campus Protection Services: 080 650 2222 (this number is behind your student card as well for any other emergency)

Substance abuse:

Alcoholics Anonymous South Africa- National helpline: 0861 HELPAA (435 722)

Narcotics Anonymous SA- National 24-hour helpline: 083 900 MY NA (083 900 69 62)

Website: www.na.org.za

SA National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (SANCA) – Western Cape: (021) 945 4080/1 or www.sancawc.co.za

Submit

This content is neither created nor endorsed by Google. [Report Abuse](#) - [Terms of Service](#) - [Privacy Policy](#)

Appendix F

Secrets under the theme “Imagery and symbolism”

Secret 2



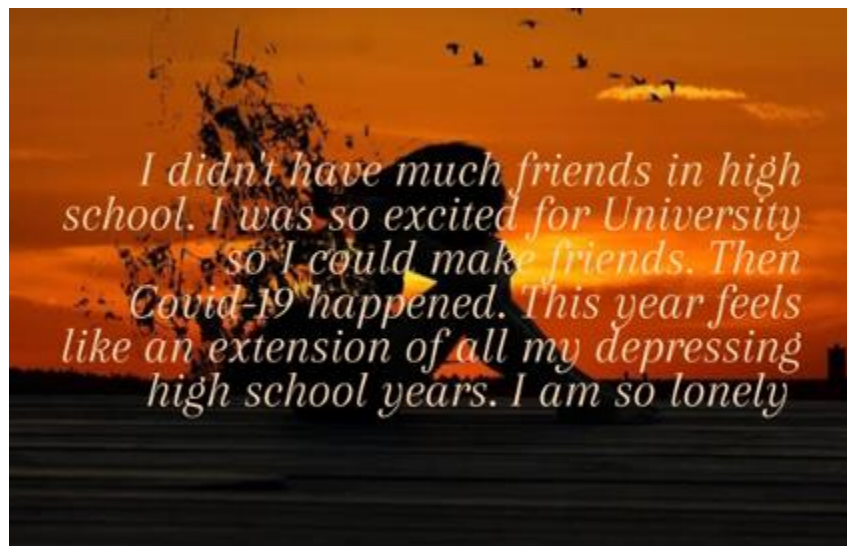
Secret 7



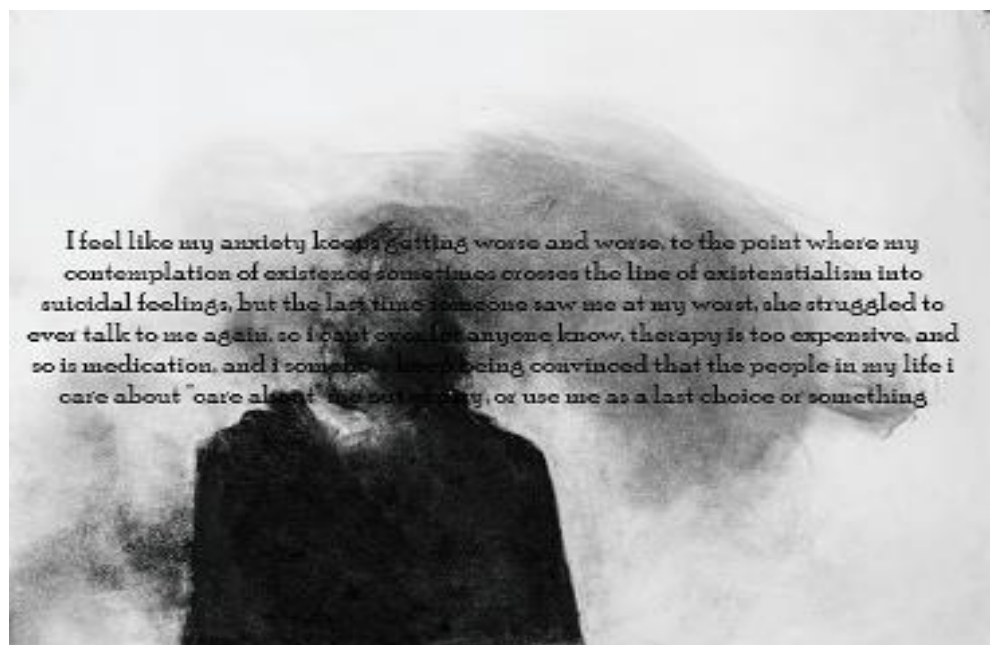
Appendix G

Secrets under the theme "Isolation and loneliness"

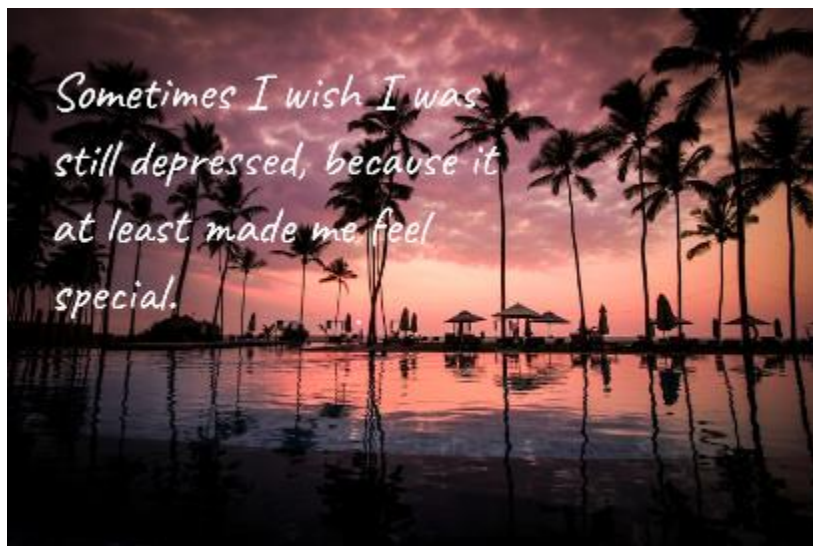
Secret 4



Secret 12



Secret 13



Secret 15

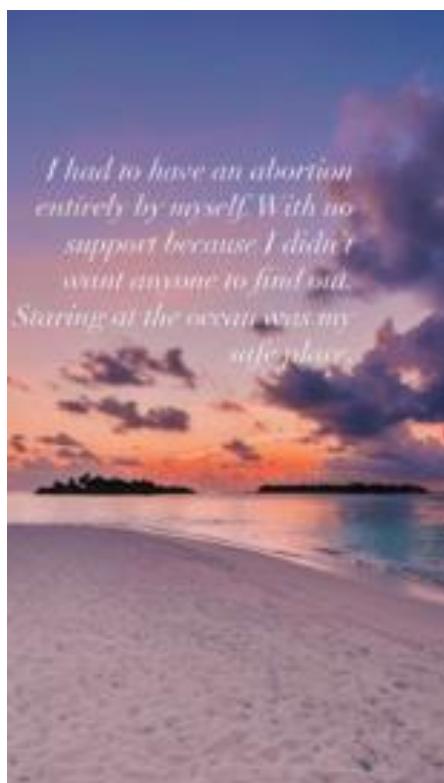


Secret 17



I never truly confide in others and the isolation makes me very lonely. I can't even trust this website enough to open up to it.

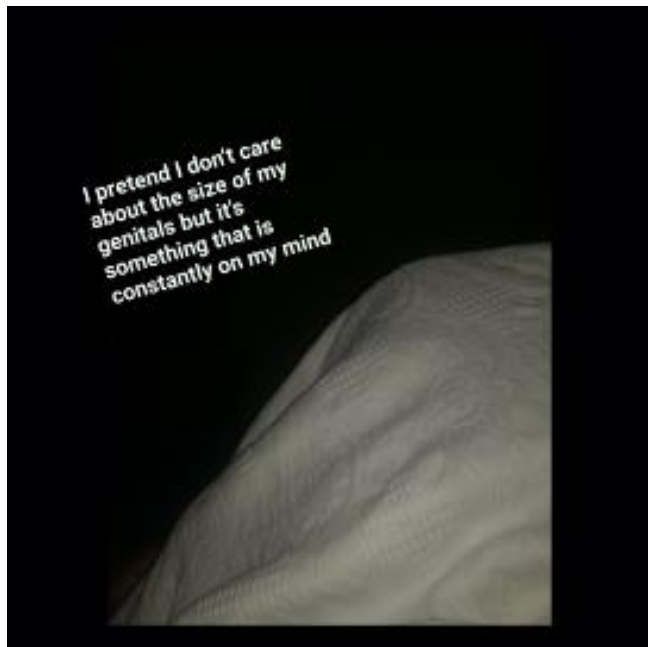
Secret 20



Appendix H

Secrets under the theme "Body dissatisfaction"

Secret 14



Secret 15



Appendix I

Secrets under the theme “Secret crush or secret relationship”

Secret 8



Secret 18



Secret 23



Appendix J

Secrets under the theme “Sexual trauma/rape”

Secret 1



Secret 10



Appendix K

Secrets under the theme “Shame, hurt and fear”

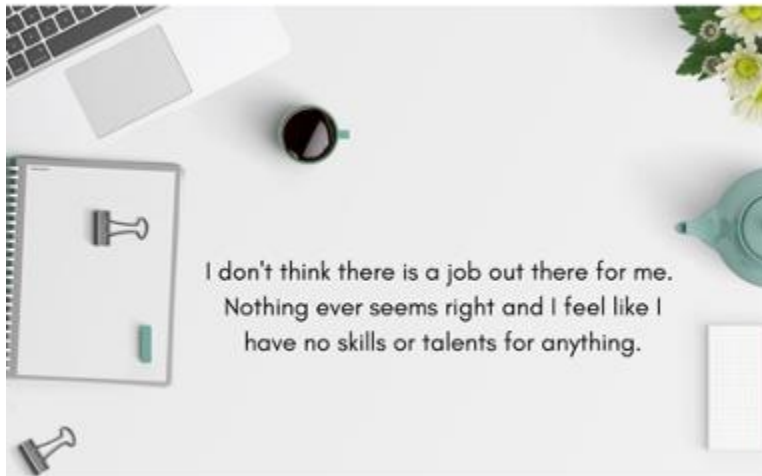
Secret 5



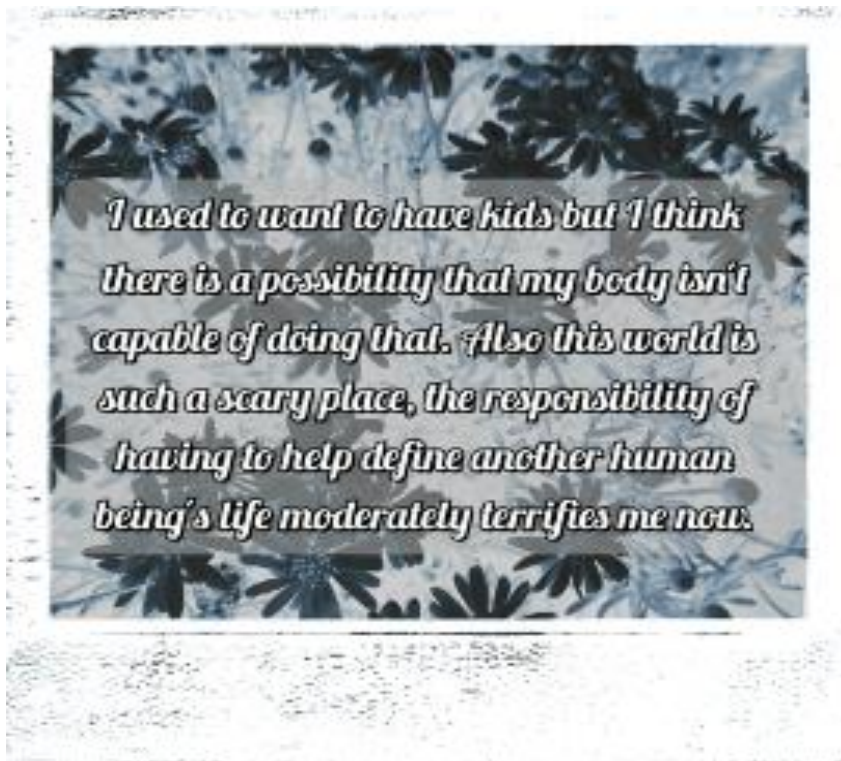
Secret 6

I was 17, last year to be specific. I was around the June exams and it was winter so I didn't sleep much because I had to study and cover work. As I tried not to sleep, I would end up passing out, and I had early morning classes. I would always wake up late and at school they would punish us if we arrive late. So, for me to make up for lost time when I woke up, I had to sacrifice hygiene. I would not take a shower in the morning, but I would only apply deodorant. The embarrassing thing is that I didn't shower at night. This kept on going on for week. No really noticed, I still can't believe it.

Secret 9



Secret 11



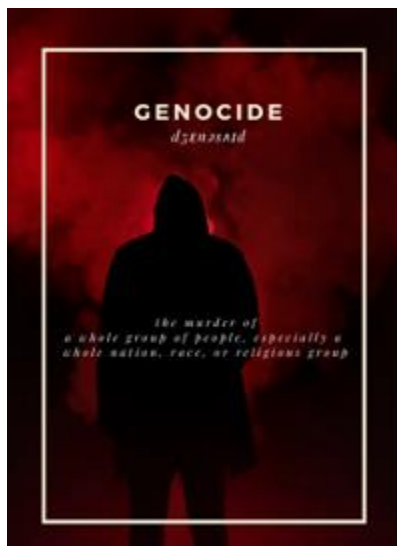
Secret 16



Secret 22



Secret 24



It's not something I'm proud of but I've had thoughts about killing people, a certain group of people. I hate that I have so much resentment for them. But don't worry I am working on getting rid of these thoughts.

Appendix L

Secrets under the theme “Independence from parents”

Secret 3

I haven't got round to telling my folks a lot about me, like the fact that I changed my degree from a science course to humanities, am questioning my sexuality, use cannabis habitually and that I've already had sex. They're conservative, so it should be an interesting conversation if ever I gather the strength for it.

Secret 19



Secret 21

