

Science AMA Series: I’m Taylor Kohut at Western University and I want to talk about porn, what it is, and how it may impact the way that people think, feel, and behave. AMA!

Taylor_Kohut¹andr/ScienceAMAs¹

¹Affiliation not available

April 17, 2023

Abstract

When asked, I used to tell people that I study the impact of pornography use, emphasizing “impact.” I guess I just didn’t want to give the wrong impression (“People pay you to do what?”). So, much of my research has focused on experimental and survey investigations of impact of pornography on sexual thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Some of it even pops up in r/science on occasion. As a sex-positive researcher with half a brain, not everyone likes what I have to say; popular writer Jonathan Van Maren has characterized me as Marlboro Man of porn, and the well-intentioned folks over at yourbrainonporn.com have filed my work under “Questionable / Misleading Studies.” I’m thinking about getting t-shirts printed.. Recently, my work is shifting more towards the nature and structure of sexual materials. What is porn? What isn’t porn? Wow can we best measure porn use in surveys? And how can the content of porn be divided up into psychologically relevant taxonomies? (Specifically, I’m trying to raise money to develop a new tool for crowdsourcing the content description of pornography to this end: <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/porn-genome-project-app-science/> or check out <http://www.pornforscience.com>. Porn for Science - Studying Your Shame). Which now means that I not only study the effects of pornography, but porn itself (“Yes Great Aunt Kathy, I get paid to watch porn.”). I’m currently a postdoctoral fellow and adjunct professor that Western University, where I also earned by PhD in social psychology in 2014. Thanks everybody for your questions! It’s been fun! If you’re interested in talking further with me about research, shoot me an email at tkohut at uwo dot ca

[REDDIT](#)

Science AMA Series: I'm Taylor Kohut at Western University and I want to talk about porn, what it is, and how it may impact the way that people think, feel, and behave. AMA!

TAYLOR_KOHUT [R/SCIENCE](#)

When asked, I used to tell people that I study the impact of pornography use, emphasizing "impact." I guess I just didn't want to give the wrong impression ("People pay you to do what?"). So, much of my research has focused on experimental and survey investigations of impact of pornography on sexual thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Some of it even pops up in [r/science](#) on [occasion](#). As a [sex-positive researcher](#) with half a brain, not everyone likes what I have to say; popular writer Jonathan Van Maren has characterized me as Marlboro Man of porn, and the well-intentioned folks over at [yourbrainonporn.com](#) have filed my work under "Questionable / Misleading Studies." I'm thinking about getting t-shirts printed..

Recently, my work is shifting more towards the nature and structure of sexual materials. What is porn? What isn't porn? Wow can we best measure porn use in surveys? And how can the content of porn be divided up into psychologically relevant taxonomies? (Specifically, I'm trying to raise money to develop a new tool for crowdsourcing the content description of pornography to this end: <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/porn-genome-project-app-science/> or check out <http://www.pornforscience.com>. Porn for Science - Studying Your Shame). Which now means that I not only study the effects of pornography, but porn itself ("Yes Great Aunt Kathy, I get paid to watch porn.").

I'm currently a postdoctoral fellow and adjunct professor that Western University, where I also earned by PhD in social psychology in 2014.

Thanks everybody for your questions! It's been fun! If you're interested in talking further with me about research, shoot me an email at tkohut@uwo.ca

[READ REVIEWS](#)

[WRITE A REVIEW](#)

CORRESPONDENCE:

DATE RECEIVED:
January 17, 2017

DOI:
10.15200/winn.148457.71037

ARCHIVED:
January 16, 2017

CITATION:
Taylor_Kohut , [r/Science](#) ,
Science AMA Series: I'm Taylor
Kohut at Western University
and I want to talk about porn,
what it is, and how it may
impact the way that people
think, feel, and behave. AMA!

Is porn more or less a "new" phenomenon, or is it common across cultures and ages? Or perhaps somewhere in btwn? I'm thinking here of material meant as a masturbatory/sex aid as opposed to erotica, but would welcome hearing your more nuanced view of what constitutes porn.

Thanks!

[DLWM1](#)

Porn has existed for at least 25,000 years in one form or another (e.g., the Willendorf Venus). What changes across time is not the existence of porn, but the medium of presentation, the accessibility of porn, and the social norms surrounding its use and value. For an example of a culture that was very open about sexual representations, you should look into some of the artifacts that were dug up in Pompeii. Certainly we're moving towards more open acceptance of sexuality compared to the recent past, but putting pornography in a broader historical context suggests that openness to sexuality fluctuates tremendously across time and culture.

The Winnower
4:e148457.71037, 2017, DOI:
[10.15200/winn.148457.71037](https://doi.org/10.15200/winn.148457.71037)

© et al. This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and redistribution in any medium, provided that the original author and source are credited.



Thanks for doing this AMA! Have your studies shown any particular advantages or disadvantages on the use of pornography as a tool for masturbation? Are there any specific connections between personality type and porn addiction?

[IAmTheWigster](#)

My research lately has focused on use in the context of relationships, and one sexual behaviours and function in the context of dyadic (two partner) relationships, so not too much of my work has focused on masturbation. However, you'll be unsurprised to know that pornography is very useful for making your penis harder when you want to masturbate it, which is a pretty big benefit for masturbation. Additionally, perceived benefits of those masturbating with pornography typically include a heightened sense of pleasure during masturbation (i.e., compared to staring into the dead eyes of your cat while he watches you) and less time to orgasm (for addressing the very common problem that coming always takes forever). There are also certainly purported health benefits of masturbation more generally, such as decreased rates of prostate cancer and higher immune functioning, though these claims should maybe be taken with a grain of salt.

One of the recurring themes in terms of personality type and porn use is that higher levels of religiosity are a better predictor of perceived porn addiction than actual levels of porn use are.

Do you find that people who view porn on a regular basis become bored with a specific type or theme, and progress to increasingly kinkier or more taboo subjects? If so, how does that impact other attitudes they may hold, or their relationships with their partner?

[SapperInTexas](#)

I haven't found that in my research, but it's not the main focus of my studies. Though the area is under-researched, I'm not aware of any direct evidence for this so far. Mostly, it seems to be the case that if you show people the exact same videos or pictures, then they'll seek out more and more extreme stimuli just for the sake of looking at something different. That is, people get bored when you show them the same thing over and over again. But if you give people a few days off in between viewings of identical stimuli, they de-habituate, and are pretty much just as aroused as they were at the beginning.

I'm not aware of any research that tracks free choice porn use over time, and this is an area of study that very badly needs more research.

Keeping these limitations in mind, I recently published a paper suggesting that positive impacts of pornography are commonly perceived in the context of relationships (e.g., improved sexual knowledge about partner, better sexual communication, increased sexual comfort).

https://scholar.google.ca/scholar?q=kohut+campbell+porn&btnG=&hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5

Do the effects of "traditional" porn (i.e. actors who get paid for their work) differ from true "amateur" porn in which an exhibitionist just posts photos or videos of themselves for free (e.g. on [/r/gonewild?](#))

It seems to me whether somebody gets paid to do something or they do it as a hobby should make some kind of difference, but I don't know whether that has ever been studied.

[QuinZ33](#)

The honest answer is, we don't know at this point. Or at least I don't. There is a line of survey research that measures perceived realism in pornography, and some social cognitive models suggest that perceptions of realism in porn play a role in the connection between pornography use and attitudes

towards recreational sex.

What are the long term effects on the libido from viewing porn? Are these different than text-only porn?

[thislooksprettyfun](#)

The effects of porn on libido are currently contentious. Check out your favorite antiporn groups and you will find claims that porn contributes to both hypersexuality (sex addiction) and low libido. They both can't be true for all porn users and some research fails to support either direction. People sometimes certainly attribute a loss of libido to porn, but just as many (and more in some studies) suggest that porn is / can be used to enhance sexual desire in their relationships. So, in short, as with the arousal questions, the small literature on libido is a mess.

Text-only porn is interesting. Back in the day, many people used text porn in experimental manipulations because it's easier / cheaper / more ethical to produce, and it's easier to modify for tighter experimental controls. I'm not aware of any research regarding use of text porn and libido, but sexual arousal responses to porn tend to be lower with text than with pictures / videos.

As a fellow researcher in the world of evolutionary psychology and human sexuality, I just wanted to say thank you. Somewhere in my stack of research to read is probably one of your articles.

I hope I'm not being improper here, but has any of your research looked at niche pornography for obesity? I.e.: the phenomenon of seeking a "BBW"? My dissertation is on the sexuality of obese women, so anything related to that would be awesome.

Keep on trucking and SPSSing. Maybe one day we will get to co-author an article! :)

[SpottedPaws](#)

You're welcome.

Not improper at all! The only two articles I'm aware of that study obese women in porn are the following:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00224499.2015.1065953>

https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=bryant+paul+predicting+2009&btnG=&hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5

The general takehome is that, as a category, it is about as popular as Donald Trump's probable favourite category.

Additionally, I hope that someday we do get to write an article together! Unfortunately, my future in academia is uncertain at the moment. Both hiring and funding decisions in the context of academia are often difficult to tip in the direction of porn research, which is why I had to turn to unorthodox funding options such as the Indiegogo campaign mentioned in the header above (<https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/porn-genome-project-app-science/>). I hope that you have more luck than I have had, because I love research and if I had my druthers I'd be doing this until my children are old enough to be ashamed of me.

Thanks for doing this AMA! I have a few questions..

My boyfriend watches a lot of porn while I do not, and in fact haven't been able to use it or partake in the act of masturbation at all. What would you recommend for me? I know I have some guilt and issues

over this since growing up in a religious household, yet I am atheist and still find myself disgusted and ashamed over aspects of sexuality.

[2aardvark4this](#)

Guilt is definitely a tricky thing to deal with. Anxiety is definitely easier to deal with, small doses of exposure in safe and comfortable environments will extinguish the anxiety response over time. Porn specifically has been shown to be effective in treating sexual anxiety over time.

Guilt is more difficult. Mainly, if it's important to you, I would recommend seeking out a sex positive clinician or psychologist to work with you. Alternatively, you can just accept that your partner likes porn and you don't, and that's okay for both of you. What's important for your relationship isn't that you have the exact same interests, you just need to accept that your partner will sometimes have different interests than you.

Do you believe the legal standard, [The SLAPS/ Miller Test](#) is the most appropriate way to determine if content is pornographic in nature?

[CaptCurmudgeon](#)

No, most definitely not. That test refers to obscenity, not pornography, which are related but different concepts. I've spent my time studying the concept of porn and particularly how it's perceived by referring to discreet observable cues in sexual media. This is what spawned the Porn Genome Project, which I'm working on right now (<https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/porn-genome-project-app-science#/>), which is aimed at extending this thinking into developing a much higher resolution tool for differentiating between porn/not porn and different types of porn.

Obscenity, particularly in the context of these sorts of tests, is a combination of using social norms to determine whether something is offensive, and if it is offensive, does it have sufficient redeeming qualities to justify its existence.

Any reason why there are so many people into transgender porn? As a transgender asian female, I cant tell you how many times I've been propositioned because the guys have this image in their head that i'm a sex crazed nympho bot who is willingly to get down on her knees at the very mention of how large their member is (usually with a helpful pic indicating how large).

[drewiepoodle](#)

I think it's mostly a sort of availability bias that makes it seem as though a lot of people are into transgender porn. According to studies of self-reported arousal to sub-categories of porn, transgender porn is one of the least popular categories of porn. But because of the internet, groups that represent small percentages of the population are still able to gather large absolute numbers of people. That is, even if only 1 or 2% of people were interested in transgender porn (a hypothetical number), that would be 70 million people on earth who are into that sort of thing. I think what's likely happening is that you are an obvious target for people who rarely encounter their fantasy in real life. Hence, dickpics. Lots of dickpics. Be careful with the size reference pics though. The head side of a nickel can look a lot like the heads side of a quarter :)

I'm a 26 year old male. I was exposed to internet porn for the first time when I was 11 (5th grade). Because of my abnormally curious and promiscuous nature at that age, I was instantly hooked when I found out that there were photos and videos of naked women and "grown up stuff" on the internet. I

desperately wanted to find more. So from that day forward, every chance I got, I would sneak onto my family's office computer and while they thought I was playing video games, I would be watching porn and building a collection of my favorite content. This habit stuck with me and I can't really say I've been able to completely defeat this addiction (although I have moved on from my family's computer to my own at the condo I'm living at, thankfully). There is no doubt in my mind that 15 years of porn use has had multiple profound effects on my social and sexual behavior (or lack thereof) and thankfully I have found an online community of a seemingly endless number of guys who have had similar experiences (simply google "porn addiction forum" or something similar if you wish to find them). This is not an autobiography thread so I'm not going to go into tremendous detail on my story, but I am extremely passionate about this subject because I do believe porn has shaped my life in a very direct way. Here are some of the questions I would ask a professional that is dedicated to studying something I consider to be a fundamental part of my life:

- 1.) Do you deny that long-term porn use has a tendency to change peoples' behaviors (ultimately for the worse) as they become less and less interested in everyday events and pleasures and more dependent on the dopamine rush provided by porn? If you don't deny it, or better yet if you are fully aware of it, why don't you do more to use your connections and influence as a researcher to make people more aware of the dangers of this "new drug"?
- 2.) As someone who has explored just about every crevice of porn on the internet (No, I have not been on the dark web), what would the best way be for me to use my knowledge and experience to help others understand porn and its effects or maybe contribute to the scientific industry revolving around it? I wouldn't necessarily have to make a living doing it, but if there is a way for me to use this experience in a productive way instead of feeling that it has just been a 15 year "curse", I would be anxious to do so.
- 3.) How familiar are you with PIED (Porn induced erectile dysfunction) and what is your advice to someone who suffers from it? Do you know of any experimental treatments being researched? For those not familiar, imagine being a 20-something year old guy, having an attractive woman in your bed, and not being able to get it up because seeing a girl take her bra off in front of you is about as boring as watching paint dry after you've spent years and years seeing women do much more explicit things on a computer screen.
- 4.) And I'll end with a question that stems from addiction rather than recovery... You said you have been researching "psychologically relevant taxonomies" in porn. As someone who has gotten bored with the mainstream scene of porn, this is very interesting to me. I have formed many "preferences" when viewing porn but there is often no way for me to discover more material based on these preferences. I am forced to settle for the typical, run of the mill synopsis that every porn scene nowadays seems to follow. What are researchers like yourself doing to expand the porn industry and make it easier for people to find what they're looking for?

Thanks

Edit: In regards to my last question, I'm obviously talking about very particular preferences that are too specific to be "categories" on popular porn sites. As someone who dissects the world of porn, I'm sure you'd know what I meant. But a more casual observer may have thought I was overlooking the widely available organizational system that most porn sites offer.

[Tzujan27](#)

1. It would certainly be very surprising to me if there were absolutely no effects of pornography over the long-term on the way that people think, feel, and behave, especially in a sexual context. I would, however, question the assumption that the impact is exclusively, or even predominantly, negative. Virtually every well conducted survey on the matter indicates that only a small percentage, typically less than 10% of porn users, report any negative effects. Of those, only a fraction report very

serious concerns. This is not at all intended to discount your personal experiences. I'm not saying that you're lying or making these things up. But rather, individual psychologies are tremendously complicated, and within the unique network of your traits and experiences, porn may have been atypically harmful.

2. Generally speaking, there aren't enough avenues for researchers and clinicians to capitalize on your porn experience as the asset that it is. In general though, taking place in as many surveys as possible to make sure that porn users like you are accounted for in the data is helpful, and additionally, contacting researchers in the area, such as myself, can be helpful when it comes to our efforts to research less typical experiences.
3. PIED is currently a hotly contested phenomenon in the realm of sex research. Several of the cornerstone studies that are cited as strong evidence of its existence have been called into question recently on the basis of competing evidence that has repeatedly failed to find effects in support of PIED, and has sometimes even found evidence in the opposite direction (e.g., Regular porn users show increased arousal response to pornography in a lab situation as measured by penile tumescence). Keep in mind that much of this research is focused on a more typical range of usage, and may not properly account for extreme usage situations. Because the effects are unclear, knowledge about the efficacy of treatments remains unclear.
4. I agree with you very much that categories, as they are used today, are a suboptimal means of organizing pornography. In fact, this is an issue that has occupied my attention for some time. Right now, I am at the tail end of an Indiegogo campaign for a project that is targeted at exactly this issue (<https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/porn-genome-project-app-science#/>). As it stands, if I want anal right now, that's easy enough to do. But, if what I'm really in the mood for is a middle aged, overweight ginger bear being taken from behind by a pizza delivery boy that's been working out, then the current system of categories leaves me shit out of luck. I might find it, but if I do, it'll be because I was willing to comb through dozens of videos and got lucky, not because it was provided for me. If we are able to build our tool, then we would eventually be able to recommend videos that cater to very discreet and specific tastes in exactly the way you are describing. Although unfortunately, the campaign so far has not raised very much money. I will use whatever amount I get to do as much research as possible, but as it stands now, that will be work of a very limited scope.

Have you considered researching the benefits of fetish porn that caters to less socially acceptable links, in regards to a physiological release acting to prevent illegal and aggressive behaviour? I've always thought that there's got to be some way to use pornography to rehabilitate and/or encourage the management of impulses shown by sex offenders.

[marianamor](#)

As far as I know, the only data to support a catharsis argument are population studies, which have found that as the accessibility of pornography increases over time, including access to anti-social porn, see no increase in their rates of reported sexual offenses, and occasionally even find a slight decrease. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution, because the mechanism is unclear. Mainly, these findings should be taken with a grain of salt, because these studies don't track individual level changes. That is, there is no evidence that any persons felt decreased motivation to engage in sexual assault as a function of their exposure to anti-social porn.

Is the easy access to pornography in this day and age ruining the sex lives of those who view it? Back in the 80's and late 90's porn wasn't readily available so people were having sex more. Now people can just pull out a phone and start fapping, thus killing libido, drive a sexual arousal?

[MoistnSquishy](#)

I've seen this sort of questions come up in a few different forms, and I think it's worth noting that jerking/jilling off to porn and having sex with a person are not the same thing to most people.

Having said that, the effects of media, when they do exist, are relatively small compared to effects of actual, real life social influence of others. For example, if I show a video of a man masturbating in my Human Sexuality Course, nothing would really happen, other than a few students shifting in their seats (from either discomfort or arousal or both). If, however, I dropped my pants and started masturbating in front of my class, I would lose my job. Real life interactions are a very different thing for most people than watching a video of something happening.

Porn is interesting, in that people are uniquely concerned about ironic effects, that is, increased exposure reducing the behaviour being demonstrated. I've never heard anyone say, "We shouldn't let people play violent videogames, or no one will be interested in joining the army." People are concerned that media enhances the behaviour being demonstrated. And as with violent media, large scale analysis seems to suggest very very small effects.

Hi, thanks for doing the AMA. My question is.

What lead you to start studying porn, and its impact? And how did your relatives and friends handle the choice?

Thanks again.

[WorkFox150](#)

I blame my mother...

But really, I think it was just that, as an undergrad, I was exposed to the literature and it seemed loaded with politically biased assumptions that I didn't believe reflected reality in all cases. I thought that I would be able to ask important questions about porn and sexuality in a way that was less value laden in terms of the acceptability or preferability of specific findings, so I chose to get involved in answering these questions. Also, I like to kick the hornets nest whenever I get a chance, and I've been able to do that quite a bit with some of my work (<https://redd.it/3n3hv2>).

In terms of friends, I don't really have any. I'm a misanthrope in my thirties with a wife and two young children. My wife and parents have been very supportive throughout my career. My bemused colleagues have been generally tolerant of my heavy use of pornographic GIFs in presentations, so that's a win.

Have you ever sought access to data from porn websites to conduct more demographic-focused research? I'm sure [/u/Katie_Pornhub](#) would be willing to help.

How has studying porn affected you personally? I know several people who worked on clinical decision support systems to help women with breast reconstruction after mastectomy. All now claim to have minimal attraction to the female breast because of their exhaustive exposure over the course of their research.

[shiruken](#)

A) I'm open to working with big porn in order to take advantage of their extensive data. However, I've found that generally they are less interested in working with me... Additionally, it's very important that I'm able to maintain independence to maintain research integrity, which becomes more difficult when

funding or data comes from someone with a specific, pre-existing agenda.

B) If I'm collecting stimuli for a study, spending two or three days sifting through collections of porn, I get just as bored looking at that as a line worker in a car plant gets bored of looking at gear shifts, and on those days, I'm not particularly interested in driving cars. After a few days off, however, my enthusiasm as a hobbyist returns.

Seeing other people's data, however, has made me feel some things, on occasion. Essentially, it can have the same effect as Facebook, which is that I suddenly have access to information about all of the best and most interesting things that an unrealistically broad group of people are doing, and by changing my reference group so dramatically from what I would encounter in day to day conversation, it really makes me realize that I've been married for quite a few years.

As an undergraduate, I did two studies on porn. I tried to find racial preferences for certain types of porn actors amongst college students. I also looked at emotional differentiation, being judgemental about sex, and explicit media usage and how they related.

I had a lot of trouble doing preliminary research for these studies, especially when looking at racial bias outside of the proliferation of racial stereotypes and the mistreatment of African American actors. Are you aware of anything published that has examined constructs along the lines of consumer preference for a specific porn actor race?

Also, have you had much difficulty getting IRB approval for any of your studies?

[gizzardgulpe](#)

Funny you should mention that, I have done a series of studies myself on the effects of race on ratings of unpleasantness and pornographicness, as well as evaluations of the featured models, looking for subtle indicators of prejudice. Results have been mixed so far, to the degree that these results may be difficult to publish. The preliminary evidence that people judged naked black women as significantly more unpleasant and more pornographic than naked white women has not replicated with follow up studies, so we are hesitant to make any claims based on it. I can't think of any research that looks specifically at racial preference for different porn actors. There was an essay in Tristan Taormino's book 'Feminist Porn' that discusses the racialization of Asian Americans in porn that is kind of interesting.

In answer to your second question, the IRB has been pretty good, actually. It's other, more tangential institutional bodies that have caused problems. For example, I am currently running a vibrator study, which was run using resources from an arms-length industry donor (a company gave me a pile of free vibrators). Since this was technically a donation, the office that deals with donations made it extremely difficult for us to accept these free vibrators, which delayed the project for a full year. This sort of institutional resistance also makes it difficult to find funding for a lot of my projects, which is why one of my more ambitious projects to date may live and die (die) on the success or failure (failure) of the Indiegogo campaign I'm running, which comes to a close later today (<https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/porn-genome-project-app-science#>).