



ASA NEWS

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Beginning Pornography Use Associated With Increase in Probability of Divorce

SEATTLE — Beginning pornography use is associated with a substantial increase in the probability of divorce for married Americans, and this increase is especially large for women, finds a new study that will be presented at the 111th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA).

“Beginning pornography use between survey waves nearly doubled one’s likelihood of being divorced by the next survey period, from 6 percent to 11 percent, and nearly tripled it for women, from 6 percent to 16 percent,” said Samuel Perry, the lead author of the study and an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Oklahoma. “Our results suggest that viewing pornography, under certain social conditions, may have negative effects on marital stability.”

Titled, “Till Porn Do Us Part? Longitudinal Effects of Pornography Use on Divorce,” the study uses nationally representative General Social Survey panel data collected from thousands of American adults. Respondents were interviewed three times about their pornography use and marital status — every two years from 2006-2010, 2008-2012, or 2010-2014. The study uses a statistical design that focuses on initially married respondents’ change in pornography use and marital status between survey waves. Respondents who did not report viewing pornography in the past year at an initial wave, but did so by the subsequent wave were characterized as having begun pornography use. The study then isolates the connection between this change in pornography use and the probability of respondents being divorced by that subsequent survey wave, compared to the probability of divorce among those who did not watch pornography in either survey wave.

In addition to investigating the association between changing pornography viewership habits and the probability of divorce in general, Perry and his co-author Cyrus Schleifer, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Oklahoma, also examined how age, religiosity, and marital happiness moderated the link between changing pornography viewership habits and marital stability.

While beginning to watch pornography was associated with an increase in the probability of divorce for the sample of married Americans, the increase was greater for younger adults. In fact, the study found that the younger an adult was when he or she began watching pornography, the higher his or her probability of getting divorced by the next survey wave.

“Younger Americans tend to view pornography more often than older Americans, and older Americans generally have more stable marriages since they tend to be more mature, financially established, and likely already have more time invested in the relationship,” Perry said. “So, we thought it made perfect sense that the effect of pornography use on divorce would grow weaker with age.”

Beginning pornography use was also associated with a greater negative impact on the marriages of those who were less religious, which was measured by religious service attendance. For those who did not attend religious services every week or more, beginning pornography use was associated with an increase from 6 percent to 12 percent in the probability of getting divorced by the next survey. By contrast, those who attended religious services at least weekly saw virtually no increase in their probability of divorce upon starting to view pornography. According to Perry, the fact that being more religious seemed to lessen the negative influence of pornography use on marital stability deviates from some previous research.

“Several previous studies finding a negative association between pornography use and marital quality showed the effect was stronger for frequent churchgoers,” Perry said. “This was thought to be because pornography use carries a greater social and psychic cost for those in communities that stigmatize its use. But our findings suggest that religion has a protective effect on marriage, even in the face of pornography use. Because religious groups stigmatize divorce and prioritize marital stability, it is likely that married Americans who are more religious will experience a greater combination of community pressure and internalized moral pressure to stay married, regardless of pornography’s effect on their marital quality.”

Additionally, the researchers found that respondents’ initially reported level of marital happiness played an important role in determining the magnitude of pornography’s association with the probability of divorce. Among people who reported they were “very happy” in their marriage in the first survey wave, beginning pornography viewership before the next survey was associated with a noteworthy increase — from 3 percent to 12 percent — in the likelihood of getting divorced by the time of that next survey.

However, beginning pornography use had no statistically significant association for individuals who reported lower marital happiness initially. “We took this to mean that pornography use — perhaps if it’s discovered by one’s spouse unexpectedly — could rock an otherwise happy marriage to the point of divorce, but it doesn’t seem to make an unhappy marriage any worse than it already is,” Perry said.

Interestingly, Perry and Schleifer also found that cessation of pornography use was associated with a lowered risk of divorce for women. Women who reported viewing pornography in an initial survey wave and in the subsequent wave had an 18 percent probability of being divorced by that subsequent wave, compared to a 6 percent probability for women who discontinued pornography use between waves. But, among men, discontinuing the use of pornography had no statistically significant association, which the researchers said might be due to the fact that men tend to be more consistent in their pornography use, resulting in a smaller sample size for observing a possible connection.

In terms of the study’s implications, the researchers said their findings could help couples make more informed decisions about factors that may affect their marriages, but emphasized that they are not suggesting a policy revision is in order. “We have no desire to push a ‘ban pornography’ agenda on the grounds that it can be harmful to marriages,” Perry said. “Neither one of us is on a moral crusade. We think information is helpful, and Americans should be aware of the potential consequences of pornography under certain circumstances.”

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About the American Sociological Association

The American Sociological Association (www.asanet.org), founded in 1905, is a non-profit membership association dedicated to serving sociologists in their work, advancing sociology as a science and profession, and promoting the contributions to and use of sociology by society.

The paper, “Till Porn Do Us Part? Longitudinal Effects of Pornography Use on Divorce,” will be presented on Monday, Aug. 22, at 10:30 a.m. PDT in Seattle at the American Sociological Association’s 111th Annual Meeting.

To obtain a copy of the paper; for assistance reaching the study’s author(s); or for more information on other ASA presentations, members of the media can contact Daniel Fowler, ASA Media Relations Manager, at (202) 527-7885 or pubinfo@asanet.org. During the Annual Meeting (Aug. 20-23), ASA Public Information Office staff can be reached in the on-site press office, located in Room 601 of the Washington State Convention Center, at (206) 219-4513 or (914) 450-4557 (cell).

Elizabeth McCauley, ASA Public Information Office, wrote this press release.

Papers presented at the ASA Annual Meeting are typically working papers that have not yet been published in peer-reviewed journals.