

**“WE TAKE THESE THINGS VERY SERIOUSLY”: HIGHLIGHTING THE
ISSUE OF UNREPORTED SEXUAL ASSAULT AT COLLEGES AND LOCAL
UNIVERSITIES**

Honors Thesis

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice**
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By

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Abstract

Colleges and Universities alike can make it quite difficult for someone looking to report an instance or multiple instances of sexual misconduct. Often students who do report are faced with/subjected to humiliation, disapproval, or even reprehension. A component of my thesis work was the ongoing development of a website. This website hopes to shed some light on this prevalent issue and increase the awareness of the growing rate of sexual assault on both college and university campuses, while ultimately changing future practices when it comes to dealing with instances of sexual misconduct at that level. The most unique part of this website is that it is completely anonymous, so anything shared by users is free of sensitive and or personally identifiable information. The written portion of this thesis seeks to provide more insight into the developmental processes of this digital component and in addition, provide a well-attuned explanation for much of the decision making behind the finalized product. The primary sources used in my research and website development include an array of scholarly sources, primary statistical sources, academic journals, and documentaries.

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List of Tables and Figures/ Appendix

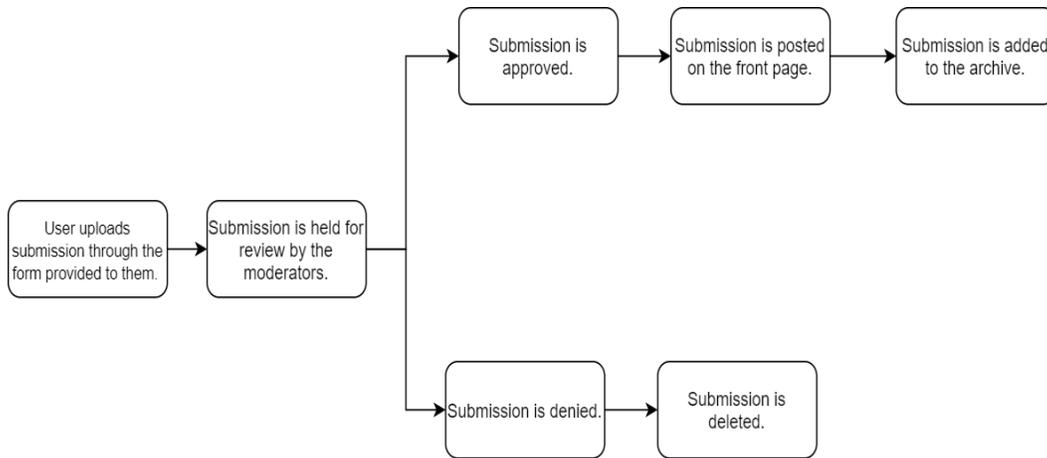
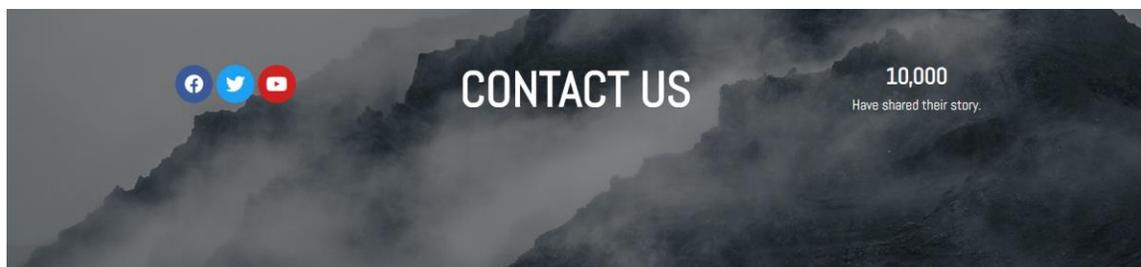


Figure 1 - Diagram showing the working principle of the website.

The screenshot shows the submission page layout. On the left, there is a sidebar with sections: "Our Mission Statement" (with a quote: "To create and foster a safe environment for students to learn, develop, and grow."), "Submission Guidelines" (with three bullet points: "Do not include any sensitive and/or personally identifiable information in your submissions.", "Do not submit any materials that contain biased commentary and/or discriminatory language.", "Should you decide to upload images as part of your submission, avoid uploading images with embedded location data."), and "Founders" (listing Watanya Felt and Skerdilajd Skenderi). The main content area has a header "WE ARE HERE, TELL US YOUR STORY." followed by a "Post Title" input field. Below that is a "Post Content" area with a rich text editor toolbar (Paragraph, Bold, Italic, Bulleted List, Numbered List, Quote, Link, Image, Undo, Redo) and "Visual" and "Text" tabs. At the bottom, there is a "Security Check" section with a math problem "2+6=" and an "Enter Sum" input field, and a "Submit Post" button.

Figure 2 - Current layout for the *Submission* page.



Contact Us

Find us on maps

352 Lafayette St, Salem, MA 01970

Connect with us

Uni-anonymous@notyetpublished.com



Figure 3 - Current layout for the *Contact Us* page

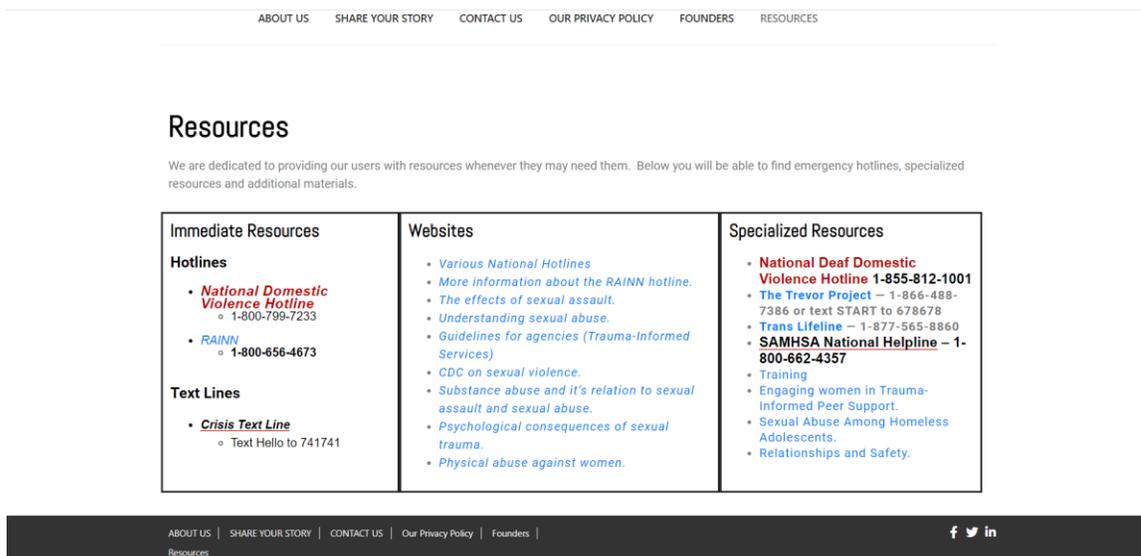


Figure 4 - Current layout for the *Resources* page.

Uni-anonymous.com is contextually varying in terms of the services it offers. From what I have seen there are not too many websites out there like it. The only moderately successful platform of this nature to ever exist was *Yik Yak*, a social media app for both iOS and Android users, which allowed them to create and share posts anonymously to anyone within a 5-mile radius. Although this app had originally presented itself as being moderately successful, it had some major security and privacy issues, which ultimately led to both its demise and its eventual shutdown. In more recent years, *Reddit* has been the go-to for users seeking that same level of anonymity as well as a sense of community. *Reddit* owes a lot of its continued success to its well-equipped moderation team, its outstanding safety measures (i.e. separation of NSFW (not safe for work) content from regular content), and its overall level of transparency.

When *Uni-anonymous* was in its early stages of development, both Watanya Felt and Skerdilajd Skenderi used *Reddit* and *Yik Yak* as their primary influences, and each played its own role in the entire creative process. We wanted to use a design that was similar to that of *Yik Yak*, one that would be clean-cut and appeal to college-aged students but would not discount the safety and security of our users. As previously noted, the most prominent *Yik Yak* inadequacy was its faulty safety and security measures. Taking this into account, Mr. Skenderi and I took things one step further with the creative process and made *Uni-Anonymous* not only appear more modern but comprised it of more modern safety and security features that were made possible through the use of *Wordpress*, a website development service.

In addition to the accessible safety features and clean-cut design, we wanted to offer our users additional resources should they need them for any reason. Mr. Skenderi

and I both agreed that providing resources to our users is just as important as the testimonials/shared stories themselves. Our resource page will include a catalog of specialized resources, websites, hotlines, text lines, etc. to support a wide range of individuals within our user base. These resources will be there to assist victims of sexual assault, their families, and community members alike.

Before *Uni-Anonymous* went into its initial stages of development there was a lot of discussion around its overall purpose and what Mr. Skenderi and I hoped to achieve throughout its continuance. Mr. Skenderi and I want our website to raise continued awareness to the growing rate of sexual assault and sexual misconduct cases, among college-aged students. We also want our website to show the administration the overall impact this issue has on the campus climate, and remind them that there is still work to be done and that doing 'enough' does not equate to doing everything within your power. The hope is that through seeing countless individuals sharing their stories, the administration will seek to improve its future practices when it comes to handling these kinds of situations. This website will serve a safe space for our user base, but also as a reminder to the administration that they could be doing more to protect their students.

We are setting out to achieve the goals mentioned in the previous paragraph by adding several features to our site as well as countless resources for those seeking additional support. Web design features such as the testimonial count, will not only help keep track of the number of testimonials received through our website but will also let our user base know that they are not alone in their experience. Often victims of sexual assault feel extremely isolated. That feeling of isolation could have stemmed from the victim being told not to share the experience with anyone by their own perpetrator, a

lack of understanding/empathy from those around them, or a combination of the two. According to an article written by the Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs, “A survivor's culture and (lack of) community connections can, at times, compound feelings of isolation...survivors at times may be shunned or even avoided by their families and/or communities because of their disclosure.” The testimonial count in this case scenario is great because it shows the number of individuals who have shared their own stories and encourages those visiting to continue to vocalize their experiences.

Another notable part of the website that serves to help us achieve our goals is the resources in which it offers. As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, the resources are there to provide additional support to individuals should they need it. The act of sharing these kinds of negative experiences or even reading these kinds of experiences can sometimes bring up a lot of awful memories or even leave some retraumatized. Mr. Skenderi and I wanted to be prepared for that and took into careful consideration when creating *Uni-Anonymous*. For us, it was really important that *Uni-Anonymous* have all the necessary resources to help in case those awful memories do come back, or in case you experience some form of retraumatization.

The final thing which I am going to note that will aid in us achieving our goal is our websites' versatility. Not only is it available/accessible from your web browser it can be accessed from your phone thanks to Wordpress's amazing options. The fact that our site is able to be accessed from your webphone browser makes it much easier when it comes to reaching a wider audience. Part of being able to raise awareness is being able to reach as many people as humanly possible. If you are able to expose people to sites such as this one if they end up favoring the website and its initiatives, they are likely to share it

with another person who will eventually share it with another person, and the cycle continues.

There was so much to learn and take from the developmental stages of this thesis project. The process of creating a website, even with the help of a well-curated template system and plug-in architecture, still presented an array of technological challenges. However, utilizing these tools allowed us to explore different ways to tackle these challenges in a more streamlined fashion. Mr. Skenderi served as an exceptional partner in the construction of this website because he was fairly knowledgeable in some of the areas in which I was unfamiliar. Much of the learning took place through trial and error and through the exchanging of ideas.

When first using the Elementor page builder plug-in (offered through *Wordpress*), Mr. Skenderi and I only included some of the more basic information and showcased this information on a more rudimentary layout, in order to gain some familiarity with the tools and widgets of Elementor. The website was incredibly uninspiring upon first glance, but Mr. Skenderi and I eventually acquired enough knowledge through this experience to start not only adding some new features to our website but eventually implementing an all-new design. The only issue with the developmental process was the challenge of being able to include all of the features that were being considered thereafter in the “*Uni-anonymous* development timeline”. A lot of the more contemporary ideas were omitted from the final product as we came to the realization that the limited time we had would not allow us the flexibility to explore those options.

This leads to my next point, had we not had major time constraints/ been more realistic about our timeline there would have likely been more ideas explored throughout

the development of this website. Luckily this is just the first version of this site and I have the rest of my professional career to continue to work on improving it using the feedback provided. This first version of my website leaves much room for potential. Mr. Skenderi and I discussed potentially collaborating in the future to build an even more grandiose version of *Uni-Anonymous* from scratch. Building it from scratch would allow us so many opportunities to explore what this website could be and raise it to its highest level of potential. Especially if the website gains a lot of traction, we are going to want to adapt to the growing user base and make modifications to the site based on their specific needs.

When taking part in the developmental process of this website, Mr. Skenderi and I looked into several different ways of actualizing it. With his help, we came up with several ideas on how we would execute. One of the main ideas in the very beginning was to build this website from scratch, but unfortunately, our timeline did not allow for it. As I mentioned in previous parts of the text in order to accomplish any work on the site we needed to have a good understanding of the tools that we would be working with and have a realistic timeline for the project. Building this site from scratch would have been extremely unrealistic if we had decided to take it on so late into the year but it was and arguably still is, something worth exploring even through this reflective piece.

If we were to build this site from scratch there would be several programming languages used. The layout of the website would be implemented using a mix of HTML, CSS, and PHP. The functionality and interactivity of the website would be delivered by using PHP and JavaScript. To support the backend system that would be responsible for cataloging and manipulating data (in this case the submissions of our users) a MySQL

database would be used alongside a database management tool such as phpMyAdmin, being that it is something provided to Salem State University Computer Science students.

What is also amazing about this idea of building the website from scratch is the modularity that building from scratch would allow for. The deep and intricate nature of programming languages would allow us to consider options that would have not been possible had we used a CMS. Everything from a basic font/theme, all the way to the backend aspect of it would be customizable. We would no longer be limited to the content and systems the community at large develops, we would be able to make the site truly our own with the potential to create something completely unique. In addition to that this type of development would allow us to have greater control over the website's performance in different platforms. While a CMS system does this very well, the additional metrics provided when the source code is available, give a very insightful picture, at least from an engineering perspective. Lastly, when built with source code from the ground up, some of this code can be referenced to directly, if the service would transition to a mobile application form.

Unfortunately, though we were unable to go in this direction and after generating a timeline for the project and creating a list of what Mr.Skenderi and I found to be the most necessary additions to our website. It was the idea that we can implement our site using services online that moved us along smoothly. Mr. Skenderi and I decided to go with a more notable hosting website Hostgator, which offers WordPress as one of its website development services. Although, in previous parts of the text Wordpress is mentioned the following definition takes it one step further: Wordpress is a CMS(

Content Management System) that allows its users to develop their website using a set of easy-to-access, easy-to-use tools which in this instance fit the mold for what we were looking for in a website development service. After spending some time getting familiar with WordPress we discovered that in addition to its varied and flexible tools and features, it also allowed administrators to access the source code of these tools to truly personalize every aspect of the website, making the platform far more robust than what we had expected at first glance. While we did not have the time to use these features to their full extent, what was already provided proved to be more than adequate for the task at hand, and helped streamline the process saving us significant time down the line.

After the decision was made to proceed with WordPress, the working principle of the website was created. The working principle of *Uni-Anonymous* is based on the idea that you could have an anonymous platform where users could submit testimonial accounts about their experiences with sexual assault/harassment on campus without revealing personal information and without feeling ridiculed or threatened.

Mr. Skenderi and I took several steps to achieve this: First, we made sure that the website would not allow social features such as log-in forms, comments, or a submission rating system. It has been shown time and time again that allowing such social features in websites containing sensitive topics similar to ours could lead to these environments quickly becoming hostile to its targeted audiences, an unintended side effect of creating a social environment in which certain individuals can exploit to create harassment. Next, Mr. Skenderi and I implemented an administrative review system for the submissions that come through on our site. With this feature, site moderators will be able to review every

submission, ensuring that it abides by our site's guidelines and ensuring that no personal information is found on the submission.

Lastly, we created an information collection policy that allows us to ensure the anonymity of the user at a backend level. While following this policy, Mr. Skenderi and I can ensure that the collection of long term cookies that contain personal user data, such as preferences or computer specifications is prevented. Within the confines of this policy, the only collection of data that is allowed is temporary entry and post-submission cookies. In the event that one was to look into the submission history, there would be no long term data, as these types of cookies are only temporarily present and are automatically deleted from the system after a short time has passed. This alongside several layers of security provided by our server provider Host Gator, ensures the security of all information on site. The diagram in *Figure 1* of the appendix shows the working principle of the site with attention to what happens to submissions prior to it being published and displayed on the homepage, while the subsequent figures in the appendix show what some parts of the website design look like.

In conclusion, this website allowed Mr. Skenderi and I to better understand all of the moving parts of a website. I am certain that this experience will continue to serve us throughout our professional careers because we have come out of it having learned so much. Should we decide that we want to collaborate in the future, this website proves to be a good start for, future collaborative efforts.

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