

Understanding the Needs, Challenges and Priorities of Students/Survivors and Perpetrators to Inform a Digital Support Tool for Violence Prevention in Canadian Academic Institutions

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BACKGROUND

Sexual violence remains a pressing public health concern in higher education, with college and university campuses being particularly vulnerable environments (Sutherland et al., 2024; Jiménez Aceves & Tarzia, 2024). While individuals of all genders may experience sexual assault, research consistently shows that women especially during their first two years of study face disproportionately higher risks, a period often referred to as the "red zone" (Senn et al., 2014), with a Canadian study reporting that more than one in four female university students have experienced sexual assault (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993). The consequences of campus-based sexual violence are profound, affecting students' health, well-being, and academic success in both the short and long term (Nowrouzi-Kia et al., 2024). These realities underscore the urgency for colleges and universities to implement systematic monitoring, allocate adequate resources for survivor support, and invest in comprehensive prevention initiatives (Steele et al., 2024). Beyond providing resources, proactive prevention strategies must address both risk and protective factors associated with perpetration; however, while risk factors are relatively well understood, protective factors remain underexplored (O'Connor et al., 2024).

Although various digital tools have been developed to support at-risk groups, there is still a lack of comprehensive platforms that integrate these considerations and address the diverse needs of students, survivors, and potential perpetrators (De Filippo et al., 2023; Henry et al., 2024). In sum, despite progress in research and intervention, critical gaps persist, and effective prevention requires context-specific, evidence-based strategies that account for institutional differences and diverse student needs; therefore, this study aims to address these gaps by identifying key factors to inform the design of a comprehensive and effective application that responds to the needs of all groups.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

- What are the needs, preferences, priorities, and challenges of students and survivors in Canadian academic institutions regarding safety, coping, and recovery from experiences of violence, harassment, or other harmful behaviors?
- What features and functions would students and survivors consider most important in a digital support tool (e.g., confidential chatbot) designed to assist with safety, coping, and accessing support services?
- What perspectives, preferences, priorities, and challenges do perpetrators (or potential perpetrators) identify in relation to preventing harmful behaviors, and what features in a digital tool could help guide them toward safer actions and appropriate support processes?

CONTEXT OF STUDY

This collaborative project between Canadore College and Go Thrive Go aims to better understand the needs of students and survivors of violence at Canadian colleges and universities in order to support their safety, healing, and access to resources. The study also seeks to identify the most valuable features of a digital tool such as a confidential chatbot that can effectively respond to these needs. In parallel, it explores how individuals at risk of perpetration can be guided toward safer behaviors, integrating both perspectives to inform the development of comprehensive applications that support survivors while contributing to the prevention of harm.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Phase 1

Review of the literature to develop a Conceptual Model

Phase 2

Data collection through Survey (132 Responses) and three Focus Groups (20 participants) across Canada

Phase 3

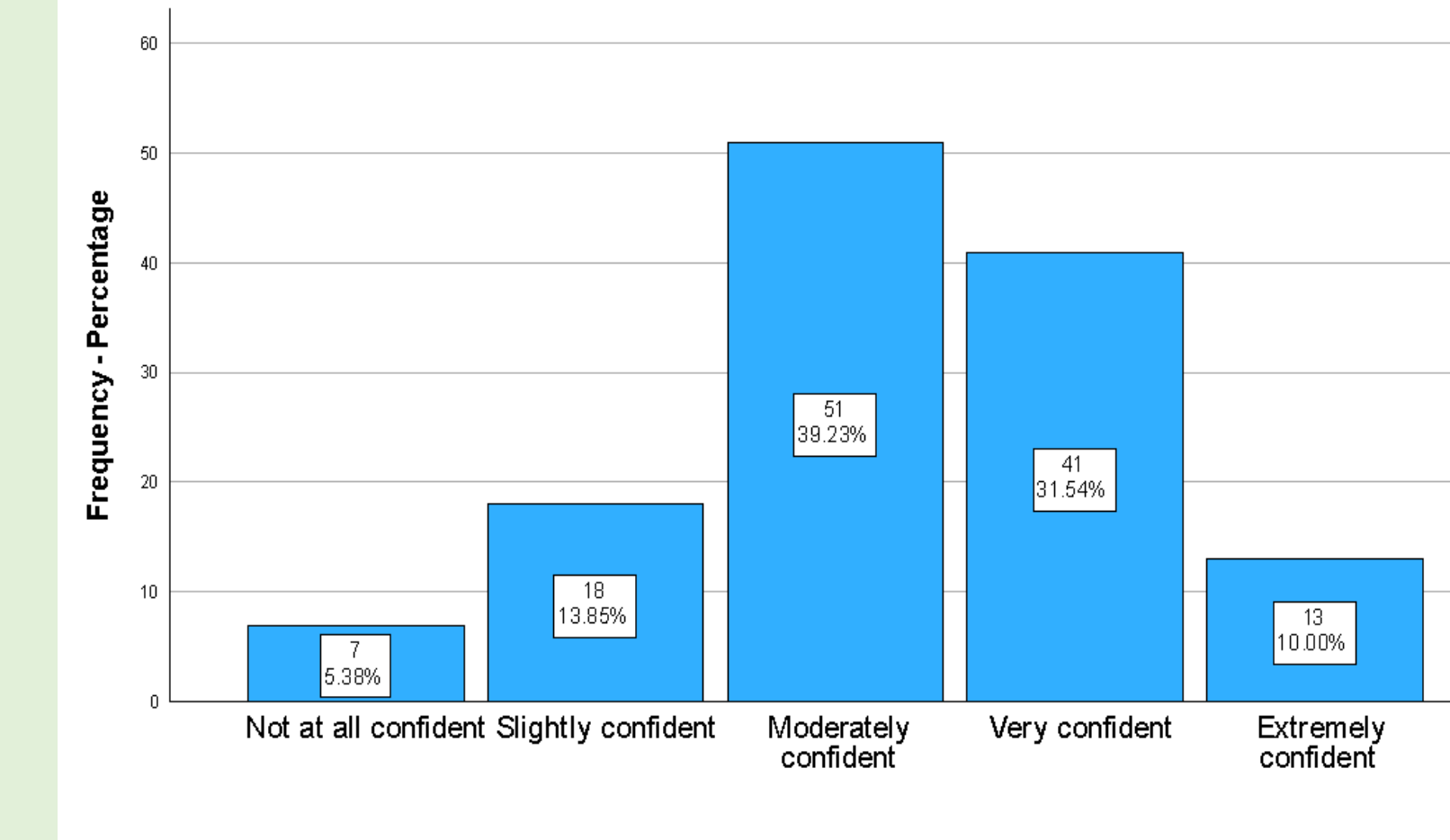
Data analysis (both quantitative and qualitative) and final report

SURVEY RESULTS

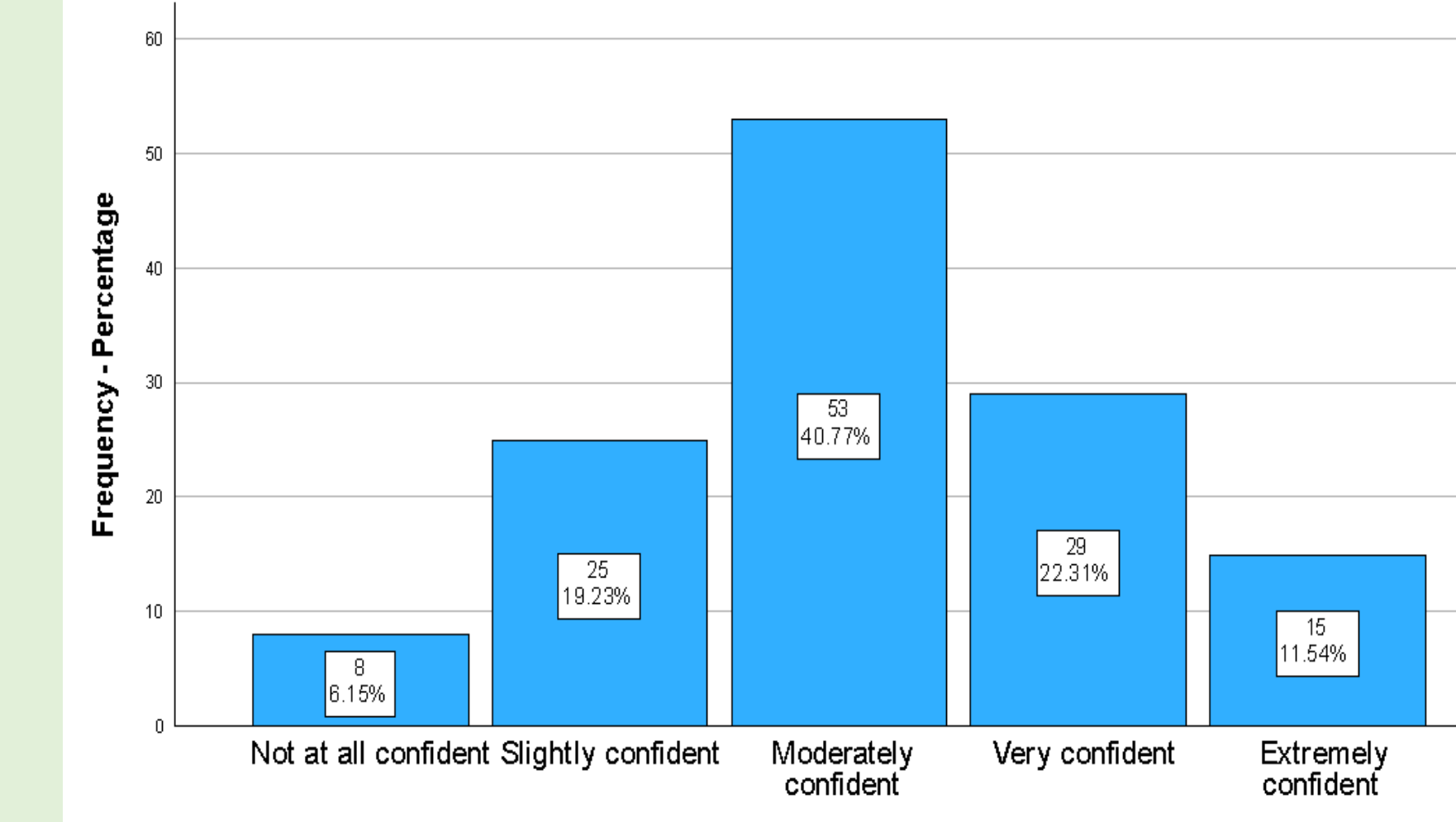
What were the immediate impacts of the incident on you?

	Responses		
	N	Percent	Percent of Cases
Emotional distress (e.g., anxiety, fear, depression)	28	28.6%	59.6%
Impact on personal relationships	18	18.4%	38.3%
Social isolation or withdrawal	17	17.3%	36.2%
Academic difficulties (e.g., concentration problems, missed classes, lower grades)	15	15.3%	31.9%
No impact	8	8.2%	17.0%
Physical harm or health issues	6	6.1%	12.8%
Financial strain (e.g., medical costs, relocation, loss of income)	5	5.1%	10.6%
Other (please specify):	1	1.0%	2.1%
Total	98	100.0%	208.5%

How confident are you in recognizing signs of violence or harassment?



How confident are you in knowing what to do if you witness violence or harassment?



Preferred Features in a Digital Safety Support Tool

	Responses		
	N	Percent	Percent of Cases
Quick links to emergency numbers or crisis lines	73	16.6%	65.2%
Anonymous reporting options	72	16.3%	64.3%
Self-help resources (e.g., coping strategies, educational materials)	65	14.7%	58.0%
Safety planning tools (e.g., personalized safety strategies)	63	14.3%	56.3%
Direct referral to campus or community services	59	13.4%	52.7%
Peer-support connections (e.g., student mentors, survivor networks)	54	12.2%	48.2%
Reminders and follow-ups (e.g., check-ins, appointments, safety reminders)	52	11.8%	46.4%
Others (please specify)	3	0.7%	2.7%
Total	441	100.0%	393.8%

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