

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

April 30, 2021



Teaching *Current Directions in Psychological Science* offers advice and guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic covered in this peer-reviewed APS bimonthly journal, which features reviews covering all of scientific psychology and its applications.

Edited by C. Nathan DeWall

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Pornography's Prevalence, Purposes, and Perils

By David G. Myers

[Grubbs, J. B., & Kraus, S. W. \(2021\). Pornography use and psychological science: A call for consideration. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 30\(1\), 68–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721420979594>](#)

In this Internet era, pornography is a big deal. Just one website, Pornhub.com, averages 115 million daily visits, report Joshua Grubbs and Shane Kraus. U.S. surveys, they add, indicate that 68% of adolescents have viewed pornography, and one in two men and one in six women do so each week. Research on pornography use can be relevant to numerous domains in psychological science, including relationship research, adolescent development, and clinical science.

Student Activity: Effects of Pornography Use

Most undergraduates, say Grubbs and Kraus, have seen pornographic material and are aware of its prevalence. Without invading students' privacy by asking them about their own personal exposure and reactions, instructors might introduce this sensitive but important topic by asking four questions:

1. Have you been aware of fellow students' pornography use, either during your high school days or more recently?
2. What effects—benefits or harms—might you expect from regular pornography consumption? Might this differ by the viewer's age?
3. What type of research might assess pornography's effects? (This provides an opportunity to illustrate what we can learn from correlational/cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental methods.)
4. What research could benefit from including variables related to pornography use?

In recent books and articles, Philip Zimbardo and Nikita Coloumbe (2016) and Gary Wilson (2017, 2021) have pointed to the perils of young men's excessive pornography use. They report pornography use is associated with excessive video game use and that both offer images of conquest. In correlational studies, online pornography use has also predicted erectile dysfunction, "anorgasmia, low sexual desire, delayed ejaculation, and lower brain activation to sexual images" (Zimbardo et al., 2016). Over time, Zimbardo and Coloumbe added, the huge increase in streaming online pornography has presaged a soaring rate of erectile dysfunction in young men—from 1% among men under age 25 in Kinsey's 1950s to approximately 25% today. Voluntary pornography abstinence has been shown to enable a rebooting of men's sexual functioning.

Are young men's virility and sexual responsiveness depleted by excessive pornography consumption? Does pornography, as Zimbardo and colleagues have said, "mess with manhood?" If so, why? Students who know about habituation may explain how compulsive pornography use might desensitize people to normal sexuality.

In their review, Grubbs and Kraus take a deeper dive into the psychological science of pornography use. First, they note (as perhaps your students could) pornography's potential benefits: as a means of discovering and affirming one's sexual identity, of facilitating solitary sexual pleasure, and of enhancing their sexual variety and satisfaction within a relationship. Indeed, as Grubbs and Kraus report, there is a "robust literature" indicating that sexual media convey sexual scripts that people bring to their relationships. In one national survey, a quarter of 18- to 24-year-olds said pornography was their most helpful information source about how to have sex (Rothman et al., 2021). Such scripts can enable

“greater sexual novelty and variety” and “greater sexual closeness” in couples, report Grubbs and Gola (2019).

But content analysis of sexual scripts in 4,009 scenes on Pornhub and XVideos found that 45% and 35%, respectively, depicted violence—most commonly spanking, gagging, slapping, hair pulling, and choking—with 97% of such actions targeted toward women (Fritz et al., 2020). Research—including longitudinal studies—has indicated “consistent links” between pornography consumption and (in both adults and adolescents) increased sexual aggression and infidelity, greater sexual objectification, and diminished sexual satisfaction with real partners who cannot rival the sexual performance of actors (Grubbs & Gola, 2019). In one study of 1,694 teens, boys exposed to violent pornography were two to three times more likely to perpetrate dating violence (Rostad et al., 2019).

Are Zimbardo and his colleagues right to conclude that extensive pornography use can produce sexual dysfunction? Grubbs and Kraus acknowledge that “self-reported problematic” (compulsive or extreme) pornography use does correlate with erectile dysfunction—a finding reported by others (B?the et al., 2021). But they argue that the link is “not directional or causal.”

Observing that some clinicians have noted a growing epidemic of pornography addiction, Grubbs and Kraus report that there is not, as yet, a scientific consensus about such addiction. The World Health Organization has, however, added a new behavior disorder to its International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems: *compulsive sexual behavior disorder*, which it defines as “a persistent pattern of failure to control intense, repetitive sexual impulses or urges, resulting in repetitive sexual behavior over an extended period.” “Problematic pornography use” may meet this diagnostic criterion, and Grubbs and Kraus’s own national survey revealed that 11% of men and 3% of women “reported feeling at least somewhat addicted to pornography.” Addiction is especially problematic among highly religious individuals (such as the Atlanta spas mass shooter) who experience “moral incongruence”—an inner dissonance between their moral standards and their behavior.

Amid the ongoing debate about pornography’s influence, this much is certain, Grubbs and Kraus conclude: In our 21st-century world, pornography use is a big deal, and an under-researched one. Future clinical research should explore the epidemiology and treatment of problematic pornography use and its co-occurrence with psychiatric disorders. Researchers might also explore the impact of the pornography industry on its actors. And they might explore the outcomes of viewers’ attempts at self-regulation.

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How Psychology Can Help People Save for a Rainy Day

By Cindi May

[Hall, C. C. \(2021\). Promoting savings for financial resilience: Expanding the psychological perspective. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 30\(1\), 49–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721420979603](https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721420979603)

Experts recommend that every adult have 6 months' worth of savings to cover essential living expenses in case of emergency, such as lost wages during a global pandemic. Despite this long-standing belief, Federal Reserve data indicate that as of 2019, Americans had a median balance of only \$5,300 in their bank accounts—enough to cover little more than a month's expenses for a middle-class family—and that 39% of Americans have insufficient funds to cover a \$400 emergency. This lack of sufficient personal savings is a problem not only for those whose accounts are low but also for a society aiming to lift people out of poverty and help them achieve self-reliance.

Crystal Hall at the University of Washington notes that policymakers and applied behavioral science researchers have attempted to develop interventions that encourage individuals to save not only for emergencies but also for retirement, children's college funds, or a down payment for a house. These efforts, while well-intentioned, have yielded mixed results. Although the strategies are rooted in principles of behavioral psychology and economics, Hall argues that they have fallen short because they offer broad, one-size-fits-all approaches to savings. She posits that findings from social and personality psychology could inform and further hone these strategies—in particular, by shedding light on the ways in which both individual differences and social forces affect decisions about when, why, and how much to save.

Student Activity #1: Principles of Personal Saving

To begin a conversation with students about ways to increase personal savings, first have students review two strategies for encouraging savings that have recently been promoted:

- Targeting tax refunds: People are encouraged to save when they receive their lump-sum tax refund. The \$aveNYC program, for example, offered low-income tax filers the opportunity to open a savings account with their refund and receive a 50% match on their investment (Key et al., 2015).
- Linking savings to prizes: People are rewarded for saving money with a chance to receive a monetary prize. The odds of winning increase as savings increase (Kearney et al., 2010).

Ask students to identify the psychological principles that these strategies address. Examples include the tendency to procrastinate (e.g., rather than planning to save later, save your tax refund now and receive matching funds) and status quo bias (e.g., rather than do nothing, save money and receive a chance to win more).

Then ask students to identify people to whom these broad strategies might appeal and people for whom they might be less effective. Research has shown that the prize-linked savings strategies, for example, are most appealing to men, people who play the lottery, and people who show high optimism (Atalay et al., 2014; Filiz-Ozbay et al., 2015).

Student Activity #2: How to Promote Saving

Hall argues that these general approaches have gaps and can be refined and improved by utilizing knowledge from three areas of social and personality psychology: individual differences, culture and context, and power and privilege. To explore these areas, put students in teams and have them consider each area in turn.

First, have students generate individual-difference variables that might influence savings. Examples include gender, optimism, locus of control, culture, and materialism.

Then ask students to consider environments and contexts that might encourage (or discourage) savings. As one example, prompting individuals to focus on one aspect of their identity (e.g., parenthood) by

using visual cues (e.g., photos of children) might encourage greater savings. As another example, savings rates in the United States have increased dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic for many reasons, including a lack of travel opportunities and uncertainty about job stability. How might we encourage individuals to maintain these saving patterns when life returns to “normal”?

Finally, have students discuss whether being the target of prejudice or discrimination might impact saving behavior. For example, ask students to consider how systemic and institutional forces, such as low minimum wages or discrimination in granting loans to small businesses, might affect a person’s ability to save.

With these factors in mind, have students evaluate the four popular saving apps. See this article online to download a handout of the app matrix. Each app targets a different purpose for saving (e.g., emergency fund; retirement). What psychological principles are in play for each app? For whom do students think the app will be most appealing and effective? What weaknesses can students identify? How would students use their understanding of social and personality psychology to further improve these apps? If they were to create their own, what would it look like, and why?

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