

How people respond to anonymously disclosed secrets

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Abstract

People keep secrets for many reasons, including to protect themselves from judgement and rejection. Past research has focused on the perspective of people who keep secrets, but there has been minimal research focusing on how people respond when others disclose their secrets to them. Even less is known about how people on the receiving end of secret disclosure respond to *anonymously* disclosed secrets. Thus, this research aimed to explore how people respond to anonymously disclosed secrets. This qualitative study used a social phenomenological theoretical framework. The sample consisted of 10 undergraduate psychology students at UCT. Data collection methods involved semi-structured individual interviews based on an exhibition of anonymously disclosed secrets developed through a separate research project. The data was analysed using thematic analysis. The themes that emerged from the data were relatability, relief, curiosity, anonymity, and sadness, which are indicative of the distinguishing features of the participants' responses to the secrets. The results from this study have societal implications regarding the meaning behind sociocultural norms and taboos. Anonymous secret disclosure platforms can allow for a collective redefinition of societal norms without having to reveal vulnerable parts of ourselves (with identification) publicly. Our unshared realities become shared realities, thus allowing for collective healing, normalisation of shameful or painful experiences and emotions, and increasing awareness around mental health.

Keywords: responses, anonymous, secret, disclosure

Keeping secrets is an inescapable part of our human experience. We generally understand secrets to be the intentional concealment of information from others (Kelly, 1999). However, Wismeijer (2011) encapsulates secrecy in a more nuanced way: “the conscious and active process of social selective information exchange that uses cognitive resources and can be experienced as an emotional burden with possible physical consequences” (p. 251). Secrecy as a phenomenon has many components, namely concealment, disclosure, anonymity and response (Slepian & Greenaway, 2018; Slepian & Moulton-Tetlock, 2018; Zhang & Dailey, 2018). This study has chosen to focus on responses to anonymously disclosed secrets.

There is substantial literature about responses to secrets disclosed in close relationships, which has personal significance to the discloser and the receiver (Slepian & Greenaway, 2018). Contrastingly, responses to anonymously disclosed secrets, for which there is limited literature, require engagement between the private (the anonymously disclosed secret) and the public (respondents with no emotional attachment to the ‘revealer’ of the secret) (Motter, 2011b). On the surface this interaction shows how individual people respond to and are affected by others’ secrets when unencumbered by personal loyalties, but more deeply it can give insight into societal norms and values, creating potential for more informed interventions (Slepian, Masicampo, & Ambady, 2014). Therefore, this study sought to record the responses of South African university students to an exhibition of anonymously disclosed secrets and to use these responses to flesh out the information we have about what anonymity permits for the responder of secrets, and to explore the reality of secrecy within South Africa (Fleming & Kruger, 2013; Zhang & Dailey, 2018).

Literature Review

Research on secrecy is surprisingly limited but of that literature there are three focus areas: how secret-keeping and disclosure have significant effects on mental health and relational well-being; types of secret disclosure; and types of responses to secret disclosure (Slepian & Greenaway, 2018; Slepian & Moulton-Tetlock, 2018; Zhang & Dailey, 2018).

Secret Concealment

Secret concealment involves three components: the secret being kept, the individual keeping the information from others (the secret concealer); and the audience from which the

secret is being kept (Kelly, 1999). Secret concealment is both an active process - occurring during conversation with another person, and a passive process of mind-wandering - the involuntary gravitation of a person's thoughts to the information they are keeping from others regardless of context, which is the dominant process (Slepian, Chun, & Mason, 2017; Slepian & Moulton-Tetlock, 2018). Additionally, the frequency of mind-wandering to a secret correlates with the gravity of the secret being kept, independently of the content (Slepian & Moulton-Tetlock, 2018).

Slepian's studies have shown that secret concealment is a very common occurrence and that, most people have more than one secret (Lui & Slepian, 2018). These studies have also shown that secret-keeping is primarily used as a tool to avoid social consequences such as criticism, judgement and adverse effects on relationships (Caughlin, Afifi, Carpenter-Theune, & Miller, 2005; Slepian, Kirby, & Kalokerinos, 2020).

Although the act of secret-keeping and the reason behind secret-keeping is the same universally, the content of secrets differs across contexts (Caughlin et al., 2005). In the context of Africa, there is a lack of literature about the social norms of secrecy. In South Africa one main topic of secrecy that has been identified is the experiences of sexual violence by women, whose abuse is significantly underreported due to community silence, shame and powerful societal discourses (Fleming & Kruger, 2013). Although there is some insight, much more research needs to be done in South Africa on secrecy and its social repercussions (Fleming & Kruger, 2013).

The types of responses to anonymously disclosed secrets has an impact on the concealment of specific secrets and the strongly associated fear of social consequences (McCleary-Sills et al., 2016). Positive feedback can reduce negative social associations and create a sense of solidarity, meanwhile further judgement can entrench the need for secret concealment (Maas, Wismeijer, & Van Assen, 2019).

Effect on Relationships

Secret concealment in relationships has many implications (Corsano, Musetti, Caricati, & Magnani, 2017). Keeping secrets within close relationships can help the secret concealer establish autonomy and shield loved ones from pain (Corsano et al., 2017; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). This type of secret concealment can be considered healthy

(Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000). However, secret concealment rooted in fear of criticism can be detrimental (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). Secret concealment in parent-child relationships has been linked to depression, loneliness, anti-social symptoms and a low-quality parental relationship (Corsano et al., 2017). It has also been linked to breakdown in romantic relationships (Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000). In therapeutic relationships, the patient often conceals details that portray them negatively. Conversely, the lack of personal investment between respondents and individuals involved in anonymous secret disclosure, means that there is no fear of personal criticism (Kelly, 1999).

Effect on Health

Studies have shown that secret concealment is associated with negative health effects (Slepian et al., 2017). Secret concealment causes mental fatigue from uncontrolled mind-wandering, cognitive and perceptual burdens and is associated with higher risks of developing mental and physical disease (Kelly, 1999; Slepian, Camp, & Masicampo, 2015; Slepian et al., 2017). In close relationships, the negative health effects of keeping a secret is extended beyond the original secret keeper, equally, to the people that they disclose their secret to, whether or not their confidant is a willing participant (Zhang & Dailey, 2018). This means that confidants, who keep the secret that is disclosed to them, experience mental fatigue, cognitive and perceptual burdens and are at higher risk of developing physical and mental diseases (Kelly, 1999; Slepian et al., 2015; Slepian et al., 2017). In anonymous relationships, the responder is not required to conceal a secret and, therefore, is not affected by the subsequent consequences. However, the respondent may experience negative mental health consequences due to the triggering content of a secret (Flemke, 2009).

Secret Disclosure

The majority of the literature about secrets has found that secret disclosure is associated with well-being (Slepian & Moulton-Tetlock, 2018). There are two parties involved in the process of secret disclosure: the person who discloses the secret (the 'discloser') and the person who receives the secret (the recipient). Some research has shown that the act of disclosing secrets can have a positive influence on the discloser's physical and mental well-being (Kelly, 1999). From the recipients' perspective, secret disclosure can elicit both positive and negative responses (Slepian & Greenaway, 2018; Zhang & Dailey, 2018).

The literature suggests that responses to secrets might differ according to whether the secret discloser is anonymous or not (Caughlin et al., 2005; Motter, 2011a; Rodrigue, 2012; Zhang & Dailey, 2018). Many studies about secrets focus on secret disclosure in personal relationships (Caughlin et al., 2005; Zhang & Dailey, 2018). Some of the recipients' positive responses in these studies included: a sense of intimacy (Slepian & Greenaway, 2018); social support (Slepian & Moulton-Tetlock, 2018); and forgiveness and reconciliation (Slepian & Bastian, 2017). Some of the recipients' negative responses in these studies included: a sense of being burdened (Slepian & Greenaway, 2018); of punishment; and relationship breakdown (Slepian & Bastian, 2017).

Fewer studies about secrets focus on anonymous secret disclosure - many of which are about the PostSecret Project (discussed in the next section) (Motter, 2011a; Rodrigue, 2012). The recipients' positive responses in these studies included: closeness to the discloser; sense of community; empathy or sympathy for the discloser; self-reflection; learning opportunity; identification with others; seeing authenticity in others' lives; reducing loneliness; empowerment; reflexivity and collaborative knowledge construction (Motter, 2011a; Rodrigue, 2012). There were no specific negative responses that emerged from the literature about anonymous secret disclosure.

Keeping secrets is a fundamentally relational process. We often keep secrets from people who are personally invested in us (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). Thus, it is interesting to observe how people *respond to anonymously* disclosed secrets when there is no influence of the relational component (Paxman, 2013). In the case of anonymous secret disclosure, where there is no personal or emotional investment in the discloser, there is a foregrounding of the *content* of the secret as opposed to the *person* who is holding the secret. This could force responders to engage with the content of the secret as opposed to react to the secret in relation to the person attached to that secret (Kelly, 1999). The unique aspect about this interaction for psychologists is that this process could help people gain perspective in the way that they relate to others, and help people to be more open-minded and receptive, as opposed to being quick-to-judge, because the relational component is removed from the equation. Thus, anonymous secret disclosure might reach people in a unique way so that they can relate to the more intimate and vulnerable parts of others, thus increasing a collective sense of empathy and acceptance. Ultimately, this phenomenon may be of interest to

psychologists as they could perhaps create interventions using anonymous secret disclosure in order to improve people's capacity to mentalise (Fonagy & Target, 2006).

PostSecret Project

This study made use of the PostSecret Project model to elicit and explore responses to anonymously disclosed secrets. The PostSecret Project was founded by Frank Warren, a suicide prevention activist based in the United States. The PostSecret Project gives people a platform to disclose secrets anonymously on a postcard to the public. Conceived of as an art project, Warren distributed preaddressed, blank postcards to strangers that invited them to disclose any secret anonymously and to mail the postcard back to him (Paxman, 2013). Warren then compiled the postcards to form a community art project. This project was so successful that he published four books (containing selected postcards) and manages the project online. He publishes new secrets weekly on his website (postsecret.com), as well as social media platforms, including Instagram (@postsecret) and Twitter (@postsecret). Warren currently hosts PostSecret events at universities in the United States. The PostSecret Project exemplifies the human need to disclose our secrets to anyone, as we are not always willing to share our deepest secrets with our relational partners. Thus, the experience of anonymous disclosure can be therapeutic and cathartic (Paxman, 2013).

Rationale

There is a lack of literature specifically on the responses to anonymously disclosed secrets. Most of the literature focuses on responses to disclosed secrets in close relationships (Zhang & Dailey, 2018) or between researchers and participants that interact directly (Fleming & Kruger, 2013). Specifically, there is a lack of research about anonymous secret disclosure and response in South Africa. Furthermore, the literature that does speak to, firstly, disclosure (such as Slepian's several papers) is quantitative, and secondly, to anonymous disclosure, such as the PostSecret Project, falls under the discipline of art education.

Our study aimed to analyse responses to the anonymously disclosed secrets from a qualitative perspective through the discipline of psychology. The nuanced responses to anonymously disclosed secrets has the potential to identify cultural norms and taboos (McCleary-Sills et al., 2016). Anonymous engagement with secrets of a sensitive nature could: give people insight into experiences of traumas that are otherwise normalized; create a

sense of solidarity amongst victims; and ultimately, generate a culture of public healing and empathy rather than one of shame and isolation (Slepian & Kirby, 2018). Thus, the motivation for this study, beyond contributing to the literature, was to connect the private with the public; generate a deeper understanding of societal secrecy; and explore possibilities around generating discussion (Smart, 2011). Additionally, viewing this phenomenon through a qualitative and psychological lens can help to produce deeper social meaning and human connection that can be translated into social action (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

Our study is the second part of a two-part study about students' secrets in the UCT Psychology Department. Part one of the study focused on analysing the image-text content of anonymously disclosed secrets collected using the PostSecret Project framework. The secrets collected in part one of the study were compiled into both an online and Microsoft PowerPoint exhibition. Part two of the study - our study - invited participants to reflect on their experiences of viewing this exhibition. Therefore, our data collection and analysis could only begin once part one was completed.

Theoretical Framework

This study used a social phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is the study of a shared human experience (phenomenon) through a collection of individual insights from people engaged in the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The insights, which focus on 'how' individuals experience the phenomenon, are narrowed down by themes to determine a central crux. Social phenomenology focuses on how the insights and awareness of themselves by participants, constructs their reality and produces their social actions (Jesus et al., 2013). Secrets are products of social and cultural values and norms (Wismeijer, 2011). Social phenomenology was thus deemed most suited to assess responses to anonymously disclosed secrets as this framework allowed us to view responses within the social context from which responders make meaning. Additionally, because this theoretical framework seeks to find commonalities in the personal experiences, of undergraduate psychology students, of the anonymously disclosed secrets, it was very compatible with a thematic analysis approach, which also seeks to find themes and connections, in making meaning of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Methods

Design

This study used qualitative methods to collect data. Qualitative research uses the personal experiences and thoughts of people to generate theory about social phenomena, through a process that is emergent, flexible and context-specific (Sutton & Austin, 2015). This paradigm was believed to be the most appropriate for this study, as it allowed us to engage with and be guided by detailed thoughts and perspectives around anonymously disclosed secrets from which we could then create social meaning and have a deeper understanding of beliefs surrounding this phenomenon. The social phenomenological procedure involved collecting data from participants through in-depth interviews that sought to generate data that addressed two specific questions: What have you experienced in relation to this social phenomenon? How has context affected this? (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This qualitative study used a semi-structured interview design, with which we conducted individual telephonic and video interviews asking participants open-ended questions about their thoughts and feelings in response to viewing the digitised postcards depicting anonymously disclosed secrets.

Sample

Ten undergraduate students in Psychology at UCT were recruited to participate in the study. We recruited participants via convenience sampling by using the students' research participation program (SRPP) in the Psychology Department at UCT. Convenience sampling was best suited as it is inexpensive and required the selection of participants that were most accessible during social distancing (that is, UCT undergraduate psychology students) (Elfil & Negida, 2017).

Procedures

Once ethical approval was obtained for this study, data collection commenced. An advert (Appendix E) was sent to potential participants via the SRPP which outlined the study's purpose, aims and requirements, and potential risks and benefits associated with participation. Potential participants were asked to email us to indicate their interest. We then emailed interested participants a consent form (Appendix B). The consent form required

students to provide their student number in order for us to award them SRPP points following their participation. Once students emailed us back the signed consent form, they were sent both a link to the online exhibition and an attachment of the Microsoft PowerPoint presentation of the exhibition (Appendix F). We asked participants to jot down some thoughts and impressions immediately after they viewed the exhibition in order to keep their thoughts about it fresh. Additionally, via this email, we acquired participant details and availability to then arrange a time for a phone or video call such that the interviews were conducted within a week of each participant viewing the exhibition. The phone or video call was conducted on a secure platform. The participants were asked to sit in a private, quiet place with good reception. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed by the researchers.

Data Collection

This qualitative study used a semi-structured interview design, with which we conducted individual telephonic and video interviews. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule that asked about the participants' feelings and thoughts in response to viewing the digitised postcards depicting anonymously disclosed secrets. (Appendix D). Interviews lasted between 15-30 minutes and were recorded on laptops. The semi-structured interview guide was developed in four phases: evaluating this data collection method as most suitable; gathering all essential information regarding the topic; constructing a preliminary semi-structured interview guide; and piloting the interview guide in the 'outside world'. Due to social distancing, this phase involved us role-playing the interview process with each other and our supervisor reviewing our guide and offering feedback. This refined guide was used with participants (Kallio, Pietila, Johnson, & Docent, 2016). However, we amended the interview schedule after the first few interviews as we found that there were themes emerging that we had not thought of previously.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was more aligned with the phenomenological approach of this study, than interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). While IPA focuses on common patterns of meaning and the unique aspects of individuals, thematic analysis is more focused on the overall meaning created across participants and is flexible in its theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Spiers & Riley, 2019).

Braun and Clarke (2006) have proposed a six-step method of thematic analysis. The first step involves familiarisation of the data. This entailed reading and re-reading the whole body of data, while making rudimentary notes. The second step involves the generation of initial codes. This step involved compartmentalising the data into meaningful sections of information according to the broader questions that our study was addressing. The third step involves searching for themes; the identification of significant patterns in the data. There is no direct rule about how to ascertain themes, rather the focus was on connecting codes that fit together or overlapped. The fourth step involves a review of themes. This step required us to evaluate the crude themes we had previously identified and decide whether they were relevant. The fifth step involves a refinement of themes. This step involved finalising the distinct themes, identifying their essence and understanding how they were related to each other and the broader question. The final step involves the write-up. This required us to summarise our findings and address our research question(s) in a concise report.

The data analysis process began during data collection, so as to work towards achieving saturation. Data analysis was conducted by both researchers, over a period of one month, in the order that the interviews were conducted. Data saturation was achieved after doing 10 interviews.

Ethics

Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee at UCT's Psychology Department. Prior to participation, participants provided signed informed consent via a form (Appendix B) which emphasised voluntary participation and withdrawal without penalty, described the purpose, aims and requirements of the study, outlined the potential risks and benefits of participation; the systems in place to assist participants with possible negative outcomes; maintenance of confidentiality of the data; and assurance of anonymity of the participants. Due to the sensitive nature of the secrets in the study, we provided participants with a list of mental health resources (Appendix C). Confidentiality was ensured by the use of encrypted communication platforms for the interviews and password-protected laptops. Anonymity was ensured by the use of pseudonyms and the omission of identifying information concerning participants in the final research report.

Reflexivity

Social phenomenological research involves participant-researcher intersubjectivity; both participants and researchers bring their own subjective experiences into their shared space (Berger, 2013). Thus, it is important that as researchers we engage in this interaction reflexively, through reflecting on the ways in which our unique identities inform our understandings of the world (Finlay, 2005). Each of our identities that encompass our gender, race, and age, as well as our positions as researchers, influenced the way in which participants responded to us in the interviews.

Regardless of a researcher's efforts to create an equal environment, the nature of an interview relationship is one of an imbalance of power (Finlay, 2005). Discussing the contents of anonymously disclosed secrets required the participant to be vulnerable. Even though the secrets exhibited were not their own secrets, participants identified with and/or wanted to discuss secrets of a sensitive nature. The fact that our participants were exclusively UCT undergraduate psychology students, meant that we have shared many of their scholastic experiences. This was used to create a more trusting relationship which allowed our participants to be vulnerable with us. However, these similarities could have also created a fear of judgement, making it difficult, and perhaps a bit awkward, for participants to be vulnerable with us.

Our identities also influenced the way in which we interpreted the data (Berger, 2013). Being researchers at UCT may have caused us to have a specific paradigm from which to draw ideas. However, although we are both women and UCT students, each of us comes from a different background and culture. This intersectionality added diverse perspectives to our analysis. We managed our influence on the study by keeping journals of our experiences of the research journey to reflect on and by having regular discussions with our research supervisor about our impact on the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, we recognise that the meanings that we have made are unavoidably shaped by our particular perspectives.

Results

After viewing the secrets exhibition (Appendix G), participants were asked a series of questions regarding their thoughts and feelings. The data from interviews with these ten participants were analysed. Of the ten participants, eight identified as women and two as

men, and three were in second year, with the rest being in first year. The age range of participants was wide. While the majority of participants were in the young-adult bracket (18-22), one participant fell within the middle-age bracket (45-60).

During analysis, five broad themes were identified, namely, relatability, relief, curiosity, anonymity, and sadness. These themes were further broken down into sub-themes. Relatability was apparent within context of certain experiences including having conservative parents, sexual orientation, sexual abuse, and mental health. It also had subthemes of empathy, pity and the desire to help. Relief had subthemes of comfort and a cathartic, therapeutic effect. Curiosity had subthemes of fascination and intrigue as well as shock and surprise. Anonymity had a subtheme of judgement.

Relatability

Relatability was a dominant theme in the data. Overall, this theme suggests that one way that people might process anonymous secrets is to find the ways in which they can relate to or even identify with them. Various participants talked about how they strongly resonated with the disclosers' emotions and experiences shared in the secrets. For example, Participant 9 showed a sense of relatability to most of the secrets, noting: "There was like an underlying feeling of, of, 'Oh, like, I get that', for like, most of them...a lot of them I related to at least on some small level". Similarly, Participant 6 resonated so strongly to the secrets that she had flashbacks of her own experiences, she noted: "A lot of the things were kind of just, things I could apply within my own life, or my past...my own experiences that kind of just came back to me".

Relatability also gave way to a deeper connection between the discloser and responder, as in the case of Participant 4, who expressed a sense of relation to a particular secret, and of comradery with the discloser when she said, "I understand where you're coming from... you don't have to feel so like strange like you're the only one dealing with it 'cause I am too I guess?". Moreover, Participant 10 shared that she felt a sense of interconnectedness with the disclosers: "we're all kind of interconnected in that sense, and we all have our own battles that we're fighting in silence". She later expressed that she felt comforted by the fact that she could relate to the burden of carrying secrets like other students around her, noting: "people that...have been withholding all these things, and I mean obviously we all have our secrets and things that are very deep that we can't even talk about. So I also feel like I related

to them” (Participant 10). Similarly, Participant 9 felt that she wanted to connect with the disclosers whose experiences she understood, noting: “I connected to what they said”, and, “I mostly want to connect to that person, because I understand what that's like.” However, some participants expressed that they did not relate to certain secrets. One participant expressed how she simultaneously thought about ways in which she did and did not relate to some of the secrets when she said, “So, some of it would make me think, do I want to do the same as some of them, some of the secrets they have disclosed? Some of them made me think that I couldn't relate at all” (Participant 1).

Relatability also spoke to secrets representative of a particular group - in this case, secrets typical of young university students in South Africa. Participant 5 spoke to how although the secrets varied, they were collectively indicative of a younger age group, noting: “a lot of responses...very much of a certain age”. Participant 2 extended upon this assertion by identifying a common thread in the secrets: “undergraduate you're still quite young... really battling with your identity”. These sentiments were echoed by Participant 4 when she said, “People are learning to come into their own...in university”, who referred to the disclosers as going through an “identity crisis”.

Overall, there were four main subthemes within the theme of relatedness that appeared to apply particularly strongly to participants: having conservative or strict parents, sexual orientation, sexual abuse, and mental health (anxiety and depression being the primary mental health issues).

Parents

Most participants related to the secrets about keeping secrets from parents out of fear of rejection or judgement. Throughout her interview, Participant 6 often expressed her identification with the theme of having conservative parents and briefly spoke about her own experience. She made reference to Secret #21 and showed understanding and a sense of relatability when she said, “for me like, my mom's like really strict...I could kind of understand where this person's coming from” (Participant 6). In addition, Participant 1 resonated with Secret #3. She reported that she related more to the idea of them not telling their parents their secrets than the content of the actual secrets themselves. She shared a parallel experience to that of the discloser, noting: “I guess I have, um, a secret of my own

that I still need to, um, tell my parents and I haven't mustered up the courage yet" (Participant 1).

Sexual Orientation

Some participants related to the topic of sexual orientation - evident in Secrets #2 and #3 - to themselves in their responses. Participant 1 commented on Secret #2, related it to her own sexuality, and showed an interest in having a conversation with the discloser, noting:

I saw the pride flag. So I guess in a sense, that has nothing to do with me because I identify as heterosexual, but then I would think that I'd want to get to know more, as I said before, like I would have loved to have a conversation with someone who has disclosed something like that.

Participant 8 was resistant to the idea of disclosing a secret when he said, "I don't think necessarily to me". He showed a strong sense of wanting to be authentic and used an example of sexual orientation to illustrate how he felt, noting: "Ya it's a tough question to answer because I'm quite... for example, like if I was gay or something like, I would want people to know that that's me" (Participant 8).

Sexual Violence

Both Secrets #1 and #10 suggest a theme of sexual abuse. Some participants related the topic of sexual abuse to themselves and others in their lives. Participant 4 related to Secret #1 through her own experience of sexual abuse, noting: "cause I went through something like that at university...so I definitely like relate to it but like I don't like seeing it". Similarly, Participant 6 also self-disclosed that she had experienced sexual abuse as a child, noting: "one thing that did kind of um, I guess I could say, triggered me, was, um, the sexual abuse thing, because, um, like, that's something I had an incident with when I was younger".

Participant 6 also made reference to the #MeToo movement - a movement centred on women publicly disclosing their experiences of sexual assault in order to gain justice and healing - and how the power of sharing experiences of sexual abuse openly can allow for collective healing: "for a woman, like if she was sexually assaulted by a man, but no one believes her, if she comes forward, maybe other women who've also been assaulted by him will come forward". In contrast, Participant 8 related the secrets about sexual abuse and

mental health to his friends: “I guess, when I saw like, uh, mental health or sexual abuse, um, I was sort of relating it to boys...my friends and stuff that they’ve gone through.”

One participant expressed surprise at the relatively limited appearance of sexual violence content in the secrets: “It only came up twice...you know I would have expected it to come up more” (Participant 5). She said that she expected secrets about “sexual abuse” to be more prevalent in the exhibition as it was something that she felt many people in the university environment statistically would have experienced and could relate to.

Mental Health

Several secrets (#4, #5, #9, #12, #13, #15 and #17) appear to address mental health issues - mostly depression or anxiety - or have a depressive or anxious tone. Participants related to the secrets differently. Secret #12 resonated with one participant in particular because she felt that while she is not always confronted by negative feelings - like the discloser - they do sit in her mind and are brought to the forefront in times of loneliness: “The thing about my anxiety like being around people I kind of like I'm okay and everything but like when I'm on my own you know that kind of stuff does like kind of take over you” (Participant 3).

Similarly, Participant 5 felt that although she had not experienced mental health issues at the same intensity as many of the disclosers, she related to their struggles because of her experiences of the mental health issues with her loved ones, noting: “People who are close to me who have struggled with mental health issues, ...I thought about them...their feelings and their struggles”.

Participant 4 directly related her experience of loneliness to Secret #17. She talked about her struggle to connect with others despite wanting to and how that spirals her further into isolation, noting: “I'm not like an open book...I want to connect with people but I can't”. She also felt that mental health issues were disclosed as secrets because they are “stigmatizing” (Participant 4). Participant 9 also continuously referred to the theme of isolation that she strongly connected with in the secrets - particularly in Secret #4.

While the previous participants acknowledged the stigma and private struggle associated with mental health issues, Participant 7 felt that mental health issues were so

widely relatable that to disclose them as secrets was unnecessary and that there were more shameful topics of secrecy, noting: “the other ones are the cliché ones...the ones revolving around like depression and anxiety”.

The above participants spoke about how they related to the mental health issues in the secrets. However, Participant 1 suggested that she had difficulty relating to some secrets - particularly Secret #13 which was about depression, noting: “I didn't understand some of them. One in particular, was the one who wished that he was depressed or she was depressed again.” When she was later asked about whether she resonates with any of the secrets, she elaborated more on the above,

There was another one about depression. I never resonated with it on a personal level, like with my identity, but someone in my immediate family suffers from depression. So in that way I related and I also didn't understand why someone would want to go back into that. (Participant 1)

Empathy, Pity, and the Desire to Help

Many participants felt compassion and empathy towards the disclosers after reading the secrets. While Participant 3 empathised with disclosers from a place of mutual understanding when she said, "Definitely can kind of sympathize and empathize with the things that they have to say", Participant 2's empathy was one of an observer looking in when she said, “felt like empathy towards people who obviously had some very personal...secrets”, and, “I guess in a way I felt pity for them.”

The participants felt compassion and empathy towards the disclosers, which was often then accompanied by a desire to help or address the issues alluded to in the secrets on a societal scale. A common thread throughout Participant 8's interview was that he had a strong desire to help others by addressing those societal issues, particularly mental health issues and sexual abuse: “I felt like I needed to do something about it”. Similarly, Participant 6 felt a strong pull to help others throughout the interview since the secrets resonated so deeply for her: “those things kind of just like struck a nerve for me because I know what that's like because I've gone through it, um so it like, like I kind of want to help them, but I can't”. Participant 5 spoke about her deep desire to help others through more practical means. She felt that she could offer both advice about self-acceptance and practical resources, such

as the contact details of mental health professionals. Many participants felt that the urge to comfort the disclosers. Participant 9 expressed how she wanted to connect and empathise with the disclosers in order to comfort them: “trying to connect with them to... to make them feel that not alone, that there are people who feel the same way. And that it does get better”.

Some participants wanted to offer advice to disclosers who spoke about keeping secrets from parents. They generally advised the discloser to be more authentic with their parents and that their parents needed to accept and respect their decisions. However, Participant 7 warned against actions towards parents just for the sake of rebellion.

Relief

Another prominent theme in the data was relief. By extension to the theme of relatability perhaps, many participants expressed feeling relieved and comforted by the fact that they share the same experiences as the disclosers.

Participant 5 spoke about the importance of finding an outlet for one’s feelings, to create a sense of relief. Many participants (Participants 1, 6, 7, 10) expressed a personal desire to experience the cathartic effect that the disclosers may have felt when submitting their secrets anonymously. Participant 1 shared, “I guess I just really would like to get it off my chest and not be the only one carrying it.” Similarly, Participant 10 said,

But also, like, even if they're not saying who they are, they're still releasing something that they've kept bottled up within themselves. And that's very healthy to release. So it kind of had a therapeutic effect to it and I think it's, it's good for us, even if, you know, we're not exactly able to reach out to that particular person, that that person got to speak their mind about how they really feel and I would, you know, um, engage in something like this.

Participant 6 also spoke about how anonymously disclosing a secret could give her an opportunity to heal, “I thought maybe, like, that would help me as well, like just get better, and like heal even more, um, from that.”

Many participants felt relieved and comforted that they were not the only ones experiencing the scenarios revealed in the secrets. Participant 7 and Participant 1 spoke to how on viewing the exhibition they felt an overwhelming sense of comfort, especially with

regards to the disclosers being other undergraduate psychology students. Participant 5 extended upon that sentiment by saying that the presence of so many common secrets between disclosers and responders helped to normalize the thoughts of participants. Participant 5's assertion was proven by Participant 4 who was initially hesitant to answer questions about the secrets, but after reading sexual assault disclosure, felt much more comfortable in presenting her experience of the same thing.

Curiosity

Many participants felt a sense of curiosity towards the secrets and the disclosers, which manifested as mixed feelings of intrigue and fascination as well as shock and surprise. Participant 2 was very curious about what the contents of the secrets might be. She spoke about expecting very "spicy" [scandalous] secrets and was excited to read them (Participant 2). However, upon viewing the exhibition she felt that the secrets contained were not as interesting as she expected them to be - they were quite ordinary. She said, "...wouldn't say disappointed but wasn't what I was expecting" (Participant 2).

On the other hand, Participant 1 showed a sense of curiosity more towards the discloser than the contents of the secret. She said, "I wish I could have a conversation with some of them" (Participant 1). In addition, when she was asked to choose a secret and share what she would say to the discloser hypothetically, she chose Secret #24. She showed a sense of curiosity and openness in response to this secret when she said,

...it's quite a malicious thought. But it's, it's opened me...I would really like to sit down with the person. And I think I want to because I think it also made me think like, gosh, have I ever encountered someone who has ever thought about having thoughts about killing me just like randomly, you know? So in a small way, it's a bit scary, but I would really have loved sit down to see just how can someone carry that resentment? Because I'm guessing this is a student as well. (Participant 1)

Intrigue, Fascination

Participant 10 showed a sense of intrigue with the secrets and with the construction of the exhibition itself when she said, "I thought it was very fascinating to actually get an in-depth look into sort of the lives of other people...experiencing...deep and difficult emotions",

and, “I thought that it was intriguing...how, like, how people interpret their lives”. Similarly, Participant 7 spoke about the uncensored platform for expression that the exhibition created and how that an opportunity of this nature should not be “passed” over.

Surprise, Shock

Some of the common feelings that participants (Participants 1, 5, 8, 9) felt in response to the exhibition were shock and surprise. Participant 9 was surprised by the small number of secrets in the exhibition, but she suggested that she understood why people would be hesitant to submit a secret. She said, “I also like, wouldn’t, wouldn't really uh, do this either” (Participant 9). Moreover, she was surprised that certain bits of information were secrets:

I never really thought that that would like, be a secret almost. Something to like, keep a secret. Because, like, I mean, you, you wouldn't talk about it. But for it to be a secret that you would like, post on something like this. (Participant 9)

Participant 8 was surprised and shocked to find out that the secrets belonged to other undergraduate psychology students at UCT, noting: "Woah! Um, ya I thought these were just off the internet, you know."

Participant 5 shared the same sentiments as Participant 1 with regards to the secret about genocide. However, her curiosity about the secret and the mindset of the discloser stemmed from a place of shock: “Genocide one I found really really disturbing”. She felt that the secret was revealing of a troubled person and wanted to understand this person in the context of them receiving help: “...love to connect with that person and just say: ...don't you want to talk to a professional person about this?” (Participant 5)

Anonymity

Anonymity was a major component of the exhibition that had both negative and positive implications. Anonymity regarding the disclosers was twofold. On one hand, some participants felt that it allowed disclosers a place to express their thoughts free of personal persecution. Participant 3 felt that the anonymous set-up of the exhibition was “non-confrontational” thus taking away the “heaviness” of the secrets and creating a “safe space”. Participant 5 felt that it was the first step towards receiving help for their issues.

On the other hand, Participant 2 said that admitting one's issues anonymously was only a beginner's step in addressing them. Participant 4 felt similarly, emphasising the need for people with issues to express their thoughts in more active ways, noting: "I do think it's good for people to express themselves but it's just a way to avoid like dealing with it" and "I feel like dealing with the core issue is better". Participant 5 also made the point that it would be "impossible to predict" the impact of the anonymous disclosure on the discloser.

The veil of anonymity on disclosers also affected responders. It raised questions about whether the knowledge of the identity of the discloser would affect the reaction of the responders. The general consensus was that when the identity of the discloser is known to the responder, their feelings towards the secret or the discloser do not necessarily change but rather intensify to where they want to engage more in conversation and in assistance of the discloser. This sentiment was best shown by Participant 9 who said, in the case of knowing the discloser, that there would be context; knowledge on how to help the discloser; stronger feelings of empathy: "if it was someone, someone I knew, then, I mean, depending on which one it was, I'd, react with more empathy"; an emotional investment in the person; and a determination to help resolve the discloser's issues.

However, in the case of anonymity, she said it did not allow for context, there were feelings of disconnection and reduced feelings of empathy: "maybe it took a bit of...the empathy away also because I mean, it, like at the end, it's just like words on the screen. Like, you know there's someone behind it, but they're not in front of you?" (Participant 9). There was also a general sense of hopelessness since she was not able to help the discloser.

The veil of anonymity extended beyond the disclosers, to the responders themselves. In their interviews a few participants chose to have a voice call instead of a video call. Participant 10 felt that the audio-only interview allowed for an open, non-judgemental space. She said,

...face-to-face interview there's a lot more pressure because someone's, you know, viewing your facial expression, visual reactions, whereas when I'm just doing a vocal interview, then I feel more free because I can just be comfortable in my space. I don't feel like I'm being analysed. I feel more open to talk about things. (Participant 10)

Judgement

Judgement is intrinsically linked to the process of anonymity as it determines what is considered a secret and how that secret is received. Participant 10 spoke to how the element of anonymity in the exhibition allowed for a non-judgemental space. However, in the case of knowing the discloser, she said that there is an element of judgement, which can be good or bad, depending on the nature of the secret - the good judgement connoting that others need help through their struggle, and bad judgement connoting that others are problematic. Furthermore, she said that her view of the discloser would change if they shared a nasty secret: “However, for something that was, um, you know, quite a, a nasty secret. Um, I think it would change my view of them...in reaction to how they view the world.” Participant 1 also touched on the complexities that come with knowing the discloser: “I think it's easier to deal with these type of things if they're anonymous. I think if I had to know someone, then there would be other factors to sort of juggle through.”

Participant 2 took a different route in her judgment. She said she had no interest in participating, not because she didn't think it was a valuable system but because she was confident enough in herself to manage her negative feelings, thus having no secrets. She explained: “...I've never felt ashamed.... [therefore] I don't really have big secrets” (Participant 2). She was making a judgement about the type of people that keep and disclose secrets anonymously.

Participant 7, however, displayed judgement more towards the secrets themselves. He referred to Secret #4 as being a minor issue in comparison to the “deeper” struggles that other disclosers were facing. He said: “damn, [you are] actually sharing them [the secrets]?”, and, “people are going through the most, then you...” (Participant 7).

Sadness

All participants except for one said that they felt sad when asked about their feelings regarding the secrets, particularly about themes of depression, low self-esteem, and sexual abuse in the secrets. Participant 6 was specifically concerned about Secret #19, questioning why someone would want to ‘sell their body’. She said,

What would be the reason for you selling your body? Like sure, like, no one's touching it and stuff. But for me, personally, like, I choose to cover up because this is my pride, you know, like, this was given to me, I want to look after it...what what

would be your reason for selling it?...is there a deeper issue, like, you know, cuz, like, for me, I feel like there are other things you could do for money maybe. (Participant 6)

Similarly, Participant 10 said, “it made me feel sad and a bit worried”. She also felt deeply saddened by the fact that the secrets belonged to other undergraduate psychology students. Participant 9 expressed a complexity of emotions. She said that she felt “dually relief and...a sort of sadness”. She explained the sadness she felt and also observed a sense of nihilism in some of the secrets: “I feel...kind of sad, because kind of makes me think that, that it's a, there's almost like a, like a nihilistic creep in there...There's like something wrong with the world” (Participant 9).

Discussion

This study sought to explore responses to anonymously disclosed secrets. A secret is the social selection of information that when withheld or disclosed may have physical and emotional consequences for the holder (Wisemeijer, 2011). In other words, information that is labelled as a secret tells us about the social value assigned to that information (Slepian et al., 2014). Additionally, secrets have both a personal and public presence in the sense that they are kept as a result of a personal fear or based on a wider public discourse of what is considered acceptable (Motter, 2011b). The responses to secrets collected in this study spoke to the personal values and norms of the responders. Although each participant’s unique response to the secrets speaks to the individual values and norms of that responder, which then constructs their individual reality, the finding of themes (commonalities between participant responses to particular secrets) speaks to wider congruent values and norms, which then constructs not only an individual’s reality, but a social reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018; McCleary-Sills et al., 2016).

Social phenomenology focuses on the construction of a specific reality (phenomenon) by individuals and how that reality is perpetuated by their interactions and actions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, using the lens of social phenomenology, we were able to take the individual insights of participants who had viewed the exhibition and derive a societal reality about secrecy through the following themes: relatability, relief, curiosity, anonymity, and sadness.

Relationality

At the core of this phenomenon, there is a relational component which underlies all the themes that have emerged from the data. All of the key elements to the participants' responses to the secrets were based on how the participant made meaning of the secrets in relation to their own sphere of life. Even though there was an element of anonymity that prevented an initial personal investment between discloser and responder, responders used their own experiences and the experiences of their loved ones to relate to, understand and measure against the secrets. The more that the participants could identify with the secrets, the lesser the distance they felt from the disclosers. The less the participants could identify with the secrets, the more the distance they felt from the disclosers, but even in that distance participants showed interest in wanting to understand them more. These responses have revealed a strong sense of comradery amongst responders and exposed their capacity for compassion and understanding.

The limited literature on the topic of responses to anonymous secret disclosure makes it difficult to interpret the findings against the findings of other studies. However, our findings support the findings of past research relating to responses to anonymous secret disclosure. Past research - specifically on the PostSecret Project - and our study have shown that viewing secrets that resemble difficulty or struggle elicits a sense of solidarity in the responders to the secrets (Beaton, 2016). The disclosers' vulnerability in opening up to others allows for responders to open up and be vulnerable too (Beaton, 2016). Frank Warren shares the idea that, "secrets are the currency of intimacy", which suggests that sharing secrets can deepen the channels of intimacy between people (Beaton, 2016). Sharing secrets can also allow responders permission to share their own secrets (Beaton, 2016), which occurred during some interviews in our study. Our participants picked up on how viewing secrets can allow us to see the richness of experience, perspective, and feeling that we do not often see in our everyday lives (Beaton, 2016). Viewing secrets are peaks into people's private lives that allow for a sense of connection (Beaton, 2016). People's responses to and interpretations of secrets are almost like Rorschach tests (Beaton, 2016) - the way in which respondents seemed to process the secrets was to measure them against their own experiences in some way; to identify with them (or not). In a way, this experience might have facilitated the experiences described in the themes that emerged from our data.

The vulnerability and relation to the secrets that the participants displayed in their responses moves beyond creating connection and solidarity. On a wider societal scale it has the potential to normalize and de-stigmatise the experiences that the disclosers submitted as secrets (McCleary-Sills et al., 2016). Earlier literature spoke to how different types of responses to anonymously disclosed secrets have the potential to either “entrench” or alleviate existing social pressures (Maas et al., 2019). In the context of this study, this means that the participants’ positive interaction with the secrets could change the negative connotation that they hold, thus changing the thoughts, feelings and action (or inaction) surrounding that issue (McCleary-Sills et al., 2016).

Element of Anonymity

As mentioned previously, our research aimed to address the gap in the literature about responses to *anonymous* secret disclosure specifically. Even though it may seem like the element of judgement may be suspended in the case of anonymous secret disclosure, it is still not entirely a judgment-free space (Motter, 2011b). The unique part about anonymous secret disclosure is that the discloser does not have to see the judgment or be the direct recipient of it; they have the option to dissociate themselves from it (Motter, 2011b). The element of anonymity in our research played the role of neutralising any prejudice based on the disclosers’ identity (from the side of the responder), suspending certain judgements the participants may have had if the disclosers were not anonymous. This suggests that the element of anonymity is useful in reshaping how people relate to others around them. Anonymity allows for a strange but palpable intimacy.

In addition, due to there being no real-life relationship between the discloser and the responder, potential feelings of hurt, betrayal and distrust are removed from the equation. Instead, there is more focus on going inward (self-reflection for the responder) as opposed to going outward (projecting thoughts and feelings onto the discloser).

Context

Addressing the gap also involved looking at responses to anonymous secret disclosure within the South African context. The responses helped to identify a trend of secrets specific to a particular social group: South African undergraduate university students. This genre of secrets revolved around the emerging identity of students and the complex issues of family,

friends, mental health, sexual exploration and self-worth attached to that development. Although revealing a common reality about responses to anonymously disclosed secrets of a specific social group, there is more research to be carried out on the wider population of South Africa.

Art versus Psychology

Understanding secrecy in South Africa, and its social tenets, is a minor step in addressing its very real, as discussed previously, consequences. The PostSecret Project, off which the study is based, takes a theoretical and art-based approach to the secrets and their content (Motter, 2011a). However, this pilot study chose to engage with the exhibition from a more psychological point of view. Whilst from the social art educational perspective the focus is on cathartic expression through postcard artwork, the vulnerability created by the human experience and the creation of dialogue around the often-sensitive issues revealed, the psychological perspective puts more emphasis on the social mechanisms and thought processes behind that created dialogue (Paxman, 2013; Sutton & Austin, 2015). Using the discipline of Psychology in this study has helped us ask and, to some extent answer, the questions: What do the responses about the secrets tell us about the individual responders? And collectively, what do those responses tell us about the society in which we live? Having this knowledge can help us make a larger societal impact, that moves beyond confessional sites and cathartic comradery into more practical and meaningful change.

Impact

This research can have a wider societal impact in terms of public anonymous secret disclosure. The PostSecret Project is an example of a first step towards a practical intervention using the tool of anonymous secret disclosure. The PostSecret Project as well as our study have given us deeper insight into the human experience. We realise that there is more room for empathy and non-judgement when secrets - which represent our shadow selves - are anonymously disclosed and widely shared. We tend to be quick to judge when we know people and hear their secrets. The PostSecret Project and our study have allowed for a breaking down of societal norms (that dictate our unshared realities). An example of this is evident in Rodrigue's (2012) paper which discusses the topic of reclaiming traumatic experiences and identity in relation to the PostSecret Project. She discusses how the PostSecret Project has allowed for a deconstruction of dominant trauma discourses and a

(re)construction of trauma representation, as the PostSecret Project provides imagetext which holds raw, lived experience:

The construction of a representation can help bring understanding to crucial (yet also, sometimes, elusive if not buried) life experiences, awareness to the role of society in defining such experiences, and ultimately can aid in (re)building one's subjectivity. In addition, imagetext has the potential to guide viewers in recognizing the tensions that exist between dominant scripted identities and actual or individualized identities of those who have experienced trauma. (Rodrigue, 2012, p. 65)

Seeing people's secrets and taking time to process the ways in which they resonate with us show us that what we think are social norms, are not actually social norms; they are social ideals that - our participants have shown - no one is living up to. Seeing people's secrets redefines reality, thus redefining social norms to be what people actually, normally experience in real life. Therefore, anonymous secret disclosure platforms can allow for a collective redefinition of societal norms without having to reveal vulnerable parts of ourselves (with identification) publicly. Our unshared realities become shared realities, thus allowing for collective healing, normalisation of shameful or painful experiences (such as trauma) and emotions, and increasing public awareness around mental health.

Some examples of potential practical interventions that the discipline of psychology could develop from knowledge produced by studies like this include: anonymous secret disclosure platforms for students in schools and universities as part of a mental health initiative; online anonymous secret disclosure platforms for the public in South Africa - some could perhaps focus on topics of mental health, sexual abuse, and difficulty being authentic with parents; and community projects where NGOs can organise anonymous secret disclosure projects in rural communities with postcards..

Significance of the Study

This study has a number of implications. The common themes derived from responses can give researchers insight into cultural norms and further phenomena to study. Additionally, responses to secrets concerning mental health issues can give practitioners

insight into people's common experiences and fears, which can then be used to inform future interventions.

Limitations

Although our study elicited rich information, there were some limitations. The online platform, largely selected due to Covid-19, prevented us from engaging in live focus groups, where firstly, the element of anonymity for responders would have been erased. Secondly, focus groups would have allowed for more interaction between participants and a possibly more integrated and interesting dialogue as there would have been an opportunity to build on information and engage in varying perspectives. Additionally, the online interviews were shorter than expected, running dry between 15-20 minutes, when our goal was 30-45 minutes. Perhaps group interviews would have alleviated the pressure put on individuals.

A limitation was also found in the sample, which consisted exclusively of UCT undergraduate psychology students. Our research showed that the secrets were indicative of this social group. Therefore, in order to learn more about societal secrecy, more social groups needed to be incorporated in the sample.

An additional note that can be made, not necessarily a limitation, is that the social phenomenological research approach that we used relied heavily on researcher interpretation. Perhaps a more nuanced and collaborative view of this phenomenon could be achieved by the use of a participatory action research approach.

Future Research

Our study was exploratory, meaning that there are many ways for it to develop in the future. Some immediate reconciliations that could be made is a more diverse and larger sample, more secrets in the exhibition, data collection through focus groups, and more awareness brought to the study, perhaps by a live exhibition of the secrets.

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Appendix A

ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



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03 August 2020

Keren Shaulov and Sumaya Habib
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University of Cape Town
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Dear Keren and Sumaya

I am pleased to inform you that ethical clearance has been given by an Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Humanities for your study, *Responses to anonymously disclosed secrets*. The reference number is PSY2020 -036.

I wish you all the best for your study.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Ward'.

Catherine Ward
Professor
Chair: Ethics Review Committee

Appendix B

CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

Responses to anonymously disclosed secrets

This study seeks to explore how people respond to anonymously disclosed secrets. We are looking for UCT psychology students ages 18 or older.

Choosing to partake in this study will require you to:

1. Look at an online exhibition of postcards depicting secrets that have been disclosed anonymously.
2. Engage in a 30-45 minute telephonic/video-call interview about your thoughts and feelings regarding the exhibition.

There are no physical risks in the study, and you will not be required to partake in any physical exercise. However, viewing the postcards (with potentially sensitive or triggering secrets) may cause distress. You will be awarded two/three SRPP points for your participation. We will still award SRPP points if you prematurely withdraw from the study.

Participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate in the study and this decision will have no negative effects on you or your academic career at UCT.

If you do choose to participate, you are also free to leave at any time during the study without any consequences.

The information required from you will be your:

1. Student number
2. Email address
3. Age
4. Sex
5. Race

All of this information will be kept confidential and only known to the researchers (Keren Shaulov and Sumaya Habib) involved in this study. Additionally, all interview data will be recorded, on a secure platform, and transcribed by the researchers on password-protected laptops. We will not publish your name with our findings, and we will be the only people to handle this information.

Any study-related questions, problems, or emergencies should be directed to the following email addresses:

Researchers:

Keren Shaulov and Sumaya Habib: secretsprojectuct@gmail.com

Supervisor:

Maxine Spedding: maxine.spedding@uct.ac.za

Questions about your rights as a study participant, comments or complaints about the study also may be presented to the Research Ethics Committee, Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town:

Rosalind Adams: rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za

Additionally, we have provided a separate resource list with details of counselling and/or mental health services and optional hotlines that you can contact in the event that you feel overwhelmed or need support during and/or after the study (or if ever need be).

Consent to Record

I hereby give my consent to the researchers named above, postgraduate students of the University of Cape Town, to record my interview on the following media: voice recording. I give consent for the recording to be listened to by the researchers and supervisor involved in the research study. I understand that my recorded interview will be kept confidential, and that my identity will not be disclosed in the final research report. I also understand that my recording will be stored on a password-protected laptop when not in use and will be erased immediately after being used in the research process. I also understand that I can withdraw this consent at

any time by notifying the researchers or supervisor and that the recording will be securely erased immediately upon my request.

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Consent to Participate

I have read the above and am satisfied with my understanding of the study, its' possible benefits, risks and alternatives. My questions about the study have been answered. I hereby voluntarily consent to participation in the research study as described. I have been offered electronic copies of this consent form.

Signing below will indicate your willingness to partake in the study.

Student number of participant

Date

Signature of participant

Signature of Researcher

Appendix C

RESOURCE LIST

Organisation / Helpline	Contact number	Email address / Website	Physical address
UCT Student Wellness - Counselling Service	0216501017	Lerushda.cheddie@uct.ac.za	Mowbray, Cape Town
SADAG UCT Student Careline	0800242526 or SMS 31393	http://www.dsa.uct.ac.za/student-wellness/about-student-wellness	Ivan Toms Building, 28 Rhodes Avenue, Mowbray
Cipla SADAG Mental Health Line	08004567789 or WhatsApp 0768822775	www.sadag.org	N/A
Suicide Prevention	0800567567	www.suicide.org	N/A
Destiny Helpline for Youth & Students	0800414243	N/A	N/A
ADHD Helpline	0800554433	N/A	N/A
Department of Social Development Substance Abuse Line 24hr helpline	0800121314 or SMS 32312	N/A	N/A
Sexual Assault 24hr Hotline	0723937824	N/A	N/A
Domestic Violence Helpline	0800150150	N/A	N/A
Therapy Route (mental health service directory)	0837420114	https://www.therapyroute.com/	N/A

Appendix D

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduce self	Date
Permission to record	Setting
Purpose of study	Respondent

Introduction:

A greeting. This interview will focus on your response to anonymously disclosed secrets in the online exhibition. It will be recorded. Are you comfortable with that?

Anonymity:

Just to reiterate - your identity will remain anonymous when the research is published. The recording will be saved on a password-protected laptop, accessible only by researchers involved in the study. With that said, please try to communicate as truthfully and openly as possible.

Questions:

- 1) What was your initial reaction to this exhibition? (What was your first impression of the exhibition?)
- 2) What feelings came up for you when looking at the secrets in the exhibition?
- 3) What thoughts came up for you when looking at the secrets in the exhibition?

- 4) Did any of the secrets in the exhibition resonate with you? If so, what was it about the secret/s that resonated with you?
- 5) Choose any secret in the exhibition (you can choose more than one). Can you tell me what you would say to the person who wrote that secret?
- 6) Did the experience of observing the exhibition make you want to disclose a secret anonymously? Why do you feel this way?
- 7) Can you observe any themes or patterns in the secrets in the exhibition?
- 8) How does it make you feel that the secrets in the exhibition belong to other undergraduate psychology students at UCT?
- 9) Did any of the secrets make you feel uncomfortable or disturbed?
- 10) If someone you knew disclosed one of the secrets in the exhibition with you, would you react differently? (How did the aspect of anonymity influence the way you responded to the secrets?)
- 11) Do you have any last thoughts on the exhibition or want to discuss any of the questions a little further?

General Prompts:

- *Can you tell me more about that?*
- *Can you give me an example?*
- *Why did that stand out for you?*
- *Can you elaborate more on that?*

Debrief:

- How did you find this interview?

- Our study aimed to explore people's responses to anonymously disclosed secrets.
- If you found this interesting, we would suggest checking out the PostSecret website or Instagram page.
- Please refer to the consent form where we provided a list of mental health resources if you need support.
- Feel free to contact us or our supervisor if you have any questions or comments (our contact details are also on the consent form).

Appendix E

SRPP ADVERT

Responses to anonymously disclosed secrets

Dear student,

We are collecting data for our Honours in Psychology research project and would like for you to participate in our study in order to earn **2 SRPP points for your first semester of 2021**.

Our study is the second part of a two-part study about students' secrets in the UCT Psychology Department. Part 1 of the study focuses on collecting and analysing anonymously disclosed secrets. The secrets collected in part 1 of the study will be compiled into an exhibition. Part 2 of the study - our study – has the main aim of exploring students' responses to anonymously disclosed secrets in the exhibition.

Inclusion criteria:

- UCT Psychology student
- Aged 18 and above
- Wi-Fi / mobile data access preferably - if you do not have access to either of these but want to participate, please notify us and we can make an arrangement

As a participant, you will be required to view an online exhibition – available as a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation on Vula and a website - displaying anonymously disclosed secrets and then engage in a 30-45-minute-long interview about your experience of the exhibition either via a voice or video call with one of the researchers.

To participate in the study, please send an email to secretsprojectuct@gmail.com stating your interest in participating and we will be in contact to give you access to the exhibition and arrange an interview booking. Please ensure that you use “**Part 2**” as the subject headline of the email so that we know that you would like to participate in our study, and not Part 1. (Note that you are allowed to participate in both Part 1 and Part 2 if you would like to.)

Your participation in this study would be highly appreciated.

Kind Regards,

Keren Shaulov & Sumaya Habib

Appendix F

EMAIL RESPONSE

Dear

Thank you for your interest in participating in our study.

Before participation can occur, you will need to read through and sign the attached **consent form** and send it back to this email address. As mentioned in the advert, you will need to view an **exhibition** of anonymously disclosed secrets prior to the 30-45-minute-long **interview**. In the interview, we will ask you questions relating to your experience of viewing the secrets in the exhibition. We ask that you have the exhibition in front of you (on your phone or laptop) during the interview. We will only send you the exhibition once you have consented to participate and have organised your interview details with us.

Here are some time slots which you can choose from for your interview (please diarise your interview time once it is confirmed):

Friday 16 Oct

1:30pm

or

3pm

or

8pm

Saturday 17 Oct

10am

or

12pm

or

3pm

In your response to this email, please include:

- A signed consent form
- Your preferred time for the interview (if none of the above times suit you, please give 3 options of times that do suit you)
- Your preferred platform for the interview: Zoom or WhatsApp. If you choose WhatsApp, please send us your cell phone number. If you choose Zoom, we will send you an invite link. (If you have an issue with Wi-Fi or data, please let us know so that we can make a plan.)
- Whether you prefer to do a voice call or a video call

We are excited for you to be involved in our study!

Kind regards,
Keren and Sumaya

Appendix G

ANONYMOUSLY DISCLOSED SECRETS EXHIBITION

SECRET #1



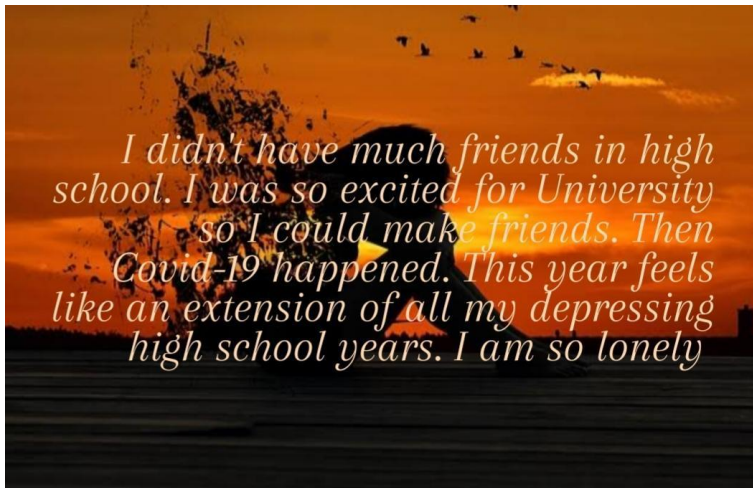
SECRET #2



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.

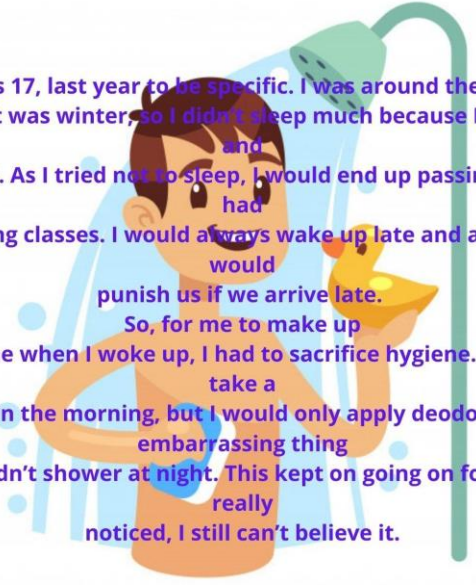
SECRET #4



SECRET #5



SECRET #6

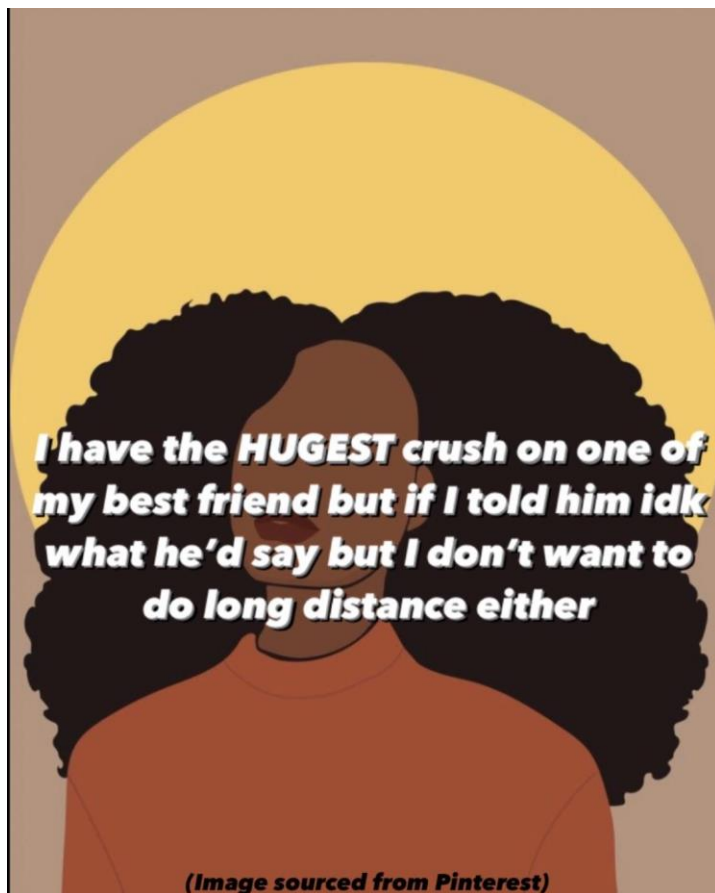
An illustration of a person with brown hair and a blue shirt taking a shower. A green showerhead is spraying water over their head. A yellow rubber duck is floating in the water. The background is light blue with some white circles.

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.

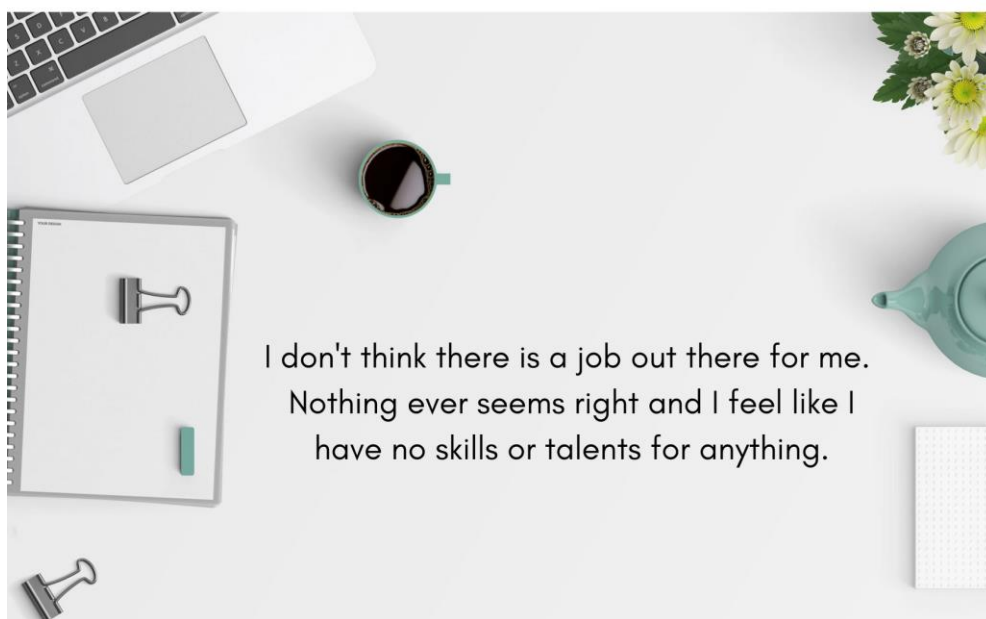
SECRET #7



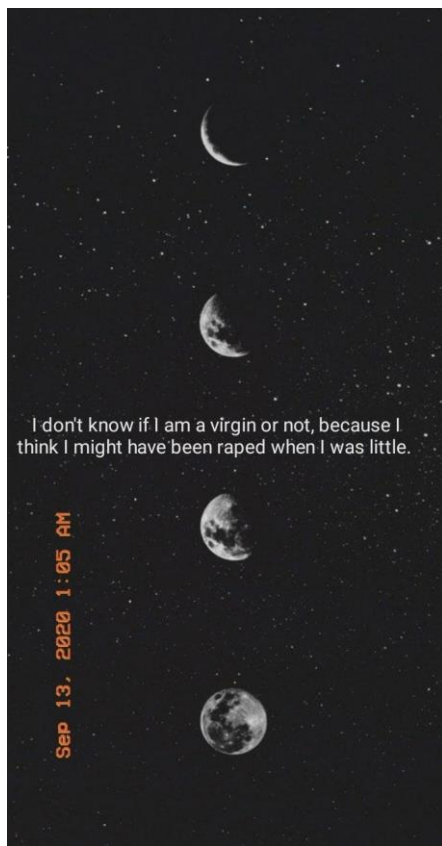
SECRET #8



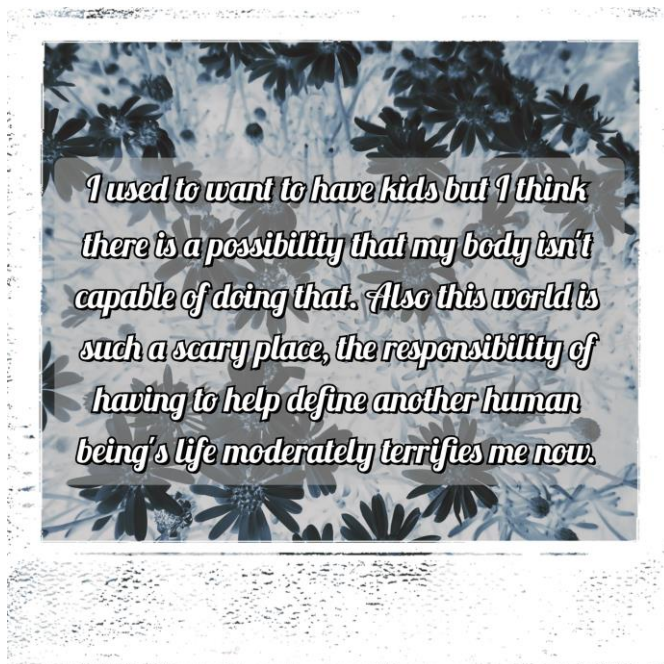
SECRET #9



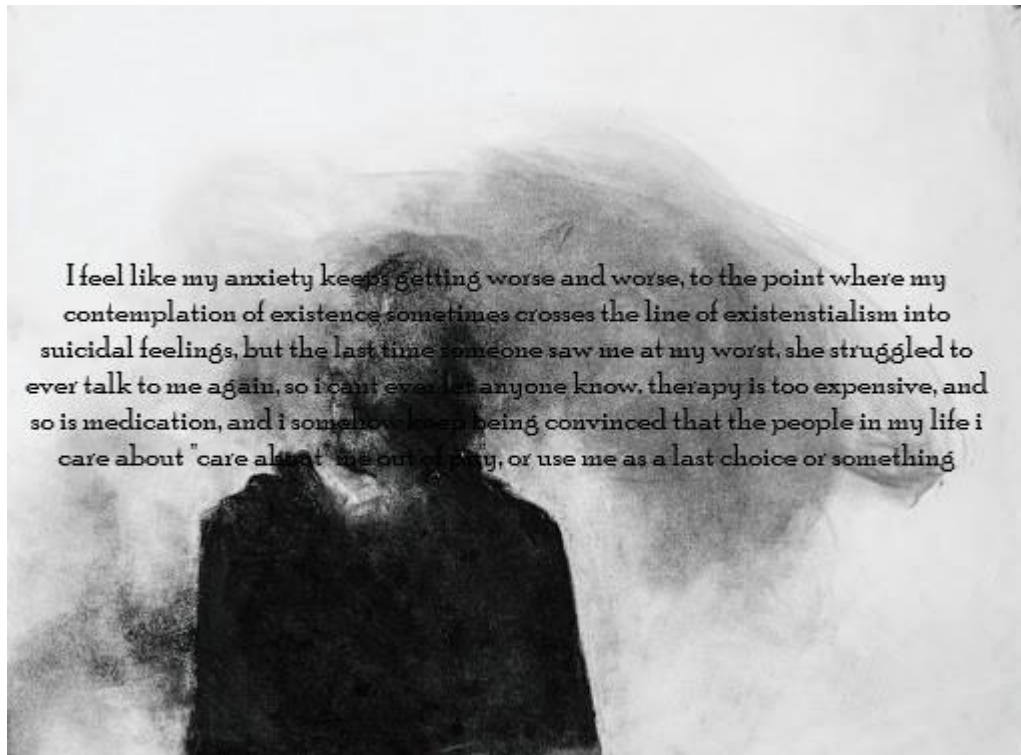
SECRET #10



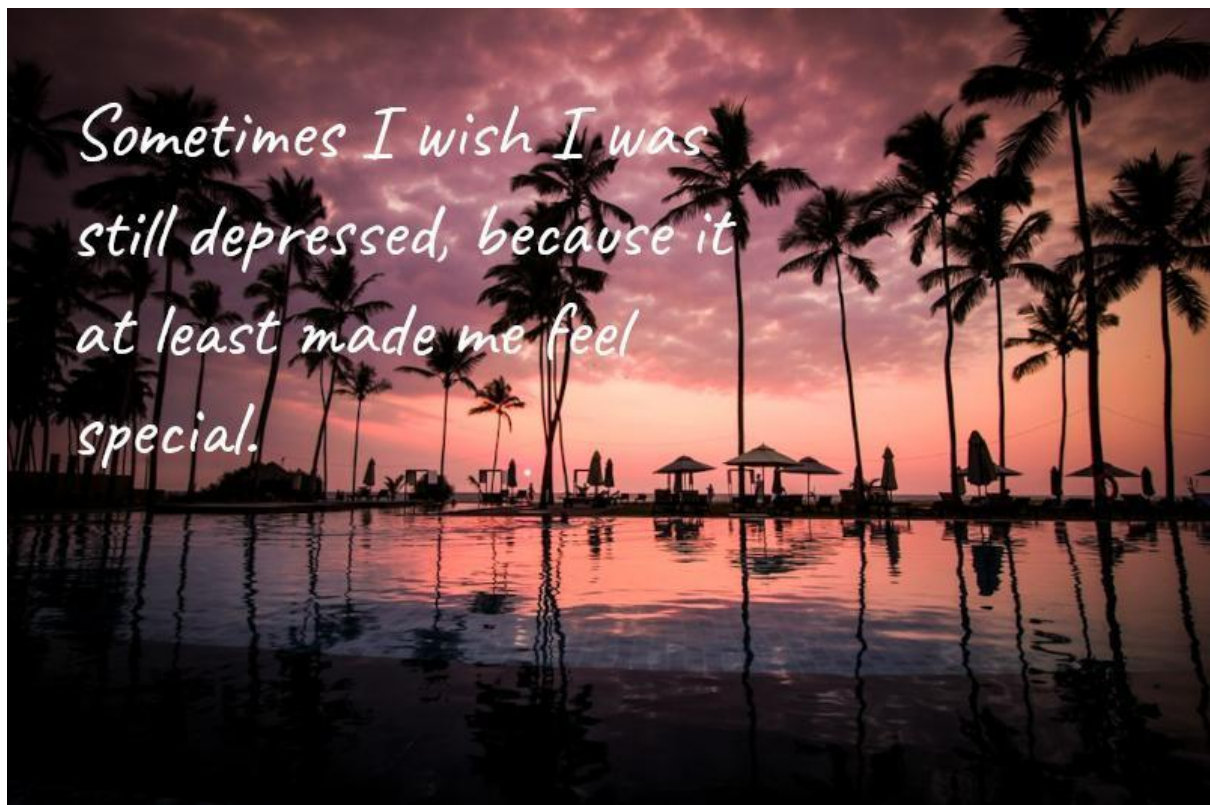
SECRET #11



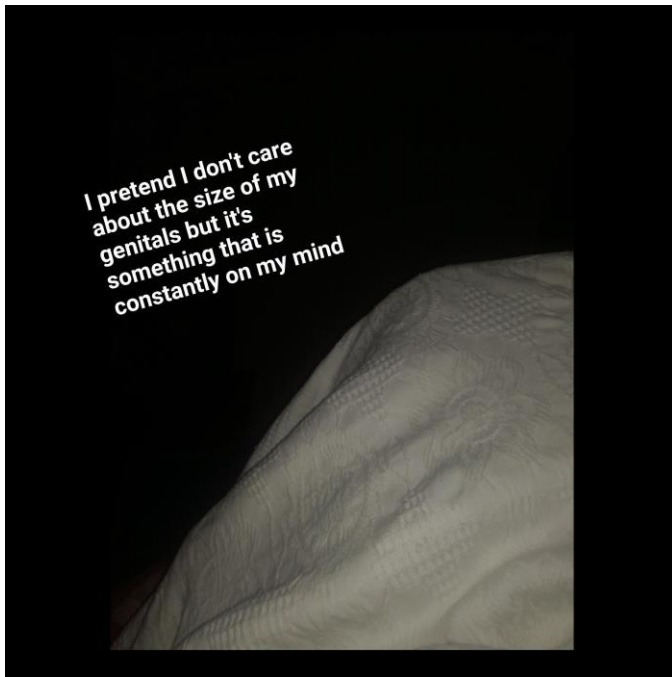
SECRET #12



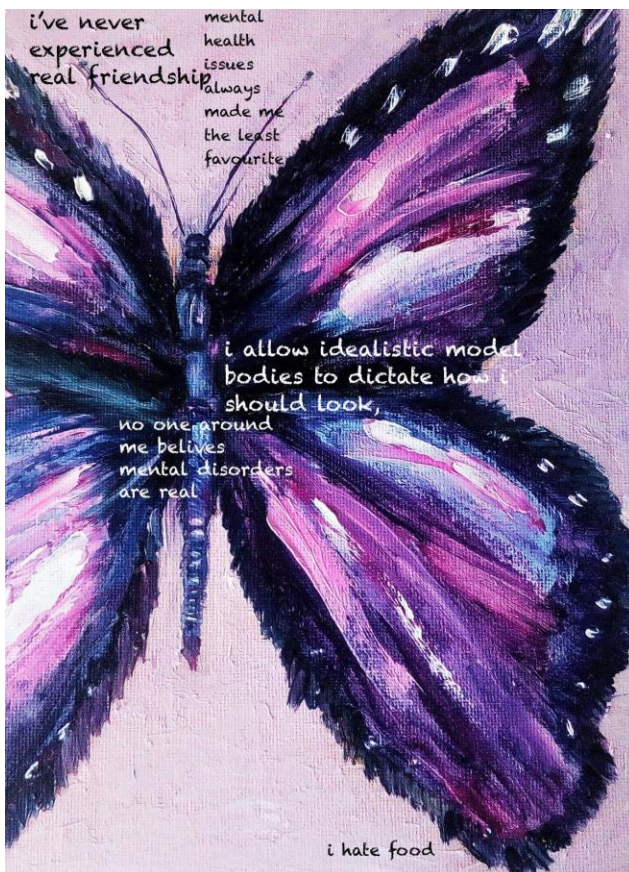
SECRET #13



SECRET #14



SECRET #15



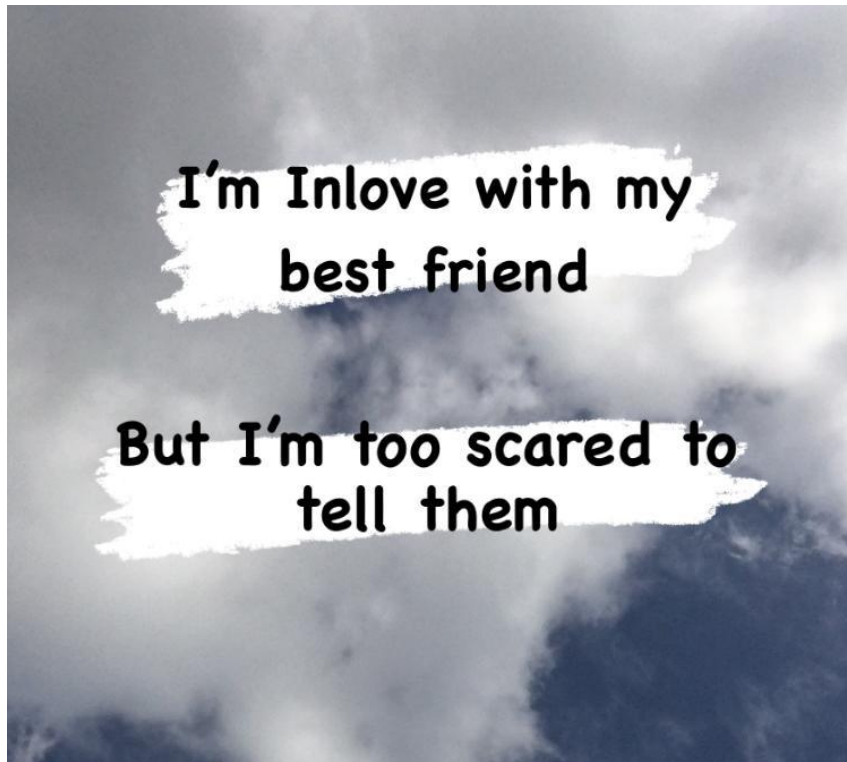
SECRET #16



SECRET #17



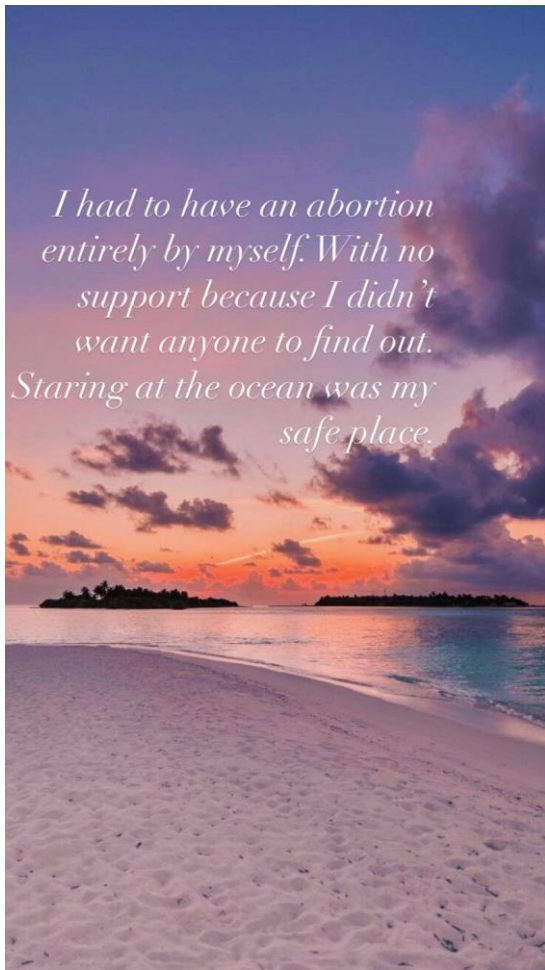
SECRET #18



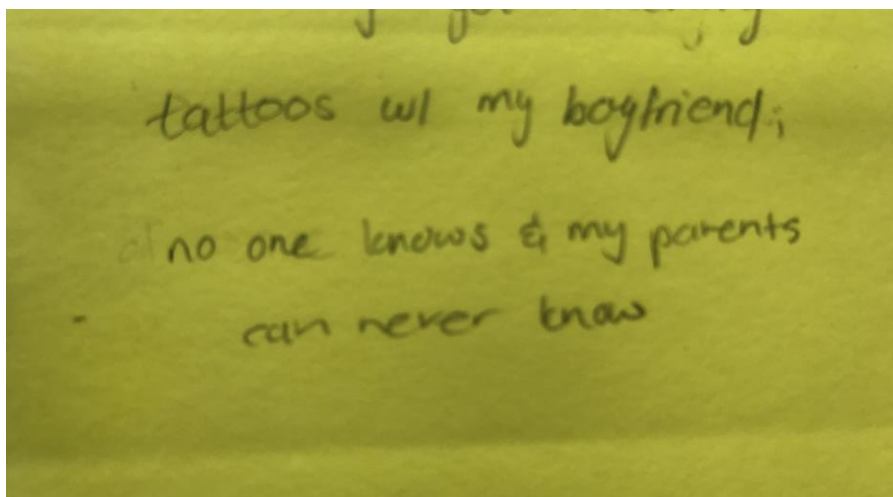
SECRET #19



SECRET #20



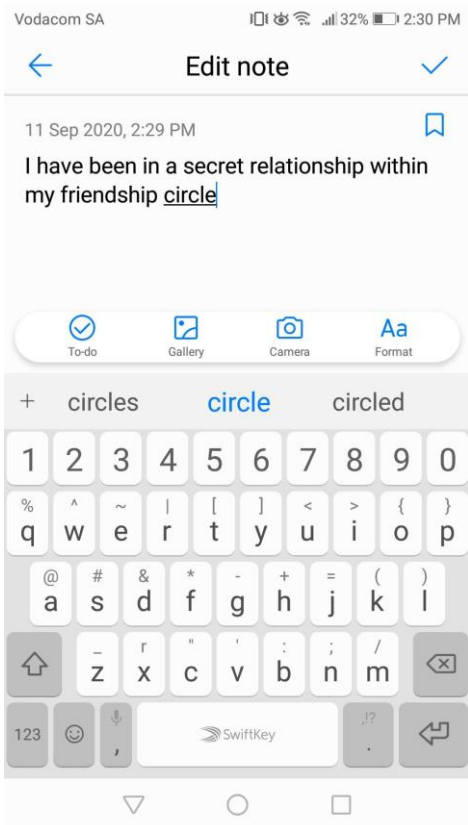
SECRET #21



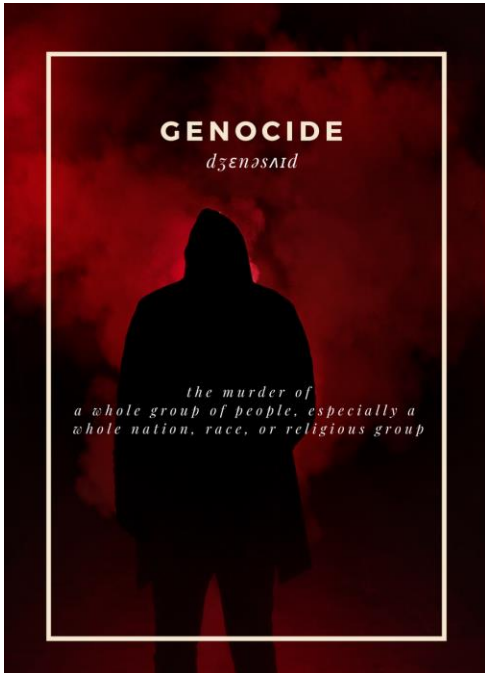
SECRET #22



SECRET #23



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.