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THE EXPERIENCE OF CHRISTIAN COLLEGE MALE  
UNDERGRADUATES WITH PORNOGRAPHY

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business  
Department of Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

---

by

Benuel Post

May 2016

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**Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Benuel Post

entitled

The Experience of Christian College Male Undergraduates with Pornography  
has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree  
in Higher Education and Student Development

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### Abstract

Pornography use appears a pervasive trend among male college students, including those who attend Christian colleges. This trend proves concerning because of the negative effects pornography can have on men's self-perception, relationships, and neurological functioning. It also concerns Christian students at faith-based colleges because their pornography use does not align with orthodox Christian teaching and the conduct expectations of their institutions. The current study sought to understand the experience of male undergraduates who have regularly used pornography while attending a Christian college and what—if any—effect the Christian college environment has on this experience. This qualitative phenomenological study took place at a small, faith-based liberal arts institution and examined the experiences of seven male students. Interview data produced two overarching themes regarding the experience of Christian college males who have regularly pornography. In the first theme—the nature of their pornography consumption—participants discussed how it was obtained, factors associated with increased and decreased use, and the Christian college environment and its relationship to their use of porn. The second theme dealt with the effects students associated with pornography use. They connected their use of porn to negative emotions, difficulty in relationships, negative and positive effects on their spiritual life, and adverse effects on their college experience—both in and outside of class. Through this study's findings, faith-based institutions can better understand the experience of male undergraduates who use pornography use and the help these students must receive.

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To the MAHE faculty, I am glad to have learned from you over the past two years. I'll always remember the wisdom you've shared and grace you've shown me.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

While at one time considered shameful by the majority of society (Levine & Troiden, 1988), the practice of viewing pornography has become a nearly ubiquitous aspect of men's lives. Multiple studies report over 97% of males have been exposed to pornography at some point in their lives (Chelsen, 2011; O'Reilly, Knox, & Zusman, 2007). According to research by the Barna Group, 63% of college-age American men report viewing pornography several times a week (Proven Men Ministries, 2014).

To some, these statistics may not seem all that concerning. As McKay (2014a) stated, “. . . in general, viewing porn is something a lot of guys engage in without much thought, seeing it as something pretty innocuous—a normal part of life and fodder for endless jokes on internet forums” (para. 3). However, both established and emerging evidence has showed using pornography as both harmful and incongruent with the body's normal sexual needs (Chelsen, 2011; Laier, Schulte, & Brand, 2013; Voon, et al., 2014).

Admittedly, much of the established evidence about the harmful effects of pornography—ranging from its potential influences on mental health all the way to interpersonal relationships—has proven correlational and anecdotal (Allen, D'Allesio, & Brezgel, 1995; Morrison, Ellis, Morrison, Bearden, & Harriman, 2007). Some potential effects of pornography for male pornography users include an increase in aggression towards women (Mulac, Jansma, & Linz, 2002), a decreased level of compassion for rape

victims (Zillmann, 1989), a higher likelihood of committing sexual harassment, a greater openness to risky sexual behavior—all the way from unprotected sex to solicitation of prostitutes—(Brown & L’Engle, 2009), dissatisfaction with one’s own body (Morrison et al., 2007), dissatisfaction with actual sex (Zillmann, 1990), and many other antisocial behaviors (Greenfield, 2004). While none of the effects listed are guaranteed results of pornography use, they are nonetheless possibilities, making it unwise to ignore them. Eberstadt (2009)—comparing America’s current attitude on pornography its view on tobacco in the 1960s—captured this mentality by questioning the wisdom of waiting for further empirical evidence before taking greater action against pornography.

In addition, emerging causal evidence suggests pornography use may have more serious legitimate effects than previously thought. Developing neurological research suggests pornography-induced orgasm “rewards” the brain with a burst of dopamine, a chemical produced by the body in order to encourage survival actions (Doidge, 2007; McKay, 2014b). This chemical proved especially necessary in earlier centuries, as opportunities to procreate appeared harder to come by. As a pornography user’s body does not differentiate between different types of orgasms, it may associate pornography with a survival need (Giuliano & Allard, 2001). Thus, individuals become “rewired” to need pornography. Put contemporarily, when looking at pornography, “. . . your brain thinks you’re a heroic tribesman . . . and is shouting ‘Atta boy! Spread that seed!’ . . . in reality you’re hunched over your laptop, the light of the screen illuminating your dead-eyed gaze, as you clench a wad of tissues” (McKay, 2014b, para. 43) and not fulfilling the biblical command to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28, English Standard Version). Eventually, the body grows used to the steady dopamine surges provided by

regular pornography use and may go into withdrawal without a regular chemical fix (Wilson, 2014). Research has suggested impaired dopamine production brought on by pornography use may be behind user's experience with issues such as depression anxiety, fatigue, and attention problems (Dalbudak & Evren, 2014; Myers, 2012; Wilson, 2014)

Research, as well as conversations with college faculty and staff members, has suggested male students at Christian institutions engage in pornography use (Chelsen, 2011; O'Reilly et al., 2007). This reality proves concerning because of the potentially damaging neurological and interpersonal effects regular pornography use can have on users. It also concerns student users at faith-based institutions, because their pornography use—assuming they identify as Christians—remains incongruent with orthodox Christian teaching. This incongruence between one's preferred state—adhering to faith teachings—and one's actual state—violating faith teachings—has been associated with issues such as depression, hopelessness, anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms, poor self-esteem, and a lack of self-control (Paul & Moser, 2006). Clearly, colleges should be mindful of how students respond to pornography use and how to care for these students. This reality proves especially true at Christian institutions, where students who struggle with pornography—assuming they identify Christians—may experience the general effects of pornography use in addition to the negative emotions associated with violating the rules of one's faith.

### **Purpose of Study**

Research exists examining pornography's harmful effects (Allen et al., 1995; Laier et al., 2013) and clinical treatment for problem users (Isaacs & Fisher, 2008; Kwee, Dominguez, & Ferrell, 2007). Several studies have also examined pornography usage

among males at Christian colleges (Chelsen, 2011; Huson, 2005). However, a scarcity of research addresses the felt experience of pornography users at Christian institutions (Huson, 2005). No research has examined how pornography users feel the religious affiliation of their institution affects their experiences surrounding pornography.

In order to encourage a Christian college environment in which male students respond in a holistically biblical way to their pornography use, research must advance to examine how male students currently respond to their pornography consumption. This phenomenological study sought to describe the experience of male students who have regularly looked at internet pornography while enrolled at a small, faith-based liberal arts university in the Midwest. This exploration endeavored to determine if students respond to their pornography use in healthy or unhealthy ways and how they feel the Christian affiliation of their college contributes to this response. By delving into this particular area of study, higher education practitioners can gain a better understanding of the potential experience of male pornography users at religiously affiliated institutions. Potentially, this knowledge can allow practitioners to help students overcome their struggle with pornography and mitigate the effects pornography use has had on them. The following research questions guided the current study:

1. What is the experience of male undergraduates who have regularly used pornography while attending a Christian college?
2. What—if any—effect does the Christian college environment have on this experience?

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

This review summarizes the literature explores (a) definitions of pornography secularly and theologically; (b) the potential effects that regular exposure to pornography can have, especially on a male's identity; (c) the prevalence of pornography on college campuses; (d) the attitudes towards pornography on college campuses; and (e) the stance on pornography at Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU) schools in general and the institution included in this research.

#### **Pornography Defined**

In order to understand better the literature on pornography use by college students, a running definition of pornography and its typical position as immoral from a Christian standpoint may prove helpful. The majority of society agrees pornography is the depiction of erotic behavior—in writing, images, and film—meant to arouse sexual desire and often for stimulating the body to sexual release or discharge (Willard, 2008).

A Christian worldview understands pornography as sinful in nature. According to Willard (2008), pornography lies on a continuum with Christ's teachings against lust in Matthew 5:28. In this verse, Jesus states, "Whoever looks at a women lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (New International Version). Assumedly, adultery and lust are sinful from the commandment found against them in Exodus 20:14. Finally, pornography use does not fall in accordance with Jesus' teaching

to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). Pornography degrades and objectifies the men or women portrayed (Brooks, 1995; Willard, 2008). Rather than regarding pornographic models as multidimensional human beings, users typically see them simply as a means for sexual fulfillment; in a very real sense, viewers/users dehumanize the human beings viewed in porn. Thus, its production and use cannot be seen as an act of love (Willard, 2008).

### **Effects of Pornography**

As the literature has shown, the majority of college men look at internet pornography and approve of its use (Carroll et al., 2008; O’Reilly et al., 2007). As expected, many studies have addressed the effects pornography has on users, for instance, the psychological ramifications. These effects range from its influence on self-perception (Chelsen, 2011; Huson, 2005) to its potential neurological effect on the brain (Lai et al., 2013; Voon et al., 2014). Psychological health obviously has an effect on one’s interpersonal life. Studies have also looked at how pornography affects men’s family relationships, romantic relationships, and their treatment of women (Chelsen, 2011; Covenant Eyes, 2015; Seegers, 2003).

A common concern about pornography use is its effect on identity—the way users sees themselves. Pornography use is often associated with negative emotions (Chelsen, 2011). While those looking at pornography initially feel good, Huson (2005) conducted a qualitative study of 18 male undergraduates at five Christian colleges and found pornography viewing inevitably leads to feelings of guilt and shame. Coleman (1988) posited that shame results when individuals find themselves unable to abstain from prohibited sexual behavior. With pornography use prohibited at many faith-based

institutions, it makes sense that students at Evangelical institutions feel shame over pornography use (Huson, 2005). In another study of 245 college men at the University of North Dakota, 27% of respondents reported feeling guilt about using pornography, 20% reported feeling anxiety, and 9% reported feeling depressed (Deloy, 2006).

Regular viewing of pornography is associated not only with a negative emotional estate but also with negative body image. Morrison et al. (2007) conducted a study of 188 male community college students in Canada. Of these students, 77% reported accessing internet pornography within the past six months. The study showed the greater the exposure to pornography, the higher the likelihood of viewers having lower levels of genital esteem—a measure of one’s perception of various aspects of their genitals—and sexual self-esteem—one’s self-perceived value as a sexual being. Such studies have demonstrated the potential of pornography’s presentation of “ideal” body images to affect negatively one’s own body and sexual value (Chelsen, 2009; Morrison et al., 2007).

While much research in the field of psychology has focused on how viewing pornography affects self-perception, emerging research has examined potential neurological effects of regular use. Laier et al. (2013) studied 28 healthy individuals and found arousal during engagement with internet pornography can interfere with working memory capacity, similar to that observed in individuals with substance dependencies. Other studies on the neurological effects of pornography have observed a reaction to viewing pornography similar to that of an alcoholic seeing a drink (Voon et al., 2014); a reduction in grey matter similar to that found in drug addicts (Kühn & Gallinat, 2014); and regional brain activation normally associated with individuals’ survival drives to obtain food and water (Karama et al., 2002).

As the neurological research suggested, regular pornography use may lead to sexual addiction, under which pornography addiction falls. Sexual addiction is conceptually defined as “behavior in which the individual has an extremely intense sex drive or obsession with sex” (Seegers, 2003, p. 247). Sexual addiction is operationally defined as when individuals have “a pathological relationship with a mood-altering experience . . . [and an inability] to control their cycle of thinking, feeling, and acting when it comes to their sexual behaviors” (p. 247). Sexual acts in this state are no longer performed for enjoyment; rather, they have become necessary for relieving pain, self-nurture, and stress relief (Carnes, 1994). Internet use disorder/addiction (both words used interchangeably in the literature)—when an individual cannot control internet use and experiences symptoms of withdrawal without it—is a condition accepted by scholars and the American Psychological Association (APA, 2013; Young, 2001). Thus, it seems reasonable to view internet pornography also as a disorder/addiction (Abell, Steenbergh, & Boivin, 2006). Due to its accessibility, affordability, and anonymity, some posit that it may be even more addictive than traditional print pornography (Cooper, 2002).

Researchers disagree whether or not to label problematic pornography use and other types of harmful sexual behaviors as disorders/addictions. For instance, the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) does not currently label problematic pornography use as an addiction (APA, 2013). However, several categories of sexual addiction—including problem pornography use—may fall under conditions in the DSM-V labeled as specific sexual perversions (Seegers, 2003). Depending on the behaviors exhibited, sexual addiction can be diagnosed as Sexual Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (NOS), Paraphilia NOS, or Impulse Control NOS.



Despite debate on how pornography affects the user specifically and how to label these effects, literature has supported the view that pornography use has predominantly negative potential effects on the user (Covenant Eyes, 2015). Furthermore, pornography affects the viewer on an individual level, which likely disturbs relations with others. One of the most serious concerns about exposure to pornography is whether or not it affects a man's attitudes and actions towards women (Chelsen, 2011). Brooks (1995) identified five symptoms that suggest the effect pornography has on male users' views of women:

1. Voyeurism – An obsession with looking at women rather than interacting with them;
2. Objectification – An attitude in which women are objects rated by size, shape, and harmony of body parts;
3. Validation – The need to validate masculinity through beautiful women;
4. Trophyism – The idea that beautiful women are collectibles who show the world who a man is; and,
5. Fear of true intimacy – Inability to relate to women in an honest and intimate way despite deep loneliness. (p. 2).

Research has regularly affirmed Brooks' proposed symptoms. Scholars have reported habitual pornography use can result in dissatisfaction with milder forms of sexual material and a parallel desire for more perverted material (Harris & Scott, 2002; Linz, Donnerstein, & Adams, 1989). This dissatisfaction can spread into pornography viewers' romantic relationships. The study of 245 college men at the University of North Dakota found respondents who viewed pornography for an average of three hours a week

reported decreased sexual activity, less satisfaction with their partner's appearance, and decreased satisfaction in sexual behavior with their significant other (Deloy, 2006).

Even more sobering, pornography use can contribute to aggressive attitudes towards women (Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000; Vega & Malamuth, 2007). Several studies saw no correlation between pornography use by itself and aggression towards women (Barak, Fisher, Belfry, & Lashambe, 1999; Isaacs & Fisher, 2008; Malamuth et al., 2000). However, some correlation exists between frequent pornography viewing—coupled with hyper masculinity and sexual promiscuity—and aggressive attitudes towards women. In other words, pornography use by already hyper-masculine or sexually promiscuous males may increase their likelihood to demonstrate aggressive attitudes or actions towards women (Malamuth et al., 2000; Vega & Malamuth, 2007).

A related concern about pornography is whether or not it encourages aggressive behavior in general, including “child molestation, exhibitionism, sadomasochism, fetishism, . . . and so forth” (Zillmann, Bryant, & Huston, 2013, p. 233). Empirical research and anecdotal evidence from clinicians treating sexual illness has suggested pornographic use almost always contributes to deviant sexual acts (Allen et al., 1995). Allen et al. performed a meta-analysis of 30 studies, summarizing the effects viewing pornography has on aggressive behavior. Out of the 33 primary effect sizes, 23 showed a positive correlation between exposure to pornography and aggressive behavior. This correlation was found in exposure to both soft-core pornography ( $r = .132$ ) and exposure to violent pornography ( $r = .216$ ). A recent meta-analysis examined whether pornography correlates with committing actual acts of sexual aggression. Its analysis of 22 studies reported associated consumption of pornography with aggressive acts towards

women. Correlations proved stronger for verbal than for physical aggressions; results also suggested violent content in pornography as a possible aggravating force in users committing actual aggressive acts towards women (Wright, Tokunga, & Kraus, 2016).

### **Prevalence in College Populations**

One of the first studies to examine college student behaviors empirically regarding internet pornography utilized a questionnaire to survey 506 undergraduate students at a public university in Texas. In this research, Goodson, McCormick, and Evans (2001) found 28.4% of male respondents and 10% of female respondents reported sometimes viewing pornography. Only 5.9% of males reported frequent pornography use (the report did not include how many female students frequently looked at pornography).

More recent studies have shown a stark increase in the rate of pornography use by U.S. college students (Carroll et al., 2008; O'Reilly et al., 2007). A 2007 convenience sample study of 305 students (58.7% female and 41.3% male) found 99.2% of male and 88% of female students surveyed had viewed pornography (O'Reilly et al., 2007). Of these students, 33.7% of males and 3.8% of females viewed pornography at least three to five times a week. Further evidence of increased internet pornography use by students appeared in a 2008 study of 813 students—500 women and 313 men—from six different United States colleges. This research found 87% of male and 31% of female respondents had accessed internet pornography at some point in their lives (Carroll et al., 2008). Other research by the Barna Group found 63% of college age American men look at pornography several times a week (Proven Men Ministries, 2014).

Some research has examined the rates of pornography use at Christian colleges and amongst Christians in general. Chelsen (2011) studied 635 male undergraduates at

three different evangelical institutions in the Midwest and found 79.3% of respondents reported looking at internet pornography at least once in the past year. Twenty-five percent of respondents reported accessing it at least once a week. Other research has looked at pornography use amongst the general Christian population. According to a study by the Barna Group, 64% of self-identified Christian men view pornography at least once a month, and 37% view it several times a week (Proven Men, 2014).

It is helpful to note reasons that may explain why pornography use has increased over the past several decades. The literature offers two explanations: changes over the past half-century in Americans' attitudes towards sex and the relatively recent introduction of the internet as a distribution channel for information and entertainment (Chelsen, 2011; Levine & Troiden, 1988). Since the 1950s, acceptable sexual behavior has expanded beyond perceiving intercourse mainly as a means for procreation to considering it a medium mostly for pleasure. Instead of an act reserved for enhancing a marriage and producing a family, acceptable sexual practice has expanded to include any form of consensual sexual behavior, regardless of commitment. This broadened tolerance may explain why pornography—itself a reflection of noncommittal sex—has become more widespread and accepted (Levine & Troiden, 1988).

Another reason for the increase in pornography consumption comes in the relatively recent establishment of the internet as a distribution channel for pornography (Chelsen, 2011; Eberstadt, 2009). Pornography in this form becomes so easily accessible in part because the number of American households with access to the internet has steadily increased (Chelsen, 2011). According to the 2013 U.S. Census Bureau internet-related statistics, 74.4% of all households reported internet access (File & Ryan, 2014).

This statistic shows an increase of 56.4% from 1997, the first year the Census Bureau (2014) collected internet statistics. Including the number of individuals who have access to the internet from a non-home location, such as a college campus, the percentage of the U.S. population with access to internet pornography increases (Chelsen, 2011).

With compiled statistical data, Ropelato (2006) confirmed a significant amount of internet access relates to internet pornography: 12% of all internet sites were pornographic in nature, and 25% of all internet searches were related to pornography. Out of all internet users, 42.7% utilized it for looking at pornography. Of these users, 13.6% fell in the 18-24 age range of traditional college students. In more recent Barna Group research, 79% of 18-to-30-year-old men report viewing pornography at least once a month, and 63% report viewing it several times a week. Among Christian men of all ages, 64% report looking a pornography at least once a month (Proven Men Ministries, 2014). All of this data indicates college males, even at faith-based institutions, have steadily increased their pornography intake as internet access becomes more available.

### **Attitudes toward Pornography in College Populations**

Scholars have identified several factors positively or negatively correlating to the acceptance level of pornography—it is helpful to note pornography use does not necessarily indicate pornography acceptance. This literature review defines acceptance as the act of giving permission or approval (“Acceptance,” 2005).

Research has shown most college students have viewed pornography at some point in their lives (Chelsen, 2011; O’Reilly et al., 2007). However, in order to measure the effect pornography viewing has on college students, one must understand student attitudes toward it. In general, male college students accept pornography use. Carroll et

al. (2008) examined 813 responses from six different colleges across the U.S.: a small private liberal arts college, a medium-sized religiously affiliated university, a large religious university, and three large public institutions. The study found 67% of male respondents considered viewing pornography acceptable. O'Reilly et al. (2007) at East Carolina University found 93.5% of the approximately 130 male respondents approved pornography use. The smaller and relatively homogenous—from a single institution—sample pool in the latter study may explain the difference in the two studies' findings.

In an examination of Christian college students, it proves important to note the influence of religiosity on students' acceptance and use of pornography. As covered above, the Bible does not affirm the use of pornography, and, as one might expect, higher levels of religiosity often correlate with disapproval of pornography usage (Abell, et al, 2006; Carroll et al., 2008; Lefkowitz, Gillen, Shearer, & Boone, 2004). Interestingly, however, one study found the higher the religiosity of students, the greater their struggle with compulsive use of internet pornography (Abell, et al., 2006). This finding initially proves surprising, as religiosity negatively correlates with other negative behaviors in college-age students, including substance abuse, gambling, behavioral risks for HIV, teen alcohol use, and addiction to sex (Avants, Marcotte, Arnold, & Margolin, 2003; Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996; Feigelman, Walisch, & Lesieur, 1998). While the correlation between high religiosity scores and compulsive internet use proves a concern, Chelsen (2011) noted Christian college students may misinterpret unwanted sexual behavior, including pornography use, as a sexual addiction or compulsion; such a perspective results from Christian students, unlike many peers, having the added burden of viewing pornography use as sinful (Laaser, 2004). In addition to religiosity, other factors lowly

correlating with pornography acceptance include conservative sexual values, having no experience with sexual intercourse, and commitment to a romantic relationship (Carroll et al., 2008; Chelsen, 2011; Huson, 2005; Logue, 2009).

On the other hand, aspects often highly correlated with pornography acceptance include “risky sexual attitudes and behaviors, substance use patterns,” and less traditional family formation values (Carroll et al., 2008, p. 6). Risky sexual attitudes and behavior refers to a high number of sexual partners and acceptance of extramarital/casual sexual behaviors. Substance abuse patterns include higher levels of binge drinking and illicit drug usage. Less traditional family formation values refers to the approval of non-marital cohabitation, desire to get married later in life, financial independence between married spouses, and low levels of child-centeredness in a relationship (Carroll et al., 2008).

### **Stances on Pornography within CCCU and at Studied Institution**

The Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU) is an association of non-profit institutions offering baccalaureate programs rooted in a Christian worldview. The CCCU’s requirements for membership include any statements dealing specifically with sexuality or pornography use. Still, the CCCU requires member institutions to have a Christian mission statement and integrate Biblical faith into their educational programs (“Members,” n.d.). Considering the Bible’s prohibition of adultery, this requirement seems to imply many if not all CCCU members disapprove of pornography use.

Presentations shared at the CCCU Consultation on Human Sexuality support this hypothesis. For instance, regarding college student sexual ethics, Gushee (2004) argued pornography is sinful and colleges should make efforts to deny students access to it. While Gushee’s position on pornography does not speak for all CCCU schools, it seems

reasonable to assume most member institutions share the view. The student conduct statement signed by all members of the institution studied in the current research supports this assumption. It labels pornography as immoral and prohibits its use, possession, or distribution on or away from campus.

### **Conclusion**

The literature, as well as the researcher's conversations with faculty, staff, and students at multiple religiously affiliated institutions, has indicated students at CCCU colleges view pornography. However, little research has examined the experience of males students who use pornography while attending Christian college. The prevalence of pornography use, coupled with a lack of research on how Christian college students experience it, proves concerning due to the harmful effects associated with its use. In addition, Christian users' may experience additional negative effects due to the incongruence between their faith and their use of pornography.

This exploration sought to determine if students respond to their pornography use in healthy or unhealthy ways and how they feel the Christian affiliation of their college contributes to this response. By delving into this particular area of study, higher education practitioners can better understand potential experiences of male pornography users at religiously affiliated institutions. This knowledge can allow practitioners to help students overcome their struggle with pornography and mitigate the effects that pornography use has had on them.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

This study sought to observe and report how undergraduate male students at a small faith-based liberal arts university experienced their regular use of pornography. It also sought to discern how the institution's religious nature may influence this response. This study utilized the qualitative research methodology of phenomenological design. In qualitative research, data is collected based on the words of a small group of individuals so participants' views can be obtained (Creswell, 2011). Phenomenological research is utilized when one wants to examine a group of individuals who have all experienced a particular "action, interaction, or process" (p. 21). In this research, all interviewed students had experienced regular pornography use at some point while enrolled at the religiously-affiliated institution—"the University." This study defined regular use as engaging with pornography one or more times a week over a period of a month or longer.

### **Context**

The participants attended a small faith-based liberal arts university with clearly stated behavioral expectations, including abstinence from the use of pornography:

Some actions are clearly forbidden in the Bible and should not be taken part in by any student at our college. Included are stealing, deception, gossip, defamation, infighting, cursing, offensive or impure talk, sexual depravity (e.g. infidelity,

homoerotic acts, sex before marriage, and use of pornography of any kind), intoxication, revealing dress, and involvement with the occult.

As Christian teaching prohibits consumption of pornography (Matthew 5:28), users of it at the University act incongruously with the rules of both their college and their faith. On its website, the University expresses a desire to develop students whose faith is at the forefront of everything they do. This holistic approach implies a faith-based approach to sexuality, including pornography usage. The University acknowledges the spiritual life is not the perfect life. Rather, its website claims students will take part in a community that builds members up and holds them accountable in maintaining community values and standards. While members of this community may not always succeed, the University believes much can be learned from both failure and success. This study observed how the University's students responded to—or learned from—their pornography use.

### **Participants**

Currently, the University enrolls approximately 2,000 students, almost half of whom are male. While the review of the literature indicated female students engage with pornography as well, this study focused only on male undergraduates. The researcher chose the study's participants through purposeful homogenous sampling. Creswell (2013) described purposeful sampling as the selection of individuals and sites “because they can purposely inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of in the study (p. 156). Creswell (2011) also wrote that homogenous sampling strategy entails the specific selection of only those individuals who have experienced particular life events.

The participants in this study had one defining characteristic: they had regularly looked at pornography while enrolled at the University. The researcher selected participants through consultation with the University's counseling center, an alternate counselor, and male residence life employees at the institution. The University counselors and male residence life employees agreed to ask—based on their own discretion—students if they would willingly participate in the study. The potential participants also received a document (see Appendix A) with information about the study and the researcher's contact information, which they could disseminate to students. Students who volunteered to participate in the study contacted the researcher via email or text message. Due to the confidential and sensitive nature of the study, the researcher assigned each participant a pseudonym in the final report of findings.

### **Procedures**

Those the researcher partnered with in identifying participants indicated a willingness to use their own discretion in how they contacted students about the study. One male residence life staff member contacted his entire residence hall via email with information about the study. He instructed the students to contact the researcher if they felt interested in participating. Seven male students from this residence hall, who met the study's inclusion criteria, contacted the researcher via email or text message. The researcher then emailed them copies of the informed consent form (see Appendix B) and the semi-structured interview protocol for their review (see Appendix C).

To protect participants' confidentiality, the researcher conducted the interviews in a mutually convenient, private location. The semi-structured interviews involved a consistent set of basic questions for each participant. The researcher allowed opportunity

for relevant follow-up questions as deemed appropriate. This flexibility helped ensure the interviewee's experience with pornography was explored openly and in their own words (Esterberg, 2002). The researcher allotted an hour and a half for each interview; however, they each lasted between thirty minutes to an hour.

In order to make the interviews as beneficial as possible, the researcher conducted a pilot interview with a male who had previous experiences in line with the purpose of the study. This interview helped determine the quality of the questions in order to get the most accurate data possible. The researcher then made relevant changes to the interview protocol based on this feedback.

### **Data Analysis**

Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The researcher then analyzed the data through coding. This process involved the researcher looking for meaning in the data and sorting it into themes. The researcher used a data-coding software program, MAXQDA 12 (n.d.), to help organize themes. After identifying all the themes, the researcher sent their interpretations to participants in order to ensure accurate results. After the participants affirmed and/or reinterpreted the results as needed, the researcher reviewed the literature in order to identify the relationship between previous research on pornography and the acquired results. The researcher then interpreted the data, processed the findings, and identified implications for future research.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

This chapter presents the results and themes that emerged from semi-structured interviews with seven participants. Two overarching themes arose regarding participants' pornography use: (1) the nature of their pornography consumption and (2) the effects associated with their pornography use. The researcher identified several subthemes under both themes.

#### **Nature of Pornography Consumption**

**How students obtained pornography.** All participants described how they obtained pornography while enrolled at the University. Six participants had obtained pornography while on campus; the other had looked at pornography on the internet during the summer before coming to the University and during breaks. Four participants used their mobile phones to access pornography while on campus. They did so by shutting off their phone's Wi-Fi and accessing the internet through cellular data. Two participants obtained pornography through their computers. They reported the University's internet filter does not block all pornographic sites. Kyle used YouTube to find porn, explaining, "If you look hard enough, you can find it [on YouTube]".

**Factors associated with increased likelihood of use.** Five participants talked about factors that increased their likelihood to use pornography. Four identified being by themselves as when they seemed more likely to use porn. Kyle explained why solitude makes him more likely to use porn: "If my roommate was gone for an extended period of

time was when it would start picking up again. Was when I would find myself by myself and I knew no one was going to walk into my room.”

Three participants reported another factor associated with increased likelihood to use pornography: negative feelings, including stress, loneliness, and low self-esteem.

Patrick described his tendency to use pornography when in a negative emotional state:

When I struggle the most with it is when I am overly stressed or anxious. Or tired or lonely. And just basically don't have my wits about me and my life isn't all together I would say. Those are the times when in the moment of weakness my discipline, my will, my conscious decision making sort of breaks down and I feel compulsively driven to pornography.

Patrick also described a period of seven months when he did not use porn. He believed this stretch ended due to the negative emotions associated with a recent breakup.

**Factors associated with decreased use.** Since their first exposure to pornography, five participants experienced periods of six months or longer in which they did not look at pornography. Three of these participants had not looked at pornography in over six months at the time of their interview. Each participant described attempts to stop, both successful and unsuccessful. None of the described attempts had a negative association with stopping—none seemed to make pornography consumption more likely.

***Situational factors.*** All participants associated situational factors with decreased pornography usage. Some factors related to attending a residential college. Four participants mentioned having a roommate decreased their use of pornography because they did not want to get caught. Stephen described changes in his pornography use:

. . . you have a roommate. Especially freshmen through junior year . . . through those times it is just more difficult to even get to the point where you can be like, “Hey, my roommate is not going to be there for two hours—I have got time—let’s do this.” A lot of the times it is just, “I’m not sure when he is coming back.”

So you just don’t do it. That is also one of the things that stops me personally.

Another residential factor was the presence of filters on the University’s internet network or participants’ personal computers or phones. Five participants said filtering software decreased the frequency of pornography use; four specifically mentioned the University’s internet filter. While each student admitted they could find ways around it, all believed the school’s filter helped overall. For instance, Patrick noted, “. . . the University does do a good job of blocking many of the things I would have had access to at home. Or living somewhere else. [It] does really help to prevent prolonged usage of pornography.”

***Talking about pornography use.*** All but one participant reported talking about the subject of pornography—in general or about their own use—helped decrease their consumption of it. All participants had talked with others at the University about their use of pornography; six had told one or more individuals before they had stopped using pornography. Only Max, who never looked at pornography while on the University’s campus, did not report telling someone on campus while in the midst of the experience.

Six participants stated interactions with others—in the dorm or on campus in general—about pornography helped decrease their own use because they felt less alone in the experience. Patrick shared, “I know I’m surrounded by people who have experienced it and who want to talk about it and deal with it. . . . in a way that doesn’t promote shame, but does promote freedom. So that has been freeing.” Stephen noted,

I have noticed that when I become more close to some students, they tend to open up more. I have noticed more and more I am not the only one. That is nothing unusual. So that just kind of opened up my eyes and my perspectives of how to handle the situation. How to work on my problems.

Four participants specifically referenced the positive influence vulnerable discussion has had on their experience with pornography. Referring to a professor's talk at a residence-life sponsored program on sexuality, David said,

It was like super moving and such. But if people were vulnerable in those meetings, people would be so much more willing to share, like, even with their peers. Not necessarily with that person but more with themselves. That is what I would say. Vulnerability is something that can never be done enough.

Andrew described vulnerability by leaders as one helpful thing done by those at the University in regards to pornography use: "That they come right out with what they have done. And talking about it. And talking about it which helps me to realize they are often in the same situation as I am."

***Spirituality.*** Six participants believed a growing relationship with God had helped decrease their pornography use, though how each participant described this belief differed. David described a more unique experience of how he believed his relationship with God stopped his pornography consumption:

I was like God just take it away from me – I don't 'care what happens – just do it. What happened was ...this scared the sin straight out of me. I was looking at porn, specifically in like an interactive webcam thing. And what happened was someone was videotaping me on the other side. And they essentially blackmailed



me and hacked my computer and threatened to send this video to all my friends and family while I was still at [the University]. Very traumatizing. But at the same time, haven't looked at porn since. And it has been like such a God thing since then. So it is literally scaring the porn or the sin out of me.

Each of these six participants highlighted pursuing faith in general as a key facet of reducing or maintaining their abstinence from pornography use. Tyson expressed that, while he took other effective steps to stop using porn, "It was more of an aspect of me wanting to be closer to the Lord that made it possible even." Kyle responded that he believed "wanting God more" helped him want pornography less, thus decreasing his use.

**Christian college environment.** All participants identified a generally healthy attitude towards pornography users at their institution. While others—the institution, staff, other students—did not affirm pornography use, participants believed there existed a nonjudgmental attitude towards users and a genuine desire to care for and help them.

Andrew described the attitude at the University towards those who use pornography:

. . . definitely judgment, but also a larger sense of caring and willing to help than you would find in other places. Definitely an attitude of um encouraging and being willing to find ways to assist that person in overcoming that than you would find in a secular place.

David, Tyson, and Patrick, all of whom experienced periods of seven months or longer where they did not use pornography, admitted they sensed this helpful attitude towards pornography users more so after they had stopped using pornography. Patrick expressed that, while he sensed the general attitude towards pornography at the University remained in a positive place, many users did not seem to believe so:

I also think just because of the nature of the subject – it is so shameful and scary that it is hard to get people to . . . voluntarily come to interviews on research projects like this one. Or come to talks on pornography. So it is difficult to see that coming to fruition and because of that I feel like there is this - there is a little bit of a difference between what is said publicly about pornography – and how we are trying to approach it and deal with it – and what people actually believe.

Tyson attributed these tendencies to a felt pressure at the University to appear like one “has it all together”; thus, men feel unwilling to open up about their pornography use.

### **Effects Associated with Pornography Consumption**

**Negative emotions.** As evidenced throughout many of the themes, all of the participants experienced negative emotions in relation to their pornography use. While they all referred at some point to the physical pleasure related to pornography coupled with masturbation, feelings of guilt typically followed the enjoyment. David described this general experience: “Afterwards, the sensation of oh yeah this was great. You are just like overwhelmed with satisfaction but then afterwards you get this bad feeling that you have done something terribly wrong.”

Five participants reported feeling shame related to pornography use. This research defined shame as differentiated from guilt. In this research, guilt is understood as an acknowledgment that one has violated a set standard. Shame occurs when that violation negatively impacts how one sees one’s self or assumes others see him/her. Unhealthy shame involves hiding oneself or what they have done (Gilkerson, 2013).

Patrick described how shame made him feel like he had to conquer his pornography use on his own:

I should be able to not do that on my own strength. That has been the biggest struggle for me is just feeling like I have to conquer this on my own – I have to fix my behavior just to get back to point A and start doing the things that God wants me to do – that my family wants me to do or that I want to do even. Um, It is sort of like porn has knocked me backwards and it is embarrassing. I mean that has been my experience with shame.

Tyson reported shame made him feel like he could not change his pornography habits and made him afraid to tell others about them:

Guilt that can be positive and can make people want to change and then there is shame that is essentially – makes you feel like you can't change. Makes you feel like this is the way that you are. Um, I think it was almost entirely that shame that kept me from telling people. Even when I knew that it wouldn't be a big deal for a lot of people, I still didn't want to tell people.

Six participants expressed their pornography use affected their self-esteem, which manifested itself in many different ways, as evidenced in other themes. Kyle described the effect pornography had on his self-esteem:

In the moment it makes me feel a lot better about myself because I had really low self-esteem. And when I would get really low self-esteem was when the pornography use would increase. It would come and go with the way my self-esteem would go. And so if I felt - it would just make me feel better about myself in that moment. And then afterwards it would – I would just feel incredibly guilty and my self-esteem would drop even lower which wouldn't help me. Then I would be like I need to feel good about myself again.

Others expressed feelings of unworthiness, shame, and frustration with themselves.

### **Relationships.**

*General relationships.* All of the participants talked about pornography's effects on their relationships with friends. Five of the seven participants believed pornography had had a negative effect on their friendships. David described that, after using pornography, it felt harder to believe that others could love him:

. . . when I go and talk to people again – I'm not worthy to be in their presence because I have done this shameful thing. And then that is the only kind of people that would love me – is people through a screen.

Generally, these five participants reported that it felt harder to engage fully in friendships because of the negative emotions associated with their pornography use.

*Female non-romantic friendships.* All participants reported feeling as though pornography usage affected how they viewed women. Only one participant did not think his use of pornography had a negative effect in this area. The other students reported differently, feeling their use of porn made them more likely to have sexual thoughts about women with whom they interacted. Stephen expressed this tendency:

And I mean you struggle daily. When you go to class and you spot a girl that is not wearing complete closure clothes. I don't blame them – it is – I would do the same. It is more comfortable. And yeah, that is just one of the risks that is involved in it. And I guess my mind like sways off towards more sexual thoughts due to my long history with pornography.

These six participants also reported pornography made them more likely to objectify women. Pornography encouraged them to view women as collections of body

parts rather than multifaceted, unique human beings. For example, David expressed his belief that pornography “robs women of their womanhood” because men view women in light of the physical and sexual representations they see on screen. Tyson also described this tendency:

I still have to fight against this a lot - just objectifying women – not really giving them the full image of God that they are. I would be like wow you are really smart and fun to hang out with but for some reason I would always be thinking and yeah you are really pretty or specific body parts of yours are nice. I think that is a pretty direct carry over from porn that pretty much just focuses on what women look like or what they can do for a man. And like I would say that it has affected a lot of my relationships, especially here at [the University].

All the men expressed anger about the effect pornography had on them in this area and appeared to demonstrate a genuine desire for change.

***Romantic.*** Five participants had been in romantic relationships. Of these, only one did not believe his pornography use had any effect on his relationship. Max and David did not specify whether they had ever used pornography while in in a romantic relationship. The other three reported using pornography while in a relationship.

Only one participant, Andrew, believed pornography might have discouraged lustful thoughts towards girls he dated:

In romantic relationships, it has and I’m not entirely sure that this might be the reason but It has caused in the past a lack of want to um be physical or intimate with them in a romantic sense ...because it is something I can already get through pornography – the same feelings.

Three participants implied their pornography use—past or present—made it easier to lust after romantic partners. David, who has not looked at pornography in two years, described this facet of his past usage:

It affects everything I do from the way I talk to [my girlfriend] ... Like cause it is almost like little flash bulbs where I will randomly think of something like that - of pornography - from way, way back when. Stuff that you think will just be done but your brain will have like a flashable memory of something specifically pornographic. Where if me and her are kissing or something and then boom that thought will come to my mind, and it is like sometimes I can even project that onto her even though I don't want to.

Tyson reported his pornography use caused him to leave campus more often to see his girlfriend so they could “do things you couldn't really do at [the University].” He said doing so was, “in large part driven by the fact that I was feeding this lust monster inside of me all the time.”

**Effects on spirituality.** All participants discussed the effects their pornography use had on their faith. Some effects proved more negative in nature. However, whether pornography appeared as a current or past struggle, the majority of participants expressed that their experience had played a role in developing their faith.

**Negative effects.** Five participants stated pornography use had a negative impact on their faith. All of these five students voiced frustration that, in using pornography, they did something they did not want to do. Several participants framed these frustrations in relation to passages in scripture. David summarized this feeling:

I really did hate pornography even when I was using it. It wasn't something where I sought it out knowing it was joyful. It was like I knew it was bad. And but it was literally I mean Paul talks about I do what I don't want to do. That describes pornography perfectly.

Patrick, at times, felt more pain over his return to porn than over the act of looking at pornography itself:

But I'm continuing to come back to this thing and no one is making me do it. Um then every time I do it I'm telling myself I don't want to and then I go back and it gets to the point where I actually feel more shame about my lack of discipline than I do about maybe my actual pornography usage.

Kyle and Andrew viewed pornography as an attempt to fill a need only God could meet. Kyle said pornography affected his relationship with God negatively because he "was looking for something to fill a void and I didn't really trust God to do that.

*Positive effects.* Six participants related their struggle with pornography to some sort of growth in their faith. Some participants expressed this connection quite clearly. David viewed his freedom from pornography as a demonstration of God's power:

I think that I boast in my weakness. I like talking about this ...it shows how I have been able to be worked through because of my serious brokenness and weakness in the past. And how [God] was able to chastise me because he loved me. And I am so glad I'm out of that cycle. Because it is awful. It was awful.

Patrick expressed feeling deeply thankful for what he has learned about God through his experience with pornography:

Absolutely I wish pornography didn't exist. But because of the way that it has checked some illusions I have had about God that may not have otherwise gone checked . . . I count my struggle with it as invaluable. And I can't say I would go back and change it because I don't know that I would wrestle with the same issues. I would rather have a proper understanding of God because I wrestle with pornography than to have a poor understanding of God but I have never struggled with porn.

Other participants did not state explicitly that, because of their experience with pornography, they had grown in their relationship with God. However, as covered in previous themes, they did connect a growing relationship with God with decreasing their use of pornography.

**College experience.**

*Academic.* All of the students commented on pornography's effect on their educational experience. Three either did not believe or felt unsure that their pornography use affected their studies; four believed it did have an impact on their academics. David and Patrick stated the emotional distress caused by pornography impacted how they engaged with classwork. For instance, Patrick responded:

As far as my actual studies go, when I did them I don't think it really affected them that much. But bringing myself to a place where I could engage with intellectual material instead of engaging with the emotional personal issues of pornography – was a leap sometimes. So it definitely affects my educational life in that way.



Other participants offered several other explanations about why they believed pornography use impacted their studies. Andrew reported, “It definitely is something that eats away at time just like any other internet usage would.” Stephen thought it distracted him during class, “to some small extent just how I view people. By like being more judgmental of things. Little things. Or what they are wearing. I don’t know – that might affect it but it is unconsciously”.

***Out of classroom.***

Six participants stated pornography use effected their out-of-class experience. Five of these students reported their pornography use decreased their level of engagement outside of class, and three of these five reported spending time looking at pornography that they otherwise might have spent with others on their floor. Kyle stated,

If I like felt like I needed to view pornography I would like look for any sort of reason that I could go to my room and be by myself. Versus if I was never even into pornography, I would be probably out with people a lot more. It takes up some time.

The other two shared that the emotional distress caused by pornography made it harder to engage with things outside of class. Regarding his Resident Director’s learning goals for the dorm, David said his pornography use affected the general value of them: “Like you felt your self-worth went way down, which when that happens – who cares about goals . . . if I can’t get this part of my life right, why would I try to strive for something higher.”

**Concluding Thoughts**

The men in this study provided meaningful reflection on their experiences with pornography. They reported factors that influenced their use of pornography and

described how pornography had impacted their lives. A general finding that emerged in this study proved that consuming pornography does not create a positive overall experience for men. Participants associated the experience and the behavior with painful emotions, hurt relationships, and an inability to engage positively with the college experience. Simultaneously, the participants found many aspects of their college experience helpful in getting support for what they perceive as a negative experience. These helpful elements include as vulnerability in relationships and faith development. On the whole, the men believe that their college represented a safe place to open up and seek help from peers and college employees. Despite this belief, many men still felt unwilling to ask for help even though they felt unhappy in their pornography use.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

This chapter presents a discussion of this study's findings in light of previous research, offers thoughts on the Christian college environment and potential implications for practice, makes recommendations for future research, and comments on the limitations of the study.

#### **Connections to the Literature**

**Attitudes towards pornography use in college populations.** As expected, none of the men in this study approved of pornography use. This result aligns with literature showing religiosity's correlation with disapproval of pornography (Abell, et al., 2006; Carroll et al., 2008; Lefkowitz et al., 2004). Research has also correlated religiosity with higher rates of compulsive internet pornography use (Abell, et al., 2006), which five of the participants in this study reported. As several researchers have highlighted, this finding does not prove as surprising as it may appear on the surface (Chelsen, 2011, Laaser, 2004). These men may have reported stronger concern over their pornography use than their non-Christian peers because their faith and their institution present pornography to them as sinful and to be avoided. Thus, they may become more likely to misinterpret their unwanted—and prohibited—pornography use as addictive or compulsive (Chelsen, 2011; Kwee et al., 2007). This chapter further discusses the addictive nature of pornography below.

**Effects of pornography use.**

*Negative emotions.* Literature on the effects of pornography has affirmed that it can result in negative experiences for users. Often, pornography use is associated with negative emotions, including guilt, shame (Huson, 2005, Coleman, 1988), anxiety, and depression (Deloy, 2006). Based on the ways the students in the current research described their experience with pornography, all participants have experienced negative emotions due to pornography use. For example, Kyle, who struggles with low self-esteem and sometimes looks at porn to make himself feel better, said, “Afterwards it would – I would just feel incredibly guilty and my self-esteem would drop even lower which wouldn’t help me.” David expressed, “When I was using pornography I was often short-tempered, was often easily irritated, [and] lacking of joy.”

*Addiction.* Many of the men in this study described experiences that align with research on the addictive nature of pornography. They described experiences that could fall under the category of sexual addiction. The researcher remained unsure whether any of the participants met the full operational definition of sexual addiction: “a pathological relationship with a mood altering experience . . . [and an inability] to control their cycle of thinking, feeling, and acting when it comes to their sexual behaviors” (Seegers, 2003, p. 247). However, five students did describe an inability to control their pornography use even though it was something they did not want to use. Two participants specifically used the word “addiction” to describe their difficulty in trying not to use pornography. Patrick described his experience as addiction:

I’m continuing to come back to this thing and no one is making me do it. Um then every time I do it I’m telling myself I don’t want to . . .it is something I

compulsively go to. So I realize it is something I need help with. It is not something I'm making a conscious decision to do every time I do it. That is what I mean by addiction.

Another trait of addiction three men in this study demonstrated was a tendency to use pornography for relief of negative emotions or feelings. This finding aligned with the work of Carnes (1994), who posited sexual acts done in the state of addiction no longer serve the purpose of enjoyment but instead stress and pain relief as well as self-nurture.

***Relationships with women.*** Participants also expressed frustration about pornography's impact on their relationships with women. None of the men in this study described aggressive attitudes or behavior towards women, one of the most concerning potential effects of pornography use (Malamuth et al., 2000; Vega & Malamuth, 2007). Notably, however, the researcher did not ask questions specific to pornography's effect on aggression.

However, the men in this study did show symptoms of some effects pornography can have on men's views of women, such as objectification of women, which involves rating females "by size, shape and harmony of body parts" (Brooks, 1995, p. 2). David said he still struggles with this temptation, even though he has not looked at pornography in over two years: "In some ways you almost kind of view them as two different beings. Like the girls you know in real life can't be that girl on the screen." Most participants also show signs of voyeurism, a tendency to look at women rather than interact with them (Brooks, 1995). In a sense, one could argue all men who look at women in pornography have this tendency. Only one man in this study, who does not talk much to anyone in general, may demonstrate voyeurism in his real-life interactions with the opposite sex.

## **Christian College Environment and Suggestions for Practice**

**Safety and shame.** Overall, students viewed their college as a safe place to struggle with pornography. While they did not think others approved of pornography use, they did perceive a generally caring attitude towards users and a desire to help them. This belief aligns with information provided on the University's website, which describes its community as a place that builds members up and holds them accountable in maintaining community values and standards. The institution also presents itself as possessing an attitude of grace and a desire for growth in any member of the community who struggles. Conversations with faculty, staff, and students regarding the institution's restorative discipline process further supported this mentality.

Even though they sensed their college as a safe place, participants also reported feeling afraid to bring their pornography use to light. This fear proved especially true for those in the midst of struggling with pornography. The four participants in the study who had experienced freedom from pornography use reported more ease in talking about their past use while not struggling with it. Four participants were fighting pornography use at the time of the study. If males willing to participate in a study about their experience with pornography reported having a difficult time talking their struggle, one may reasonably assume other users at the institution also wrestle with broaching the subject.

### **Community response**

**Vulnerability.** These contrasting reports, coupled with the reality that the men in this study did not have a positive experience with pornography, prove highly concerning. Administrators at Christian institutions of higher must do more than simply discourage pornography use through institutional policy and internet filters. While these measures

help, they do not address the heart of the issue. Christian colleges must look for ways to encourage users to become vulnerable about their struggles. The majority of what men in the study found helpful in overcoming their pornography use involved interacting openly with other people. However, if men at Christian institutions in fact feel too afraid to talk about their pornography use, the findings of this report suggested they will have less success in stopping their unwanted behavior.

Student development professionals at Christian institutions can encourage vulnerability by taking advantage of the existing communities on their campuses. Many of the men in this study reported conversations with others—especially peers—as helpful in both feeling supported and finding strategies to stop their pornography use. Opening up to others also helped men realize they were not alone in having an aspect of their life they did not feel proud of and wanted to change. Numerous practices can potentially encourage undergraduate males to become vulnerable and share about their difficulties. One student reported a different residence hall on campus utilizes discussion groups centered on the book *Lust Free Living*. The structured support provided by such groups offers the men in this hall a safe space in which to process their struggles with pornography and receive help.

Findings also demonstrate the need for more effective communication in order to convince students that institutional leaders—from student leaders to administration—genuinely care about them and want to help them heal. Several men in this study felt they needed to appear as though they “had it all together” at their university. Christian college leadership at all levels must prove that this sentiment is not true. Vulnerability in leadership is in accordance with examples from scripture. For instance, many of David’s

failures are recorded by the prophet Samuel and by David himself. These examples demonstrate a leader can have failed greatly in the past, yet still—after genuine confession—be referred to as “a man after [God’s] own heart” (Acts 22:13, NIV).

If leadership at Christian universities modeled vulnerability and shared about past brokenness—including struggles with pornography—in their lives, students would feel encouraged to open up as well. Imagine if a professor or administrator shared with students about past sexual brokenness and the healing he or she has experienced. It is not hard to believe that, if students were exposed to this sort of sharing, they might find hope and open up as well. The Christian life proves an imperfect life. Students may not actually believe this truth if those they admire live out and speak out this reality.

*Describing pornography as addictive.* Despite the findings of this study, the researcher remains uncertain as to whether or not the pornography use described by the participants in this study meets the definition of an addiction. For instance, the most recent Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) does not label problematic pornography use as an addiction (APA, 2013). McKay (2014c) posited compulsive pornography use as better described as a habit rather than an addiction:

Labeling impulsive behaviors as addictions may hinder an individual from feeling capable of conquering an undesirable behavior. “Addiction” is a very loaded—even scary—word. When we tell ourselves we have an addiction, we’re implying that we’ve lost control of ourselves, that our ability to make our own choices is impaired, and that it may even be impossible to change course. (para. 38)

The findings of the current study resonate with McKay’s statement; the term “addiction” comes laden with many possibilities, including an “inability to consistently



abstain” from a particular action (American Society of Addiction Medicine, 2016). The current study supported this mentality, as five participants—four of whom described pornography with language related to addiction—had experienced periods of six months or longer in which they abstained from pornography. Thus, it may prove unwise to call a student’s unwanted pornography use an addiction; the label proves potentially inaccurate and may cause students to believe they cannot stop their pornography use.

However, in some cases, using addiction-related language can prove appropriate in helping students to understand the very real danger of their pornography use.

Neurological research has posited pornography as potentially addictive in that the brain reacts to it similarly to the way an addict’s brain reacts to alcohol or other drugs (Karama et al., 2002; Kühn & Gallinat, 2014; Laier et al., 2013; Voon et al., 2014). Admittedly, some research in the same field has suggested the opposite (Prause et al., 2015; Steele, Staley, Fong, & Prause, 2013). However, enough evidence has suggested pornography use can become an addiction that this research cannot remain ignored. Colleges must make students aware of this information.

*Campus-wide programming.* As implied in other sections of this report, there exist many ways that addressing pornography can tie into the co-curricular. While campus-wide programming focused solely on pornography could prove helpful, whether shame surrounding the topic would decrease participation remains uncertain. In order to combat this stigma, colleges should connect the topic of pornography into campus-wide existing programs. For example, the institution studied offers annual conferences and other programming surrounding themes such as social justice, community, and sexuality. In one way or another, pornography connects to all of these topics. Within these pre-

existing offerings, the college could involve speakers and workshops dealing with how pornography preys on vulnerable members of society and negatively affects relationships. Tying the discussion of pornography into preexisting programming would prove efficient—although efficiency should not be a primary concern—while also helping students understand the permeating impact of the pornography industry and how it influences many aspects of life and society.

*Internet filters.* Finally, Christian institutions should continue to utilize filtering programs on their internet networks. While such software is expensive and students with internet capable smartphones can turn off their data to look at pornography, the men in this study highlighted this feature as helpful in curbing their internet pornography use.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

As evidenced in the previous section, future research should examine the experience of male undergraduates who use pornography at other faith-based institutions. If this insight were available, student development practitioners at Christian institutions would have keener insight into the experience of male students and better ideas of how to help this particular student population.

The researcher could not find academic literature on intervention methods for pornography users at Christian institutions. The researcher believed further study in this area proves necessary in order to identify best practices for supporting pornography users at Christian colleges. The findings of the current study necessitate research into the impact of peer community measures (programs, resident assistant training, accountability groups, etc.), mentoring, and spiritual practices in order to identify best practices for intervening with pornography use. This study's findings also suggested men at the

researched institution feel afraid to be vulnerable about their pornography use. Future research should also examine factors that encourage vulnerability in male students.

As suggested by divergent findings in addiction and neuroscience research, further research into addiction and the way Christian college men consume pornography is necessary. Despite the painful experience participants had with pornography, their Christian beliefs may cause them to respond in different ways than those who do not share their faith. Thus, research on Christian college students' pornography use specifically is crucial for Christian college employees to have better informed addiction-related language with which to interact with students who struggle with pornography.

### **Limitations**

Despite proper phenomenological design, this study had several limitations. The most obvious was the small pool of seven participants from the same residence hall. Also, all of the men interviewed volunteered to participate. Due to these two factors, the participant pool may not completely represent the institution studied. Additionally, the study only included responses from students at a single institution. While the responses of the students proved relatively deep and varied, the study would likely have benefitted from insights of male students who used pornography while attending other Christian colleges. Finally, because the researcher is a male who experienced the phenomenon while an undergraduate, he may have brought prior biases into the investigation.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored the experience of male undergraduate students who had regularly used pornography while attending a Christian college. The following research questions drove this research:

1. How undergraduate male users of pornography respond to pornography use?
2. How might this response be influenced by attending a Christian institution of higher learning?

The research utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design in order to answer these questions. Through its findings, higher education professionals at Christian institutions of higher learning have a better understanding of the experience of their male undergraduate students who wrestle with pornography use. The study also presents factors male students find helpful in overcoming their pornography use. All of these findings supported the need for future research into the experience of male students who view pornography at Christian institutions and into best practices for providing them support.

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## Appendix A

### Project Informational Document

**Researcher:** Benuel Post, Master of Arts 2016 Candidate

The **purpose** of this study is to describe the experience of male undergraduate students who have used pornography while attending the University. (For the purpose of confidentiality, the University will not be referred to by name in the final research report).

#### Criteria for Participation

- Male
- Currently enrolled
- Have regularly—once a week for a duration of a month or longer—used pornography at some point while enrolled at University. This can be an experience that is currently occurring or that happened previously during their time at the University.

#### Participant's Role

- Participate in a semi-structured 45-60 minute interview with the researcher. These can take place in the counseling or a mutually convenient location.
- A list of the interview questions will be sent to participants before the actual interview. If participants do not feel comfortable answering specific question[s], they will not be required to.
- When the gathered data has been analyzed, the researcher will consult with each participant in order to assure that the findings are consistent with the student's experience.

#### Confidentiality

- The identity of participants will be protected. Identifying information will be stored on the password protected computer of the researcher and will be destroyed upon completion of the research. Only the researcher will have access to this information.
- When information shared by participants is referred to in the final report of research findings, a pseudonym will be assigned in order to protect the individual's identity.
- There will be no disciplinary response by the University for information shared with the researcher regarding participants' pornography use, unless it is unlawful in nature. Regarding pornographic material, only that which displays children is definitively illegal in nature.

If you are willing to participate in this research please **contact** the researcher at either of the following. Depending on your preferences, the researcher may initiate contact:

- Email: [benueltpost@gmail.com](mailto:benueltpost@gmail.com)
- Phone: (814)440-0668 (Call or text)

Thank you in advance for your consideration as we seek to learn more about this important topic.

## **Appendix B**

### **THE UNIVERSITY**

#### **INFORMED CONSENT**

##### **Experience of Pornography Use amongst Males Students at a CCCU Member Institution**

You are invited to participate in a research study of the experience of male pornography users at a CCCU-member university. You were selected as a possible subject because you received the researcher's contact information and contacted them on your own accord. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The study is being conducted by Benuel Post, Master of the Arts 2016 candidate.

##### **STUDY PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to describe the experience of male students who have used pornography while enrolled at a CCCU-member institution and to examine how this experience may be influenced by the spiritual culture of the university.

##### **NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

If you agree to participate, you will be one of between 6 and 8 subjects who will be participating in this research.

##### **PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:**

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:

1. Participate in a semi-structured interview with the researcher, lasting 45-60 minutes.
2. Agree to be anonymously quoted and/or referenced within the study.
3. Upon completion of coding by the researcher, examine the themes of the research and affirm whether they are consistent with your experience.

##### **RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

While participating in the study, the risks include those normally associated with everyday life. In addition there may be emotional risk in recalling parts of your experience with pornography.

While completing the interview, you may tell the researcher if you feel uncomfortable and/or do not wish to answer a question.

##### **BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

Contributing the research on college students' pornography use. Other direct benefits are unknown.

##### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published. Transcripts and recordings will be stored on a password protected computer. Recordings of interviews will only be accessible to the researcher and will not be used for any other purpose.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Taylor University Institutional Review Board or its designees, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) etc., who may need to access your research records.

#### PAYMENT

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study

#### CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For questions about the study, contact the researcher or faculty advisor:

Researcher:

Benuel Post

benueltpost@gmail.com

(814)440-0668

Faculty Advisor: Withheld from this report for purposes of confidentiality.

#### VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Taylor University.

#### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Inquiries regarding the nature of the research, his/her rights as a subject, or any other aspect of the research as it relates to his/her participation as a subject can be directed to the University's Institutional Review Board at [email withheld] or the Chair of the IRB, [name and contact information withheld].

#### SUBJECT'S CONSENT

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study. I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.

**Subject's Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Subject's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name, Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature, Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix C

### Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

**Introduction:** Thanks for agreeing to meet with me. I'm a graduate student researching the experience of male students who have regularly used pornography. Before we get started, I want you to know that we can stop at any time and you can decide not to answer specific questions. I may use quotes from you and other participants in the final report of my findings. Your name will never be associated with anything you say and a pseudonym will be utilized to identify any of your responses. There will be no repercussions with Taylor University regarding anything you share unless it is illegal (regarding pornography that which includes children is the only type that is definitively illegal). You can end your participation in this study at any time during this interview or by contacting me after the fact. All data will be destroyed upon completion of the final research report.

For the purpose of the study, pornography is defined as the depiction of erotic behavior—in writing, images, and film—meant to arouse sexual desire and often for stimulating the body to sexual release or discharge (Pornography, 2015; Willard, 2008).

- Describe your experience with pornography. How was it obtained? How did the experience make you think and feel?
- How has your viewing of pornography affected your relationships with parents, friends, and the opposite sex?
- Does pornography affect the way you feel about yourself? How so?
- What was your relationship with God like before you began looking at pornography? After?
  - Potential follow up: What was it like using pornography and at the same time maintaining your relationship with God?
- How has attending a Christian university affected your use of pornography? How has looking at pornography affected your educational experience (both in class and out of class)?
  - Potential follow up: How do you feel your experience using pornography may have been different, or not, if you attended a secular college?
- Does anyone know about your pornography use? How did they find out? How did them knowing affect your viewing habits? Did it change your relationship with that person?
  - If applicable: What keeps you from telling others about your pornography use?
- Describe the ways you have tried to stop using pornography or what caused you to stop? Why?
- What responses by the college, its staff, or other students have been helpful, or not, regarding your use of pornography?
- Is there anything else you would like me to know?

**End of interview questions.**

