Under the harm hypothesis, inegalitarian pornography, which is pornography that displays imbalanced gender-relations such that women are characterized unfavorably, causes harm to women by increasing anti-feminist activities. Therefore, under the harm hypothesis, inegalitarian pornography is viewed highly unfavorably and should even be sanctioned in some way that offsets the harm caused to women. In addition, proponents of the harm hypothesis distinguish between harm that occurs during the production of porn and post-production harm. The former can be controlled, ideally, through laws already in place, while the latter is much more relevant to the harm hypothesis. Under the harm hypothesis, inegalitarian porn contributes to an anti-feminist culture in society, which then causes harm to women through means such as the promotion of violence towards women, an unequitable division of labor between men and women especially concerning household duties, and the promotion of unequal pay for effectively equal work for men and women. The contribution of inegalitarian porn to an anti-feminist culture is especially impactful because many of the resulting anti-feminist attitudes have erotic associations. For example, inegalitarian porn promotes the erotic appeal of weak women and strong men, which can lead, the antiporn feminist argues, to more violence towards women and viewing women as weaker and inferior to men. In addition, the erotic appeal promoted by inegalitarian porn also favorably presents the subordination of women and gender inequality in general.
One of the primary charges leveled against the harm hypothesis is that it is far too vague. While many of the harms discussed by antiporn feminists are clear, the exact mechanisms by which inegalitarian porn causes such harms are far from clear. In addition, some may argue that the harm hypothesis overstates the role that inegalitarian porn plays in an anti-feminist culture. That is, given the many factors that may contribute to an anti-feminist culture, antiporn feminists do not clearly demonstrate and explain how inegalitarian porn is such an important individual factor. Perhaps if the other factors were accounted for, then inegalitarian porn would have virtually no effect on an anti-feminist culture. Similarly, one may argue that the harm hypothesis mistakes an effect of anti-feminist culture for a cause of such a culture. In other words, the anti-feminism culture that already exists in society has created the demand for inegalitarian porn. From this perspective, inegalitarian porn is simply an effect, rather than a cause, of the anti-feminism culture.

Eaton responds to some of these arguments against the harm hypothesis by further explaining the harm hypothesis and decreasing the vagueness of the hypothesis. Eaton begins by distinguishing between stage 1 and stage 2 causes, as well as between singular causes and diffuse causes. Stage 1 causes include the initial contributions to anti-feminist harms that inegalitarian porn may have. Stage 2 causes include other contributions to anti-feminist harms in which such contributions are themselves contributed to by stage 1 causes. The causal relationship outlined by Eaton is that stage 1 causes, cause harm and also contribute to stage 2 causes which also cause harm. Eaton’s distinction between singular and diffuse causes is that singular causes of harm are those that can be directly attributed to particular exposure to particular inegalitarian porn. In contrast, a diffuse cause is one in which harm is caused by
exposure to such porn over a long duration of time. Stage 2 effects are the specifically negative
effects that inequalitarian porn contributes to, Eaton argues.

Eaton does not deny that the causal relationship between inequalitarian porn and the
anti-feminist effects is an extremely complex one. So, Eaton invokes a smoking metaphor to
explain how inequalitarian porn causes anti-feminist harms. Eaton argues that just as a one
cigarette is unlikely to be considered the specific or singular cause of lung cancer, one instance
of viewing inequalitarian porn likewise should not be considered the singular cause of an anti-
feminist culture or anti-feminist harms. Instead, prolonged and frequent smoking increases
one’s chances for developing lung cancer. Similarly, Eaton argues, prolonged exposure to
inegalitarian porn may increase one’s chances of contributing to the anti-feminist culture and
even causing anti-feminist harm. One of the primary reasons that Eaton invokes the smoking
metaphor to explain how inequalitarian porn causes anti-feminist harms is that the effects of
prolonged smoking on one’s chances for lung cancer have been well-documented through
empirical studies. The researchers of such studies do not measure the singular effects of single
instances of smoking cigarettes. Instead, such researchers measure variables such as the
duration that someone smokes, how frequently they smoke, and the content of the cigarettes
that they smoke. Eaton argues that similar studies can be conducted on the effects of long-term
exposure to inequalitarian porn. Eaton argues that the researchers of such studies can measure
variables such as how inequalitarian porn one watches is, the duration of watching such porn,
and the frequency at which one watches such porn.

Eaton also identifies specific harms that can result from exposure to inequalitarian porn.
Such harms, Eaton explains, can be psychological, physical, or both. Likewise, such harms tend
to be the results of prolonged and relatively frequent exposure to inegalitarian porn. A single exposure to inegalitarian porn is unlikely to significantly affect one’s outlook on gender relations and gender equality or inequality. Rather, prolonged and relatively frequent exposure to inegalitarian porn may begin to enforce or reinforce female stereotypes and the subordinate position that women have in society. Inegalitarian porn may lead someone to believe that women prefer to be controlled by men or that men should control women. Likewise, inegalitarian porn can reinforce existing stereotypes about women, which may reduce the efficacy of gender equality social campaigns. Eaton deliberately attempts to avoid any sort of vague associations between exposure to inegalitarian porn and anti-feminist attitudes. Yet, this is virtually unavoidable, to some extent, given the lack of empirical research on the matter.

Certainly Eaton presents a number of plausible possible reasons why exposure to inegalitarian porn can cause harms against women.

The reasonableness of Eaton’s categorization is intended to counter the charge of vagueness against the antiporn feminist account. Eaton affirms that previous accounts of the harm hypothesis have been vague. By constructed a relatively specific account of how inegalitarian porn can cause harm, the harm hypothesis can both be better understood and can likely be better studied empirically to determine whether, in fact, inegalitarian porn exposure increases anti-feminist sentiments and anti-feminist harms. In addition, Eaton’s account is intended to distance itself from the charge that single instances of exposure to inegalitarian porn almost never result in harm. Eaton does not deny this. In fact, Eaton seems to agree that it would be absurd to hold that any anti-feminist harm could be reasonably found to be caused by an individual viewing of inegalitarian porn. Eaton argues, instead, that researchers should focus
on prolonged exposure to inegalitarian porn, much like researchers study the effects of smoking cigarettes on lung cancer and other diseases.

Also, Eaton presents her categorization as a means to clarify the plausible remedies for any harms caused by inegalitarian porn. After all, it may be the case that many will argue that, even if some harm is found to be caused by inegalitarian porn, it may not be enough harm to warrant any action against inegalitarian porn. Eaton argues that, at the very least, if any harm is found to be caused by inegalitarian porn, then everyone should agree that public moral condemnation of inegalitarian porn is warranted. Because there has not been any reliable empirical investigation of the effects of inegalitarian porn, Eaton does not take a stance on its punishment. In fact, Eaton’s argument is effectively that inegalitarian porn may be harmful. Thus, Eaton does not argue that there should be restrictions on inegalitarian porn currently, at least as it concerns post-production harms. Eaton takes the position that a sensible antiporn feminism argument is one that holds that much more information is needed. Such information will only be available through reliable studies, which at least at the time that the Eaton article was written had not been conducted.

Eaton’s argument in favor of a sensible antiporn feminism position is a good one, not because it settles the question of whether the harm hypothesis holds true for any society, but because it clarifies the issues, reframes the antiporn feminism position around more favorable terms, and addresses some of the major points of contention brought forth by those who oppose the harm hypothesis. As mentioned earlier, Eaton is arguing in favor of the harm hypothesis, only to the extent that it is plausible in light of virtually no reliable empirical evidence for or against it. In this sense, Eaton successfully defends the harm hypothesis from
the attacks on it explicitly listed by Eaton, especially the attack of the harm hypothesis being too vague. Eaton’s argument is successful because she focuses on explaining how prolonged exposure to inegalitarian porn may cause harms, just as prolonged smoking can cause harms.

However, Eaton’s argument, though successful, could use further clarification. The smoking analogy works because it is used to distinguish singular causes of harms from diffuse causes of harms. But smoking is not caused in any way by lung cancer or its other causes. In other words, one of the major differences between smoking as a cause of harms and inegalitarian porn as a cause of harms is that inegalitarian porn has demand in part because of an anti-feminist culture or sub-culture in certain societies. In contrast, smoking is not caused by a pro-lung cancer culture or any similar culture or sub-culture. The closest parallel here is that there was and still may be a pro-tobacco culture in many parts of the world. Cigarette smoking was considered to be a popular decision and something that ‘cool’ people do. This is not quite the same as the culture of gender inequality that has persisted for many centuries in many societies. In many, but certainly not all, societies, women have been viewed as inferior in certain ways and relegated to certain roles as result. In such patriarchal societies, the demand for inegalitarian porn is likely much higher. After all, many men have come to expect as much and enjoy the benefits of gender inequality. This likely adds a wrinkle of complexity that is largely unaccounted for by Eaton.

Specifically, the fact that a culture of gender inequality is likely a cause of the demand for inegalitarian porn may have a significant effect on how society should respond to inegalitarian porn. For example, if inegalitarian porn is recognized as being in part caused by gender inequality in a society and such inegalitarian porn is thought to possibly be reinforcing
such gender inequality, then a much stronger argument in favor of sanctions against inegalitarian porn can be made. After all, without breaking the cycle of gender inequality fueling inegalitarian porn viewing and vice versa, it will be extremely difficult for a society to overcome gender inequality, even through policies that directly affect specific anti-feminist harms, such as unequal pay for equal work. It seems that Eaton’s smoking metaphor inadequately captures the relationship between inegalitarian porn and gender inequality, when, in fact, Eaton can use this complex relationship to further her antiporn feminism argument.

From the opposing perspective, the failure of Eaton to recognize this relationship or at least to give it proper weight in her argument, may complicate her argument. After all, if it is gender inequality that is fueling the demand for inegalitarian porn, then one may argue that it makes much more sense to target the underlying causes of gender inequality, rather than focus on its effects, which happen to also be possible causes of further gender inequality. Even though Eaton, of course, does not argue that inegalitarian porn is the primary cause of gender inequality and anti-feminism harm, if gender inequality is the primary cause of demand for inegalitarian porn, then it seems that targeting inegalitarian porn would be much less effective than targeting the underlying causes of both gender inequality and, consequently, inegalitarian porn. Nevertheless, while the smoking metaphor is an imperfect fit to inegalitarian porn because of the likely difference between the causality relationships, Eaton’s argument serves an important function in the antiporn feminist argument. Namely, Eaton’s argument clarifies a misunderstood and sometimes vague antiporn feminist position in favor of the harm
hypothesis. Because of this, Eaton succeeds in defending the harm hypothesis and presents a sensible position on inegalitarian porn as one of many potential causes of anti-feminist harm.