

# Viewing pornography at work increases unethical behavior on the job

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

New research discovers employees who view pornography on the job aren't just costing companies millions of dollars in wasted time, they're causing harm to the company.

A study from professors in the BYU Marriott School published in the *Journal of Business Ethics* finds that viewing [pornography](#) at [work](#) increases [unethical behavior](#). Given unethical [employee](#) behavior is linked to a number of negative organizational outcomes—like fraud and collusion—organizations should act quickly to reduce porn consumption, authors say.

"Pornography is often framed as an issue affecting only individuals and relationships outside of a business context," said study co-author Melissa Lewis-Western, a BYU professor of accountancy. "But businesses are made up of people, and people make decisions and businesses function off the decisions people make. If you have a societal phenomenon that a lot of people are participating in and it negatively impacts individuals' decisions, that has the potential to impact organizational-level outcomes."

The study included an experiment with 200 participants and a survey of 1,000 other individuals. In the experiment, one group was tasked with recalling and recording their last experience viewing pornography. The researchers chose not to expose participants directly to pornography due to ethical concerns and concerns of selection and demand effects. Members of the control group were asked to recall and record their most recent experience exercising. Both groups were employed to watch the entirety of a boring video consisting of a blue background with a monotone voice speaking and subtitles for 10 minutes.



Melissa Lewis Western, associate professor in the School of Accountancy at BYU. Credit: Brigham Young University

Researchers found 21 percent of those who had recalled their last experience viewing porn did not finish viewing the video, but lied about it. Only 8 percent of those in the [control group](#) didn't finish the video and lied about it. This represented a statistically significant 163 percent increase in shirking work and lying for those who view pornography. Similar evidence was obtained from the survey. The experiment also found that the rise in unethical behavior is caused by an increased propensity to dehumanize others, i.e. pornography consumption increases the viewer's propensity to view others as objects or less than human.

Authors, which include accounting professor David Wood and former BYU grad student Nathan Mecham, say because porn consumption causes dehumanization, the incidence of sexual harassment or hostile work environments is likely to increase with increases in employee pornography consumption. "Organizations should be mindful of those risks," said Mecham, now a Ph.D. student at the University of Pittsburgh.

"If you have a larger portion of your employees that are consuming pornography at work, it's likely changing their behaviors and those changes are likely negative," Lewis-Western said. "Regardless of your stance on pornography, most people want to be good employees, they want to be fair to men and women and they don't want to be unethical. That's where we need to start the conversation. We need to refrain from viewing pornography to create work environments that are inclusive to all."

The researchers suggest companies take steps to reduce pornography consumption at the office, including:

- Preventative controls such as internet filters and blocking devices
- Policies that prohibit porn consumption at work, with penalties
- Hiring employees who are less likely to view pornography than others

"Almost everyone cares about the #MeToo movement and women, but if you care about that, then you have to care about this issue too," Lewis-Western said. "If your manager is regularly watching pornography at work, then our research suggests that your manager is more likely to objectify you, which is likely to be particularly detrimental to female employees."

**More information:** Nathan W. Mecham et al. The Effects of

Pornography on Unethical Behavior in Business, *Journal of Business Ethics* (2019). [DOI: 10.1007/s10551-019-04230-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-019-04230-8)

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