

## Lang Award Reflective Essay

In the winter quarter of the 2021-2022 school year, I was a student halfway through my junior year at UC Davis, and still adjusting to being back on campus and navigating COVID learning adaptations. That quarter, I was tasked with completing a final research project in SOC126: Social Interactions that explored how a certain group of people engaged in some aspect of presentation of self in a specific chosen space. Given the tools I developed in the era of remote learning, I was inspired to investigate the emerging field of social media sociological research, and examined five Instagram profiles to see how women who lifted weights engaged in presentation of gender on social media. This final project allowed me to dip my toe in the water of social media research, and inspired me to pursue an honors thesis that would incorporate interview data to explain the trends I had witnessed through online observation. My senior thesis paper, “Female Weightlifter’s Presentation of Gender on Instagram” was the resulting product of two quarters of qualitative research conducted in SOC194HA and SOC194HB. The obstacles I predicted would be most difficult to surmount before beginning the writing process included completing a full length literature review, and learning the process of conducting semi-structured interviews. The UC Davis Library’s online Subject Guides proved invaluable in finding databases to form my literature review, and I ended up collecting twenty-three sources that were referenced, in addition to reading many more unrelated articles to get a better sense of how interview-based research results were conducted and reported.

Prior to the undertaking of the honors thesis project, I had only written class papers that required a maximum of eight to ten sources. I knew that a thorough literature review would require at least double the material in order to support the abductive analysis methods required to draw conclusions from my qualitative data. In other words, I knew going into the project that I

wanted to code my interview data informed by prior research, while allowing for new trends to emerge. My initial thinking was that in order to sufficiently research my topic of interest I would need to include information on recent social media research and explore how research on gendered expectations for performance of femininity varied outside of athletic contexts. After talking with my thesis advisor, I decided to split my literature review into five topics:

Foundational Theory to establish women as performers of gender, Beauty Standards and Social Media Expectations, Women as Athletes, Gym Culture vs Weightlifting Subculture, and finally Stigma Management Techniques. I realized that the literature review would have to also include justification for analyzing the female weightlifters through the lens of a deviant subculture, which meant defining the boundaries of the mainstream culture, and how women who lifted weights and posted online were intentionally transgressing those norms. Therefore, the distinction that emerged between research on women as athletes compared to normative expectations in the gym and weightlifting spaces was an unexpected finding, but necessary inclusion to flesh out how my subjects of interest contributed to an underdeveloped population of study. While these topics were related, the sources necessary to complete such background research varied from ideas generated in the last century to last year. This decision informed my choices to use the online UC Davis Library data bank tools, along with Google Scholar due to the ease of applying search filters.

In conducting the literature review, one challenge I faced was a lack of articles that explored the intersection of deviance and social media. At first I focused on the use of keyword searches in various data banks and Google Scholar sources, but found that while a large body of research was dedicated to establishing how social norms permeated social media, not a lot of research was dedicated to transgressors of gender norms online. While this finding supported the

need for my project, to fill a gap in the literature, I needed to reference a variety of sources that conducted semi-structured interviews to get an idea of the types of questions that would need to go on my interview guide. For example, I was able to reference an article that asked, “What makes a picture Instagram worthy?” This question was conducted in the context of a study that wanted to examine adherence to feminine beauty standards online, but by asking this same question to my unique population, I could demonstrate the presence of a subculture that valued rejection of mainstream beauty norms. Therefore, while I encountered the problem of not finding sources with similar research questions, I was able to procure clear examples of the types of questions it would be useful to ask. I was able to problem solve and expand my literature review to cover five more nuanced topics that cobbled together I used to inform my question guide.

The process of writing my literature review and overall thesis paper took place over two quarters, which in itself was an additional challenge. While a course dedicated to writing the paper was useful to troubleshoot issues that arose from institutional barriers, such as making the necessary IRB corrections, there were no traditional assignments, so the writing was entirely self motivated and self paced. I gave myself a hard deadline of finishing the interview process by fall quarter, and the writing process by winter quarter. This was accomplished by establishing smaller, more attainable goals each week. Due to these time constraints, my source gathering was done in the fall quarter in order to inform my interview methods. At this time, I was able to evaluate which sources would be useful primarily based on the date that they were published. I would copy and paste key quotes into a separate word document, to remember why specific sources were useful or answered relevant questions to my topic. Due to the quickly evolving nature of social media, the most recently conducted studies were most useful for informing my interview and subject recruiting methods. The background and auxiliary sources that allowed me

to compare other deviant subcultures were gathered in winter quarter, when the writing process began. This later research was also useful in the data analysis phase of my project, and writing of the results section, because I was able to compare stigma management strategies used by previously studied subcultures and apply those ideas to answers given by my interviewees. In the end, my results verified that women who lift weights and post that norm breaking behavior on social media use some of the same stigma management strategies adopted by deviant subcultures studied in face to face interactions, but also use unique tools that show how social media can be a tool for undertaking norm change.

In final reflection, the thesis writing process strengthened my skills as a researcher, both in my ability to synthesize information and compare my results to prior literature. I refined my writing and resource gathering skills, learned how to ask questions that generate valid and reliable results, and demonstrated how those results helped fill a gap in the sociological research canon. Seeing my question and ideas evolve from a two week final project into two quarters worth of work was an extremely rewarding experience. This long term planning, dedication, study and writing will continue to serve me well in the next steps of my academic career in law school, where entire class grades are based on one exam at the end of the semester. I am proud of how I have grown as a student who is capable of intentionally parsing out work on large projects, and knowing how to ask the questions I need to complete them. I am more confident in my abilities as a researcher, my skills as a writer, and my ability to succeed in self paced academic settings, which I will continue to rely on throughout my educational and career journey.