

Reflective Essay

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I have been developing my ideas for this project since fall semester of 2017. My interest in this topic goes back to my freshman year of college here at the University of Maryland. I saw firsthand, through friends and acquaintances, just how prevalent sexual violence was among college students. Additionally, I also interned with the Department of Fraternity and Sorority Life during the fall of 2017, working on their Sexual Assault Prevention programming. This experience exposed me to the wide collection of research on the topic, and I was able to participate in a number prevention programs.

Sexual violence generally gets a lot of attention and it is a well-studied topic. From my time at the Department of Fraternity and Sorority Life, I had been wondering what reasons there are for men to commit sexual violence. The real impetus for my idea, however, came from a podcast series that investigated the way the pornography industry has changed since the mid 2000s, after streaming sites became popular. This inspired me to look closely at the studies relating sexual violence and pornography. I started to comb through the existing literature. What I found was that most of the research was quite old and had not yet studied the impact of free, streaming adult content on the Internet.

To start my search, as I always do, I began searching databases with keywords. Usually, I begin using Google Scholar, PubMed and World Cat UMD. Searching can be a difficult and frustrating process. Initially, I looked at all studies relating to pornography and sexual violence without restricting the time period. However, the more I learned about the changes that took place in the mid 2000s, the more I realized that recent studies would provide a more accurate understanding of the relationship between the two variables of interest.

While searching, I used a variety of different keywords in different combinations. The literature does not always use consistent terminology, so it is important to vary search terms to ensure that you are accessing all relevant research. The more I looked at literature, the more I began to pick up on the synonyms used for certain concepts. For things like pornography consumption, I did searches on sexually explicit media, sexually explicit materials, and adult content. Another strategy I use a lot is consulting the references of papers that come from my searches. Sometimes, these references are a little bit older and have the potential to be outdated, but usually they contain valuable foundation information. Every so often, Google Scholar would produce a paper that I did not have access to through the University. However, I was able to utilize the Interlibrary Loan Service, and I was able to quickly access the content. Eventually, I felt I reached a point of saturation where I had found all of the relevant studies relating to the two variables of interest, sexual violence and pornography consumption.

Two professors assisted me in narrowing down my ideas and making them realistic. When I initially proposed my idea to Dr. Kerry Green, a professor in the Department of Behavioral and Community Health, she encouraged me to think a little bit longer about doing a project that would have some sort of innovative aspect. My initial proposal was tired and overworked, something that had been studied many times before. She encouraged me to pursue avenues that had not yet been looked into. She also assured me when I was worried about feasibility of the research. Without her confidence in my ability to come up with a unique and invigorating idea, my project would not have ended up where it is today. Dr. Green played a key role in helping me form my idea, but Dr. Elizabeth Aparicio helped me shape the idea into a feasible, pragmatic project. She advised me to make sure that my sources were

reliable, questionnaires were standard and valid, and that I would get enough respondents for an effect to be detected.

My main priorities when selecting and evaluating a source were to ensure that the study came from the time period of interest and also that it was published by a journal with relative reputation. The former is easier to distinguish, as all articles state the date of publication. But determining that a journal had credibility was a little more difficult. If I did not recognize the name of the journal, I would look up its impact factor from that year. The impact factor is useful because it reflects the number of times the average article in a journal has been cited in a particular year. Looking at this number, I was able to weigh the relative credibility of that journal.

This process has taught me so much that is applicable to both my academic and professional career. Next semester, I will be interning full time at the Health Resources and Services Administration. In this role, I will be able to apply a number of skills gained from this project. During this research experience, I have learned how to assess the state of the literature on a topic through effective searching methods, and now I know when I have reached saturation. This was a valuable learning experience that will carry on into my future professional career, hopefully pursuing health research.

If I could change my research experience, there are things I would have done differently. If I had had more time, I would have created and developed my own measure evaluating exposure to pornography. However, in terms of assistance from the library, I feel that I got everything I needed. The librarian for the School of Public Health, Nedelina Tchangalova, has helped me immensely. We have had one-on-one meetings before, where she demonstrated the utility of reference manager applications such as Zotero. In an ideal world, I imagine a Public Health or maybe even Social Sciences specific research space where I can go and conduct literature searches but also have the ability to ask specialists questions.