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"It can be very easy to feel uncomfortable": Socio-spatial constructions of campus safety among university students and administrators

Treena Orchard [*]

School of Health Studies, Western University, 343 Labatt Health Sciences Bldg, London, ON, N6A 5B9, Canada

A R T I C L E I N F O	A B S T R A C T
	Research about campus safety focuses primarily on identifying problematic student behaviours (i.e., toxic partying, sexual violence) and institutional infrastructure (i.e., lighting, emergency services), to the exclusion of how safety, as an idea and embodied experience, is constructed. Using qualitive interview data from a participatory action research study conducted at Western University, this article uses a critical feminist lens to examine how undergraduate students (n = 23) and administrators (n = 7) spoke about campus safety as well as spatial vulnerability. Study participants shed compelling light on the "uncomfortable" feelings that pervade their movement across and within the university campus. Often presumed to be a spatially distinct place of privilege for all who work and attend classes within its reach, this is not always the case. Participants experienced this space as one of precarious privilege that reflects, reproduces, and sometimes protects hegemonic systems of white, male, cis-gender institutional power. This glimpse into the emotional geography of the campus sheds new light on safety culture and allied feminist research, specifically that which relates to the interplay between contested notions of safety as well as spatial vulnerability for two stakeholder communities in the neoliberal university.

1. Introduction

Despite decades of education and awareness campaigns about sexual and gender-based violence on post-secondary campuses, these events continue to occur at staggering rates (Colpitts, 2022; Coulter and Rankin, 2020). Between 20% to 43% of women and 3% to 29% of men attending American universities have been sexually victimized (Cantor et al., 2017; Forsman, 2017), and in some Canadian provinces as many as 63% of female students have experienced sexual harassment (CCI Research, 2019). These rates are higher among youth from racialized and gender divergent communities (DeKeseredy et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2021). Fraternity houses are a persistent source of concern and despite being known sites of sexual predation and alcohol and drug-related violence, they often evade regulations or policing because institutions choose to look the other way (Massey and Massey, 2017; Oliver, 2016; Rosenthal et al., 2017; Savva, 2019). Problematic sexual and racially motivated behaviours that circulate within 'bro' or 'lad' (Diaz-Fernandez and Evans, 2020; Keith, 2021) campus culture can also make post-secondary institutions daunting, ambivalent spaces for many students (MacDougall et al., 2020; Phipps et al., 2018).

Universities play a critical role in how sexual and gender-based violence are experienced, through their reporting procedures, policy development, and media communications (Bohmert et al., 2019; Kavcic, 2020). Dialogues about campus safety began during the women's and LGBTQ movements of the 1980s, when separate physical spaces were created to protect these students from harassment and ensure their equitable participation in education (Fast, 2018; Hanhardt, 2013). The degree to which these dialogues have helped make campuses safer is negligible, and only a fraction of post-secondary institutions in Canada have stand-alone sexual and gender-based violence policies (Colpitts, 2022; Kavcic, 2020). Some feminist scholars frame the lack of meaningful institutional engagement and/or willful silence about these topics as instances of "everyday terrorism", which elevates the issue from individual acts that occur on a campus to considering campus sexual violence as a systemic problem rooted in patriarchal structures and neoliberal ideology (Prior and deHeer, 2021). Debates about campus safety are contentious and highlight the divide between those who advocate for inclusivity and trauma-informed policy and more conservative factions who eschew these things as infantilization and an encroachment of free speech (Byron, 2017; Fast, 2018). In some settings,

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advocating for safe spaces is associated with divisionary practices that harken back to physical separation during racial segregation (Witherup and Verrecchia, 2020).

Alongside physical parameters and attributes, safety is experienced in affective, transient, and spatially unbound ways that are shaped by history, race, gender, ability, and age (Edwards and Maxwell, 2023; Rodríguez et al., 2023; Shalka, 2021). Yet most post-secondary institutions address the issue by focusing on infrastructure and event-driven practices, like installing lights or introducing seasonal prevention campaigns. These initiatives rarely interrogate the interplay between safety and spatiality and have little impact on the prevalence of campus violence. Additionally, the voices of administrative employees, who have unique insights into student experiences and institutional power dynamics, are rarely included in this research (Clay et al., 2019; O'Keefe and Courtois, 2019; Soares et al., 2022). Using data from a qualitative study about safety and sexual and gender-based violence with undergraduate students (n = 23) and administrators (n = 7) at Western University, the present paper addresses this pressing research gap. It examines the emotional geography of the campus by exploring how safety as well as spatial vulnerability are socially constructed and resisted. Against dominant notions of the campus as a spatially distinct and protected bubble of socio-economic privilege for all who attend or work there, it is revealed to be a more precarious space that reflects hegemonic systems of white, male, cis-gender power and cultivates multiple forms of socio-spatial, sexualized, and racialized precarity among students and certain administrative employees. The contributions these data make to the relevant literature is discussed, along with recommendations for enhancing spatialized confidence on campus.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study design

The study was inspired by a third-year course about sexuality, gender, and health that I teach using critically-oriented ethnographic research and a feminist, postcolonial theoretical lens. Students routinely discuss fascinating aspects of their lived experiences regarding these subjects within the context of campus culture. In the Fall of 2019, they shared distressing accounts of sexual and gender-based violence on and around campus and the lack of adequate dialogue about and support from the university about these topics. The impact of these issues on minority students, in terms of gender, sexuality, and race, was flagged as especially troubling. Given my expertise with studying sexual cultures, activist leanings, and the strong connections I have with my students, exploring these issues was something I felt compelled and well-qualified to undertake.

Intent on doing more than gathering perspectives (Coll, Sullivan& Enright 2018), I wanted this to be a participatory action-oriented initiative that honoured participant knowledge and voice. Drawing upon principles of feminist methodology, acknowledging the centrality of gender, power, and opportunities for social change as well as transforming existing patriarchal structures was critical to this research (Krause et al., 2017). The objective was to identify cultivate new sexual narratives about safety and sexual and gender-based violence and, if possible, generate greater accountability from the university. Including students as well as university administration and individuals in senior leadership positions as participants was central to achieving this task.

Seven undergraduate students, none of whom were enrolled in the course mentioned above, contributed to the study design to help ensure that the research aligned with their knowledge of campus sexual culture and institutional responses to incidents of violence. The students were encouraged to be involved throughout the research process; however, this did not happen due to time constraints, waning interest, and the fact that many moved away from London, Ontario where the university is located during data collection. Their input was limited to helping generate research questions and facilitating recruitment online, which

was helpful, nonetheless. The following questions provided the overarching framework for the project: (1) What kinds of sexual terminologies are used at Western University (Orchard and Sangaraganesan, 2022)?; (2) How does gender shape their content and deployment?; (3) How do these terms affect the lives of our students?; (4) Is Western University a safe place?; and (5) How can we mobilize our data to improve sexual violence policy and services on campus? This paper focuses on data gathered in response to the last two questions.

2.2. Recruitment and data collection

Twenty-three students took part in the study, and they were recruited using purposive sampling techniques. Posters were placed at spots where undergraduate students congregate, including the Central Student Centre, eating establishments, and bus stops. Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter were also employed to generate interest. To be included in the study, student participants had to be a current undergraduate student at Western University, be proficient in speaking English, and self-identify as belonging to one of the following four groups: cisgender women, cisgender men, LGBTQIA+, or gender fluid. The seven administrators who participated in this study were hand-selected by myself based on my knowledge of their specialized work on sexuality, violence, safety, and student experience. Study inclusion for this population was dependent upon being a Western University employee who directly engages with issues of gender diversity and/or sexual violence, working at Western in this capacity for 2 years, and being proficient in speaking English.

From July to November 2019 one in-person, semi-structured interview was conducted with each study participant. I conducted these discussions, which lasted between 35 and 90 min and focused on inquiries about sexual culture, terminologies, gender, and safety within the campus environment. Each interview was audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed by a trusted third party who has worked with me on previous participatory studies. The student interviews ceased at twenty three because saturation had been reached and collecting data from additional participants would not have yielded new insights. The administrative interviews, which centered around inquiries about barriers to and facilitators of campus safety, ceased at seven because transcription funds had run out.

The students received a small honorarium for their participation, and were informed that they would receive this honorarium even if they were unable to complete the interview. Before each interview, the potential for difficult issues or emotions to arise during the research was discussed. Information about local service provision was available for any participants who expressed a need for these supports, however, this request was not made. The administrative participants did not receive an honorarium because the study aligned with their professional duties. The project received ethics approval from Western University's Non-Medical Review Board. Participants are referred to only by their gender and study group to ensure anonymity.

2.3. Analysis

Data analysis was organized according to six principles for thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), beginning with multiple and close readings of the transcribed interviews. The data were organized into master code files by study population and reviewed using line-by-line coding to identify emergent themes as well as data that were most representative across the two samples and aligned with the study aims. This process was informed by critical feminist researchers who interrogate how safety and spatial vulnerability are constructed and intersect with everyday and structural factors, including gender, race, emotions, and the patriarchal power dynamics that structure the neoliberal university (Fast, 2018; Martis, 2021; Prior and deHeer, 2021; Rosenthal et al., 2017).

Ahmed's (2021) approach of hearing with a 'feminist ear' - "to hear

who is not heard, how we are not heard" (p.4)- was also very useful during the analysis. This is a way of listening to the emotional tenor of the experiences shared and how they were shared, including the silences that sometimes hung in the air during the interviews as well as the tears that were shed. It was hard for participants to discuss safety because it was rare and because it was part of traumatic experiences that were not fully resolved personally or politically in terms of the university's responsibility. Critiquing powerful institutions was a risky act for participants, who trusted me with their intimate accounts and sometimes shared things with me that they had not told anyone else. One administrative participant requested that portions of his interview be redacted, which I did without question to assuage his acute concerns about job security.

Like many feminist scholars, I advocate for critical scholarship that exposes the systems of power that shape the production of affective lived experiences, knowledge, and the actions needed to move social change forward (Linabary, Corple & Cooky, 2021). These affective and ideological tensions are central to doing reflexive research, which is a fluid process. Navigating these tensions can be a heavy weight as a researchers, but as a seasoned ethnographer I have learned to process these experiences safely and recall them with analytical and emotional verve during the writing process.

3. Results

3.1. Participant profile & study setting

Twenty-three cis-gender undergraduate students participated in this study, most of whom were in years three and four of their respective programs. Sixteen identified as women and of those, nine were straight, three were bi-sexual, two were bi-curious, and two were lesbian. Among the seven male students, five were straight, one was bi-sexual, and one was gay. In terms of racial identities, the students identified as White (n = 12), followed by South Asian (n = 5), Middle Eastern (n = 4), Black (n = 1), and Indigenous (n = 1). Seven White, cis-gender university administrators also took part in the research, five of whom were women and two of whom were male. Of the female participants, four identified as straight and one as queer and among the men, one identified as gay and one as straight.

Located in a medium-sized Canadian city known for health care services and post-secondary education, Western University is home to over 30,000 students, mainly undergraduates from the southern Ontario region. Women students slightly outnumber male students and although most Western members are White, the university is taking strides to attract more racially diverse individuals. Western employs 1400 faculty members and 2500 staff who, along with students, make up the campus community. This site was selected because of the distressing experiences my students shared with me on this campus and because of the university's enduring reputation as a "party school." I was curious to document this maligned and seemingly misunderstood culture from the inside, drawing upon the first hand knowledge of students and administrators, whose accounts are rarely included in campus safety studies.

Often called "the bubble", several students described the university using tropes of socio-economic privilege and physical separation, like this female student: "The university is this small bubble that is representative of the larger world around us, but in kind of skewed manor because we do have so many more open minded individuals that you see in a city." Another woman said the bubble made her feel safer but could also obscure her understanding of what happens in spaces beyond the campus: "It's almost like you are more safe because you're removed from the other bad stuff that's going on, but that could be me being blind to what's inside the bubble." Administrative participants also talked about "the bubble", but in quite different ways. One participant used the metaphor to discuss the disjunct and discomfort that exists between dominant patriarchal power structures and the protective enclave she seeks to create within the university bubble in order to carry out her inclusive, student-facing work:

> I'm so in a bubble. I work friggin hard in my bubble. Out there … It's a sea of White, it's a sea of cis-straight, where feminism is a dirty word. Individually, there's a bunch of us who want to create change, but Western University has a culture of '"belong to get along" and "don't rock the boat." I'm totally in a bubble, we don't sexualize anyone here, we're so consent based, respectful. But the environment out there, from what my clients tell me, it's stressful.

3.2. Student participants

3.2.1. Defining safety

Many students said there is no singular definition of safety, including this young woman: "It depends on how you define safe." When asked whether Western University is safe, most students said "sometimes" or "it depends", one third said "no", and one individual said "yes." A male participant who indicated that the campus was sometimes safe acknowledged that, in reality, nowhere is: "I wouldn't say it's 100% a safe space. I feel like there's a lot of steps being made to make it a safer space, but I don't think anywhere right now is a completely safe space." One female student gave the campus a safety score: "On a scale of 1–10, I would say it's safe 6.5 out of 10 times." A male student also provided a score, and his explanation revealed how he perceives the difference between physical and mental or emotional safety on campus, which is directly impacted by the racial composition of the university:

> Physically, I'll give you an 89%. I'd say campus is often a very safe place for people because they can connect with their communities here. Mentally for a lot of people I would say no because if you're a person of color walking by 70 white people on your way to class it must feel so domineering. It would be hard to devote yourself to what you're doing because you don't see yourself there. So, in that regard it's not a safe space.

3.2.2. Walking home in the dark

The most common impediment to campus safety identified by student participants was walking on campus alone at night. One woman described trying to dress "like a guy" and clutching her keys like a weapon in her hand as she crossed the campus in the dark. These two women, referring to on and off-campus experiences, respectively, stated: "I feel unsafe when I'm walking at night" and "I don't walk home ever because I get cat called and am scared of walking in my neighbourhood at night. I don't like walking alone at night." A male participant echoed these concerns and identified specific areas on campus that are frightening because they are poorly lit: "I've heard mainly my female classmates walking home at night around campus where it's not lit well, by the field by Western Drive, right by the gates where that path cuts across next to Alumni Hall. It's not well lit, and you hear a lot about students getting cat called, getting yelled at."

This young woman also commented on lighting, along with her concerns about non-students in certain locales, evoking the notion of strangers as an additional source of fear: "On campus at night around the gym is a bit sketch because we have students, and we have people that aren't students there. So, I try to walk on the sidewalk at night and not cut through. It's dimly lit." Traversing isolated stretches of the university at night, often on their way home, was something several men also identified as scary, including this participant whose safety strategy included calling a friend to 'walk with' him: "I've personally walked home and called my friends like, 'Hey, what sup? I'm just walking home … it's 9:30 p.m. and this area is empty. Yo just stay on the call with me.'" Another young man shared an identical example: "I have friends that if they're going to walk home late at night, I'll be like 'call me and we can be on the phone while you walk.'"

When describing a recent experience of traversing the campus at night, one woman said she was afraid until the man walking behind her

shared some reassuring words: "I walked through the path, and there was a guy behind me. I don't know if he could tell that I picked up my pace, but he said: 'I don't mean to scare you, I'm just taking the same path.' It made me feel better that he said that." A male participant shared an identical scene, but instead of saying something to the scared women he has encountered at night, he remains quiet to avoid creeping them out:

> If I'm walking somewhere and there's a girl in front of me and she's looking back. I feel so bad because I want to say: 'I promise, I'm just listening to my music.' It's creepy if I start a conversation like that late at night [because] she'll just automatically run. But I wish there was some way for me to say: 'I promise you I'm just walking to my car.'

His repeated use of the word "promise" captures his solemn and emotionally sincere desire to reassure these women that he is not a threat. These examples reflect the voluminous nature of fear at nighttime and how it contributes to a profound sense of spatial vulnerability, such that some students feel silenced from speaking with one another no matter how well-intentioned they are.

3.2.3. Fraternity houses

Fraternity houses at Western University are exclusive spaces known for their intense partying and sexual predation. They were mentioned on multiple occasions as being among the least safe spaces on campus, as this woman said: "I find Western University a safe space, but I've had times where I have not found it to be safe, like at the frat house." Similarly, this female participant said: "On campus, even at parties too, no one's ever been mean to me except for the drunk frat boy, obviously that happens." Her use of the word "obviously" reflects how common and normalized such behaviours are within fraternity culture. Male students also described these places as unsafe, including this man: "There's a lot of stories that come out of frat houses of harassment, the feeling of uneasiness. That's the scariest thing about violence when someone takes away your ability to feel safe." Another young man said that certain houses were associated with sinister and illegal activities: "A number of fraternities have a reputation for roofie-ing people", referring to the practice of slipping illicit drugs into drinks or other substances for the purposes of sexually assault, typically of women. The unregulated nature of frat houses factored into the increased risks associated with these places, as one woman said: "Frat parties are more scary than the bar because the bars have security and if something happened at the frat parties you'd have no idea so we don't go to those ever."

Many parents do not want their children attending Western University because of its reputation as a party school with ties to fraternity houses, as one female participant explained: "People don't want to come to Western for these reasons. My family didn't want me to come here, they're like 'this is a party school, bad things happen to girls here.' My mom was like 'absolutely no frat parties, the people there are scary.'" This detailed exchange between another female participant, a female friend, and a frat member about a demeaning social media post exemplifies the problematic behaviors within fraternity culture:

> Frat guys talk about the first entry sorority people like they're 'fresh meat.' I've seen Instagram captions like 'Welcome to the 23 fresh meat', like eew , that's gross. Someone from a frat came over to my house and I was like 'Why did you have that caption?' He's like 'It's funny.' I was like 'I don't think it's funny' and my friend said that she didn't either and he's like 'whatever, you can't take a joke.'

3.2.4. Race, gender, not talking about it

The intersecting issues of race, gender, and the silence surrounding campus violence were discussed frequently, especially by female participants. The term "uncomfortable" surfaced repeatedly, which captures the emotional and embodied unease that characterized participants' accounts of campus safety or lack thereof. For Black

students, this was reflected in the intense affective work required to deflect demeaning stereotypes in spaces where their visibility made them feel unsafe. This participant captures her experiences with "racial battle fatigue" or the exhaustion that people of color feel in hyper racialized environments that can impact their ability to persist (Smith et al. 2007):

> Race, fitting in it's not a safe space. You feel more uncomfortable and hyper visible when you're the only Black student, especially when topics of race come up and you feel like you have to answer. On top of that when you say something you have to make sure it's right because of the preconceived notion of Black people not being smart.

In contrast, this student shared insights about the unfettered relationship between Whiteness and her ability to find help on campus should she ever need it: "My color plays into a lot of this. This is a very white campus, all the police officers are white, so I don't have an issue."

Gender-related services and communications were also identified as lacking. For one participant, the university's generic LGBTQIA + initiatives and perceived silence surrounding sexual or gender-based violence caused considerable discomfort because it reflected how out of touch the institution is with the lived experiences of queer students:

> One thing I saw recently was 'Coming Out With Us At Breakfast' and it was like coming out is all rainbows. I don't feel fully safe expressing who I am because we're not acknowledging violence, especially gender-based or sexual orientation-based violence. It makes me feel really uncomfortable and not safe.

Other female students critiqued the inadequate safety supports on campus, including one woman who said that students have to find or cultivate safe spaces on their own: "Western has the potential to offer safe spaces for people, but you have to create them with finding close groups of friends or finding clubs that you feel comfortable with." She then described how easily the campus can become an unsafe place when the help female students need is not provided, which she experienced first-hand: "It can be very easy to feel uncomfortable or unsafe on campus for women who are not getting the assistance they've looked for." A different woman shared a distressing example of the insufficient response from campus security after she was followed: "Campus police said: 'why don't you go in a building, wait for a little bit until they leave?' It's like, 'I don't want to go in a building and wait for this creepy dude to leave, I want you to do something about this.'"

The paucity of institutional supports regarding safety as well as the different kinds of violence and fear of violence on campus is deeply concerning. As this woman shared: "It's really only in your courses where we at least learned about sexual violence, domestic violence, whereas in other courses it's just that token slide. Like, 'If you're having any trouble call this number' but we don't actually talk about it." Another student reflected on the challenges associated with identifying sexual violence and how it feels, in an embodied sense, because of the ways that inequitable patriarchal ideals about gender and violence are so firmly embedded within society:

> It can be difficult to recognize sexual violence and that sort of uncomfortability because we are so conditioned to the mentality of 'boys will be boys.' That's how women have to deal with violence … I'm so predisposed to just accept it as that's the way society is.

3.2.5. Men in cars and voices in the woods

Among the most shocking instances of where and why certain students feel unsafe on campus were the stories about women being followed by men in cars and being cat -called by people in wooded areas. One woman said: "I have heard horror stories about women. A girl was walking home after an art show on campus, and she was being followed. It was happening a lot in second semester where cars would follow women or men yelling out of cars." A male participant shared an emotionally stressful exchange with a female friend when he offered her

a ride home during the timeframe when the 'men in cars' scenarios were on the rise:

> I was driving at night and saw a friend, so I stopped to offer her a ride. Before I could roll down the window she was sprinting away. I said: 'What's going on?' She was bawling and said: 'I didn't know who it was, two days ago someone stopped and yelled at me to get in the car.' Last year during last o-week, there were guys in cars coming to first year events revving their engine and asking: 'Who wants to go for a ride?'

A female participant described several social media posts from fellow Western University students who heard the sound of a baby crying from a wooded area while walking across campus at night:

> I saw a girl post about walking home from the gym and she could hear the sound of a baby crying. It seemed to be coming from the woods somewhere. Then someone else posted that that's a pretty common tactic for someone to try to lure you into a space because as women you hear a baby crying and you think: 'Oh my god what is this?' Isn't that terrifying?

A young man relayed his knowledge of similar incidents: "I've heard so many stories of someone walking by a forest and someone from inside the forest yelling at them to take their shirt off."

3.3. Administrative participants

3.3.1. Searching for safety in the ivory tower

Most of the seven administrators (n = 4) said that Western University is not safe, including this woman: "This isn't a safe place to work. I've never seen it this bad before." Another female participant reflected on the fact that if these issues were discussed more often and more people felt comfortable reporting incidents of violence, more cases would be reported: "If we had a safer environment on campus, the reports [of sexual violence] would be higher. Doesn't learning begin with safety? I've worked on lots of campuses, and this is one of the worst." A different woman spoke about the intimidating administrative culture that rewards those who follow the "pack" and how these behaviours are mirrored to students, who often disclose their distressing personal experiences in hushed tones:

> There is a pack mentality and a silencing culture in the administration. I like to ask critical questions, and I don't think that's welcome especially not welcome for women which feeds back to the silencing. A lot of people get ahead on not being disruptive … Students feel safe with people who they've made a connection with, but in general those conversations happen behind closed doors. It's kind of like 'I know I shouldn't talk about this' or 'please don't tell anyone I said this', so there's a real lack of safety.

Like the student participants, the administrators discussed multiple kinds of safety, including this woman: "It's about understanding the multilayer of safety, like what do we mean by safety? It's not just physical safety, it's emotional safety and psychological safety." They also spoke about how safety is shaped by race, gender, sexual orientation, and institutional power structures, especially the dominant patriarchal ethos that works to maintain the status quo:

> For me as a cisgender heteronormative woman who has a lot of privilege it's pretty safe. But I do bump up against the structural inequalities that are here … 'this is the way it's always been' or 'this is the way patriarchy is going from these channels.' So, I don't personally feel unsafe but for people who don't carry privilege, it would be a very unsafe place because of how much privilege it takes to navigate these structures, to navigate them well.

A different female administrator stressed the importance of advocating for diverse student voices in an environment that can be unwelcoming to marginalized students and the staff who stand for these issues:

"Having student voices included, like LGBTQI2S+ and racialized folks, Indigenous folks, folks with disabilities, and folks from lower SES brackets is critical." Another administrator echoed the importance of diversifying services:

> If it was [safe] people wouldn't be assaulted or people wouldn't be experiencing homophobia, transphobia. I don't think there's any safe spaces, anywhere right now. But there could be more support roles, more pathways for support, more diversity of services in that area and reaching out to populations that aren't making their way to services.

One male participant wondered if sexual and gender-based violence is "that bad" on campus and whether the issue is taken up by some individuals to enhance their reputation:

> There's a gap in the administration between certain folks who have a more alarmist view of what's going on and other administrators who say: 'yes things aren't great but it's not that bad.' Some people constantly use the phrase toxic masculinity and gendered violence. Is it because it's really, really bad and the rest of us are asleep? Or would that help their careers and circumstances, to position them as the savior of the campus?

The other male administrator raised several intriguing questions about safety and the broader political culture at the university, which he identifies as being resistant to change and out of touch with how students inhabit the campus at different times of day and over the course of the week:

> When I hear violence I think about criminal offenses. That's what my rolodex starts doing … I find this culture, and I'm surprised, shocked really, to be resistant to change. Who's Western University? The president? Do the board of governors know about the risks? We have a population of 5,300 students on and about 25–27,00 off. They're studying at 3 am, they're up at 4 am, they're traversing around campus and the culture here is Monday-Friday.

Later in his interview, this same participant discussed the challenges of ensuring safety on campus when the resources allocated to these tasks are out of ratio with how the student populations inhabit the campus. It is hyper-surveilled when classes are in, but students have fewer supports during the evenings and weekends when most violent incidents occur. This misalignment was raised by another participant who, like the administrator above, drew attention to the institution's disjointed identity: "We still program for the university we think it is, rather than the university it is."

4. Discussion

Using qualitive interview data from a participatory action research study conducted at Western University, this article used a critical feminist lens to examine how undergraduate students and administrators spoke about campus safety as well as spatial vulnerability. Including administrative perspectives is unique in this research field, which focuses mainly on student accounts. The study participants shed compelling light on the "uncomfortable" feelings that pervade their movement through various spaces across and within the university campus, known as "the bubble." Often presumed to be a spatially distinct place of privilege for all who work and attend classes within its reach, the bubble is perhaps more of a bell jar. Both participant groups experienced this space as one of precarious privilege that reflects, reproduces, and sometimes protects hegemonic systems of white, male, cis-gender institutional power. This glimpse into the emotional geography of the campus sheds new light on safety culture and allied feminist research, specifically that which relates to the interplay between contested notions of safety as well as spatial vulnerability for two stakeholder communities in the neoliberal university.

When asked whether Western University was a safe space, all but one

participant said no, which is perhaps not surprizing given that few places are one-hundred percent safe. Determining what "safety" looks like is challenging, and this is linked with the nebulous nature of the term, which both participant groups noted. Safety researchers indicate that the concept is often conceived of in unidimensional terms that highlight normative psychological traits (Fruhen et al., 2019), to the exclusion of perspectives that consider the intersecting role of gender, race, class, and institutions themselves (Colpitts, 2022; Fast, 2018; Harless, 2018; Prior and deHeer, 2021). Feminist geographers and allied researchers have also demonstrated that the phrase "safe space" often conjures the spectre of its opposite: unsafe spaces and dangerous bodies that make certain locations perilous (Carpenter et al., 2016; Hanhardt, 2013; Valentine, 1989). This was borne out in the present study, where participants often spoke about fear when asked about safety, which may have been a way of making sense of traumatic situations that had not yet been fully processed or addressed (Ahmed, 2021; Rosenthal et al., 2017).

Several female students used the term "uncomfortable" when discussing what it feels like to walk home alone from a night class across open spaces, to not have access to campus support services when needed, and, for Black students, to experience the pressure to always respond whenever racialized issues were raised in the classroom. These women feel denied safe spaces and the supportive resources to manage campus threats, which demonstrates how spatial vulnerability can restrict their sense of freedom and bodily movements (Koskela, 1997; Linder and Lacey, 2020; Starkweather, 2007; Valentine 1989). These findings echo what administrative participants said about how hard it can be for students and colleagues, especially those from diverse socio-sexual, gendered, and racial locations, to navigate the university system effectively.

Campus safety research illustrates that women and other minority students experience more violence and scary incidents than male students (Calogero et al., 2021; Lee and Wong, 2019; Wooten and Mitchell, 2015), which also came through in this study. However, a number of male participants talked about being afraid on campus too, which is rarely mentioned in the literature. They also spoke about how afraid women are at fraternity houses, when running away from a car, or when picking up the pace ahead of them along a campus trail, which captures how gender and spatial vulnerability collide within and between gendered student groups. Students carried deep-seated fears stemming from the knowledge of what could happen to one another as they navigated their classes and their efforts to be safe on campus. This is critical information to consider when designing safety initiatives and policies, so too is including men as more than threats or barriers to safety as they are often positioned.

Tapping into the emotional geography of Western University helps identify and better understand the tacit and explicit factors that contribute to spatial vulnerability on campus. These findings also reflect the need for the university to be more in touch with who it is and who it serves, which was raised by administrative participants who asked: "who is Western University?" and noted that their official directives seemed caught between the university "we think we are" and the university "we are." Female administrative participants, in particular, reported feeling unheard or silenced when they raised various issues regarding safety and the problematic power dynamics at play in their respective departments which, at times, discouraged them from advocating for students from diverse social locations. It also cultivated feelings of betrayal and a sense of not being seen or counted for among colleagues and senior leaders (Ahmed, 2021; Rosenthal et al., 2017; Wooten and Mitchell, 2015).

In her book *Complaint!*, feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2021) explores how complaints related to power inequities and sexual harassment are managed within the neoliberal university. The culture of protection is central to her discussion, especially in the chapter called "Behind Closed Doors", which is a term that one administrative participant used to describe the fear that students experience when coming forward to talk about sexual and gender-based violence. When unpacking the metaphorical and literal meanings associated with doors in the university setting, Ahmed writes: "Doors provide clues that something is going on that is suppose dto be kept secret" (2021: 180). This sentiment was expressed by both sets of participants, many of whom were frustrated with things that happen on campus that aren't talked about enough or responded to consistently. These things include being hyper-sexualized, followed on campus, drugged at parties, silenced, told to not "rock the boat", and being rewarded for following "the pack." Speaking out about these things is a powerful way of talking back to the closed doors of the institution and the patriarchal practices that run through it. This is especially true in setting where the very existence of these distressing experiences are questioned, as was the case with one senior administrative participant who wondered whether sexual and gender-based violence on campus was "as bad" as his peers said or if these claims were about securing a 'saviour' reputation. This individual was new to Western; however, this query may reflect institutional pushback about these complex, politicized topics.

There are many ways to enhance spatial confidence at Western University and since the time of this research it has introduced new sexual violence policies and safety initiatives, including mandatory sexual and gender-based violence training related specifically to disclosure and on-site supports for students, staff, and faculty. It has also hired more security personnel and student leaders to navigate safety issues for students who live on campus. This directly relates to what some students said about feeling responsible for creating socio-spatial enclaves of safety themselves, which has been noted in the recent literature as well (Bettencourt, 2021; Deckman, 2022). Reflecting on ways to realign the university's perceived identity and dominant administrative practices, which can be exclusionary and patriarchal, with how the community members as a whole experience the campus spaces, occupational opportunities, and the spatialized relationships that make up this contested, complicated place is also important (Clay et al., 2019). Doing this in partnership with trained professionals as well as a representative cross-section of students, staff-including administration- and faculty members is critical to responding effectively to the range and depth of socio-emotional and cultural issues identified as central drivers of spatial vulnerability in this setting.

Declarations of interest

None.

The data associated with this study is not available for public access, however, allied publications stemming from the study are available on ResearchGate, Academia.edu, and other online spaces.

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