

The Business of Pornography

Contributions From Organization Studies - Introduction to the Special Section

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Abstract

Organization and management scholars have so far engaged very little in the study of the pornography industry. This is in many ways understandable, as the use of pornography is both taboo and also often produced under problematic conditions. On the other hand, it is a multi-million industry, and as critical organization scholars, we believe we have an obligation to also study and understand the problematic industries – and particularly their ethical and cultural implications – despite their stigma, and the way this stigma also tends to taint the researchers doing the research. The collection of papers in this special section takes an important consolidated first stab at conceptualizing pornography as an organizational phenomenon. The section includes an editorial as well as three individual papers.

Keywords: Pornography, porn, stigma, gender, race, class and power

Introduction

Over the last half century, pornography has emerged from the underground and developed into a giant global industry (Tarrant, 2016; Wosick, 2015). Digitalization and the internet in particular have fueled exponential growth in this sector. In 2019, online platform provider PornHub reported 42 billion visits and 39 billion searches (Pornhub, 2019). One can only assume that these figures pale in comparison to those during the COVID-19 lockdowns when popular subscription-based video sharing platforms like OnlyFans drifted toward primarily pornographic content (Rahrovani, Shadnam, & Ta, 2022). Despite being a multi-billion-dollar business, however, organization and management studies have said almost nothing about the pornography industry. Unlike sex work, prostitution as well as sexualized work, which have been explored in the field (e.g. Burell, 1984; Dalton & Jung, 2018; Hales et al., 2018; Just & Muhr, 2020; Leybold and Nadegger, 2023), it is as if the subject of pornography is off bounds – too taboo – for organizational researchers. We understand the reluctance. Mention the word “pornography” at an academic conference or departmental board meeting and you can expect the room to go silent.

Indeed, even having a file named “pornography” on our work computers – dedicated to this special section – did engender a mild feeling of paranoia. That only intensified when consulting websites such as Pornhub’s ‘Year in Review’ for the statistics cited above. Most universities have a zero-tolerance policy to accessing pornography on their equipment, counting it as a heinous and dismissible offense.

By the same token, this massive industry clearly requires organizations and management. Despite its taboo status, we believe organization studies can provide a nuanced understanding of how this business is managed. The purpose of this Special Section is to showcase scholarship that does so, with a special emphasis on the significant ethical and cultural implications that this industry inevitably broaches. We want to explore what new insights organization studies can teach us about pornography and, in turn, what pornography can teach us about organizations.

Our original call for papers invited organizational researchers to consider how our field could provide unique and novel insights when it comes to conceptualizing pornography as an organizational phenomenon. The focus was on the supply side rather than the demand side because that, we believed, would give us a better anchor for understanding the organizationality of pornography. We expected that the number of submissions would be relatively small given the stigmatized nature of the topic material. However, we were in for something of a rude awakening. Just a handful of papers arrived. We extended the deadline. A few more submissions were forthcoming. We contacted friends and colleagues in the field encouraging them to write a paper on pornography. The response was lukewarm. One of us was told, “hmmm, interesting topic... but ahhh... a bit *weird* though, isn’t it?” She shifted nervously in her seat when considering the possibility. When the *New York Times* asked AT&T about the sizable porn traffic it carries, a spokesperson nicely captured society’s general attitude towards the subject: “it’s the crazy aunt in the attic, everyone knows she’s there, but you can’t say anything about it” (quoted in Benes, 2018).

Some excellent manuscripts were however submitted, three of which are featured in this special section. Each challenged our initial focus on the supply side of pornography, highlighting the centrality of the receiver for understanding the organizational dynamics of the pornography industry. To introduce this Special Section, we will briefly discuss the pornography industry, then present a brief commentary on the papers in our collection and conclude by exploring potential directions for future research on this important topic.

Organizations and the Pornography Industry

Several uncertainties are inherent to the subject of pornography. For example, how do we define it? Definitions regarding ‘adult’ or ‘restricted’ entertainment are fuzzy and not at all clear cut given the overlap with erotica and sex industry more generally (Mecham, Lewis-Western, & Wood, 2021; Sullivan & McKee, 2015). Do we include webcamming or amateur porn, for instance? Scholars differ on the definitional parameters we should use. For the purposes of this Special Section, we follow McKee, Byron, Litsou and Ingham’s (2020) conceptualization of pornography as images or text intended to excite sexual arousal. And the pornography industry as the commercial production, distribution, trade and consumption of those texts or images.

Another uncertainty pertains to the exact size of the pornography industry and the revenue it generates. Due to the relatively secretive, privately-owned, and stigmatized nature of this line of business, it is often difficult to obtain reliable figures (Weitzer, 2010). The ambiguity is exacerbated by rampant piracy and the secretive *modus operandi* of producer networks. In relation to the US adult entertainment industry, which is dominated by major companies such as the Vivid Entertainment Group, an oft-referenced estimate suggests that the industry turns over at least US\$10 billion a year, rivaling firms like Netflix and having significant societal and economic influence (Benes, 2018; Voss, 2015). The US context is important in this regard. The United States is leading the production of porn in the world and California is believed to produce around 90% of the US porn content (Gilkerson, 2021). On the consumer side, too, the US is topping the charts of porn traffic for several years (PornHub, 2023). This extraordinary concentration of corporate capital suggests that the global pornography industry is best to be considered part of a wider cultural industrial complex linked to American capitalism and its influence on the international economy (Berg, 2021; Vucci, 2019).

How on earth do we study pornography from an organizational perspective? On one hand, it can be studied like any other institution (Voss, 2012) or workplace (Berg, 2021; Dewey, 2015; Miller-Young, 2014) under the category of entertainment (Edelman, 2009; McKee, 2012), the creative industries (McKee, 2016) and core-stigmatized industries (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2007; Hudson, 2008; Hughes, 1962). On the other hand, pornography may not be like other businesses or workplaces due to its secrecy and the continuing perception that it is somehow exceptional and underground vis-à-vis other industries (Schieber, 2019). While

organizational life has historically been a site of passionless rationality (Casey, 2004), here the sexualized body comes to the fore, albeit in a corporatized setting (McDonald, 2018). As Schieber notes (2019, p. 1), the pornography industry “combines different aspects of the social world that are typically separate” such as “condoms and contracts,” “sex and career strategies,” and “nakedness and employment.” It feels strange to think that the workforce that creates pornography – including performers, film crew, managers, set designers, and so forth – might have legitimate career paths akin to any other industry (for a human resource management perspective on the pornography industry, see Kopp, 2020). Indeed, that this seems unusual is telling. We suspect that it derives from the cultural stigma mentioned earlier, where it is presumed that this kind of work is underground, amateur, and decidedly unprofessional.

Another interesting organizational feature of the pornography industry, connected to the institutional opacity characterizing it, is the apparent division between insiders (those part of the industry) and outsiders (those who are not). This divide between producers and customers is not unusual, of course. What is different here is the clandestine nature of the consumption process. Moreover, consumers have little insight into the economic machinations operating behind the scenes, perhaps rendering porn the ultimate commodity fetish. Having said that, this insider/outsider diad of the industry shouldn't detract from the array of enabling organizations that facilitate traffic between producer and consumer (internet providers, etc.). And as feminist research into the pornography industry also demonstrates, those ‘inside’ this industry are not a homogenous group with shared interests and life chances. Like any work organization, hierarchies of power and control also operate here too, and precarity and exploitation have been found to be common (McVey, Gurrieri, & Tyler, 2021). Corporate managers exploit its male and female performers. And male performers – in heteronormative porn – exploit their female co-stars. For sure, perhaps unusual when compared to more mainstream and ‘legitimate’ business industries is the level of misogyny and sexual violence found in pornography production cultures (Tarrant, 2016). Clearly the misogynistic content of much porn (see Cawston, 2018) spills over into the labour process. For example, ex-performer Alex Devine recalls her experiences on the set of ‘Donkey Punch’,

Donkey Punch was the most brutal, depressing, scary scene that I have ever done. I have tried to block it out of my memory due to the severe abuse I received during the filming.

The guy, Steve French, has a natural hatred towards women in the sense that he has always been known to be more brutal than EVER needed. I agreed to do the scene thinking it was less beating, except the ‘punch’ in the head. If you noticed, Steve had worn his solid gold ring the entire time and continued to punch me with it. I actually stopped the scene while it was being filmed because I was in too much pain (Lubben, 2023).

From our perspective at least, any organizational analysis of pornography must be attuned to these critical politico-economic issues – especially in relation to gender, race, class and power – in order to generate the most useful insights.

Contributions to the Special Section

Each of the three papers featured in this section draws on key concepts from organization studies to extend and problematize current understandings of the contemporary pornography industry.

The first article by Manuel Hensmans presents a unique genealogy of the US interracial pornography genre, analyzing its evolution between 1916 to 2022. This paper is interesting because it places this popular variant of the porn industry within the troubling, violent and unjust race relations of contemporary America. For Hensmans, sex in these interracial films is organized around an articulating myth (following Foucault and political discourse theory) – or a *sex imaginary* – concerning the possibilities of race in an adult context. Moreover, each new generation of interracial porn seeks to transgress and supersede the limits of prior imaginaries, creating new and more extreme variants. Hensmans notes that the thematic of *emancipation* frames much interracial porn. For example, following the 1964 Civil Rights act, 1970s pornographers articulated a new ‘blaxploitation’ imaginary that targeted a legal, mainstream audience rather than underground clubs. Are these films truly emancipatory? Hensmans answers this question in a compelling analysis, which will be of much interest to organizational scholars.

The next article by Sara Dahlman and Lea Katharina Reiss explores the gendered body in feminist pornography, assessing whether the ideals of challenging masculinist norms is successfully achieved in this growing genre. Feminist adult entertainment gained inspiration from fourth wave (‘sex-positive’) feminism that extols female agency and empowerment. Porn made for women by women aims to reject the male gaze and its sexual

pacification/objectification of women's bodies and instead establish a female gaze. This disrupts the heteronormative scripts that currently organize the sexualized body in mainstream pornography. As a useful case study, Dahlman and Reiss examine the audio pornography produced by Erotic Stories, an all-female sex-tech company based in Stockholm. In the context of this 'audio gaze', women's desire and lust is scripted in a manner that significantly counters male-centric heteronormative porn, opening up new possibilities for opposing gender stereotypes that pervade the pornography industry. We find this paper compelling due to its sophisticated analysis of how feminist porn could reorganize the body in ways that foreground women's sexual agency, something the industry is otherwise criticized for denying.

In the third paper, Louise Lecomte, Flora Antoniazzi and Florence Villeséche also focus on feminist porn but from a different angle. They are interested in identifying the specific morality of pornographers in this segment of the market. Using a wide range of sources, including interview data with feminist pornographers, Lecomte, Antoniazzi and Villeséche isolate three evaluative norms or moral axioms that organize the production of feminist porn: 1) enabling diversity and difference, 2) ensuring quality and care, and 3) connecting values and valuation. The relationship between the morality codes and the pressure of neoliberal capitalism (e.g., profit-seeking) reveals an uneasy tension. For example, this type of porn inevitably has an inbuilt class bias because it's considered a high-end product. It's expensive to purchase. We find this paper important because it addresses a major organizational challenge for feminist porn due to its intersectionality with other dimensions of domination connected with neoliberal capitalism.

Towards a Porn Agenda in Organization Studies?

Whether one views the pornography industry as an innovation in the creative industries (Jones, Svejnova, Pedersen, & Townley, 2016) or an organizational moral failure (Shadnam, Crane, & Lawrence, 2020) one cannot ignore the fact that it plays an important role in reproducing and refashioning the power relations encoded in the economic and cultural fabric of many societies. Nonetheless, despite all the obvious reasons for management and organization research to study the pornography industry, the topic has remained largely avoided. Except for occasional, passing references to terms such as "porn," "pornography," or "pornification," often in metaphorical sense, little attention has been paid to the business, professional, and organizational aspects of the pornography industry (Voss, 2012, 2015).

The reasons for this (non)treatment of pornography is our first suggestion for future research on this topic in organization studies. We opened our introduction by highlighting and problematizing the absence of porn from organization studies. But the mechanisms underlying this absence deserve scholarly attention and investigation. Getting stuck at definitional fights over what porn is and is not is surely part of those mechanisms that get in the way of scholars obsessed with precision. But surely there are other mechanisms at play. We need to uncover why scholars continue shying away from examining the behind-the-scenes organizational dynamics that produce such widely accessible and visibly present cultural products. We feel that this section – or at least our introduction to it – has only scratched the surface of the knowledge-taboos that guide what we research and what we do not. Questions of legitimacy and acceptability are key in this regard, which deserves further scrutiny.

We also envision several avenues of future research and encourage scholars to take on the challenge to further elucidate how organizations matter in this industry. The following themes stand out for us:

Porn Industry's Intellectual Interplay with Feminist Organizational Research

The highly gendered nature of the pornography industry needs to be unpacked in much more depth, and feminist organizational research is perfectly positioned to do this in a critical and insightful manner. Some of the concepts that constitute the core of feminist organizational theories such as domination/liberation, censorship/rights, intersectionality, and the politics of recognition are immediately applicable to studies of the pornography industry, which can in turn reveal new ways of theorizing these concepts (e.g. Comella, 2019; Duggan & Hunter, 2006; Harding, Ford, & Fotaki, 2012; Just & Muhr, 2020; Whisnant & Stark, 2004). Feminist organizational research can also examine the notion(s) of 'pornification' and how it affects industry workers and its audience. Explicating the salient forms of pornification can then reveal those sensemaking processes that are triggered by pornification (e.g. Attwood, 2005; Boyle, 2017; Hong & Duff, 1977; Waskul, 2004).

Porn Industry's Role in Technology Transformation and Digital Economy

The recent history of pornography has been closely tied to developments in technology. However, the unpacking of this relation is yet to be done. Future research should address how the

internet (and digital technologies in general) shaped the pornography industry in terms of organizational forms and business models (e.g. Bakkar & Taalas, 2007; Berg, 2016; Jones, 2020; Pezzutto, 2019; Sullivan & McKee, 2015). It is also important to investigate how the pornography industry shaped technological innovations or at least played a role in the market rivalries of new technologies (e.g. Keilty, 2018; Paasonen, 2015). We need to understand how internet censorship laws such as FOSTA/ SESTA shaped organizational models and working conditions in the industry (Berg, 2021), and what we can learn from worker activists' responses (Blunt, Coombes, Mullin, and Wolf, 2020).

Porn Industry's Legitimization of Illegitimacy

The pornography industry is a natural laboratory for testing the existing theories of legitimacy and identifies the management tactics used to generate legitimacy in the eyes of the state, regulators, workers, and so-forth (Reast, Maon, Lindgreen, & Vanhamme, 2013; Suchman, 1995; Suddaby, Bitektine, & Haack, 2017). An important area of investigation is the trickle down effect of broader debates about the legitimacy and moral standing of the industry on the practices and identities of those who produce pornography (e.g. Altman & Watson, 2018; Mecham, Lewis-Western, & Wood, 2021; Shadnam, 2014, 2015; Tibbals, 2013). At the same time, it is important to investigate how legitimization can be accomplished via micro acts that convey authenticity to the viewers (Vanda, 2021; Shor, in press). Given the strong association of pornography with stigma, researchers can also examine the role(s) of stigma in promotion or inhibition of different practices (both symbolic and material) in the pornography industry. Studies of stigma labels and stigmatization processes in the pornography industry can reveal new insights to contribute to socio-science and management research (e.g. Blithe & Wolfe, 2017; Voss, 2015; Stardust, 2014; Weitzer, 2018).

Porn Industry's Labor Processes

An interesting area for future research is studying the recruitment, retention, remuneration, and control structures used in the pornography industry (Berg, 2021; Griffith, Adams, Hart, & Mitchell, 2012; Kopp, 2020; Schieber, 2019). The absence of governmental and nongovernmental legislative bodies tasked with oversight with respect to working conditions in this industry means that studying the self-organization capacity of porn workers is of prime

importance, particularly with respect to occupational health and safety (Webber, 2024) as well as innovation and entrepreneurship (Ruebottom & Toubiana, 2020). It is also important to document what careers look like in the pornography industry, and what key differentiators exist with respect to employees, contractors, management, business owners, etc. (e.g. Griffith, Adams, Hart, & Mitchell, 2012; Schieber, 2019). The increased blurring of boundaries among managerial, employee, contractor, and owner roles would surely challenge organizational research and labor theory's traditional categories of analysis (Berg, 2021). More generally, studying the pornography industry would provide new questions and insights with respect to the broader question of how organizations view, frame, and engage bodies. It is very likely that the pornography industry shed light on some previously eclipsed ways that organizational life is produced and reproduced (e.g. Brewis & Linstead, 2000; Dick, 2005; Hassard, Holliday, & Willmott, 2000; Riach & Warren, 2015).

Porn Industry's Role in the Enactment of Exploitative Patterns

Future research is needed to substantiate if and how the pornography industry is playing a role in the enactment of exploitative patterns at supra-organizational or interactional levels. Those who express opposition and outrage against porn commonly portray the industry as a piece of the puzzle of modern slavery, including human trafficking and forced sexual labor (e.g. Crane, 2013; Shimizu, 2010; Wood, 2002). But this portrayal needs to be seriously scrutinized. We need to know if the forms of exploitation at work in this industry are unexceptional when understood alongside other precarious, feminized labor under capitalism (Berg, 2021; Gira Grant, 2014). Even the specter of trafficking shapes pornographic business' interactions with mainstream business such as the payment processing industry, which raises the question of how this dynamics shape porn's working conditions. We need to know how the contemporary organization of pornography intersects with other industries, both in the mainstream and criminalized sex industry in an international context (Jeffreys, 2009; Shannon, 1997; Sullivan & McKee, 2015).

Reflexivity

Finally, how do we – the editorial team – feel about pornography? We acknowledge that the porn industry is a contentious subject. Anti-pornography groups and intellectuals strongly

oppose it on ethical and political grounds, calling it misogynist, objectifying towards women and psychologically harmful to its users. In many cases, this is correct. Whereas pro-pornography commentators, including feminist analysts (McRoy, 1995), argue that it doesn't have to be this way and could potentially be linked to important emancipatory struggles around sex. Even the editorial team have differing stances on this issue. So, we chose to stick to a rather descriptive language format. Perhaps a cop-out, yes, but it offers undeniable advantages for fruitful dialogue about such a sensitive sector.

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