



# Journal of Intercultural Management and Ethics

## JIME

ISSN 2601 - 5749, ISSN-L 2601 - 5749

published by

Center for Socio-Economic Studies and Multiculturalism

Iasi, Romania

[www.csesm.org](http://www.csesm.org)

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**TABLE OF CONTENT**

Editorial .....	3
Rodica Gramma	
Legalization of Euthanasia: Critics and False Theological Arguments .....	7
Mircea Gelu Buta	
“Are You Ashamed to Talk About It?” Pornography, Moral Incongruence, Morality, Ethics, and Religious Distress in Romania .....	13
Tudor-Daniel Huțul, Adina Karner-Huțuleac	
Communication Ethics in Local Public Administration in the Age of Facebook .....	25
Cristina Gavriluță, Alexandrina Cucu	
Contributions to the Ethics of Economic Science. Liberalism and its Alternatives .....	33
Aurelian Virgil Băluță, Rada Alexandru Cristian	
Intercultural Aspects in the Accounting System in Romania and Republic of Bulgaria .....	49
Mihaela Bebeșelea	
Sunk Sub: Looking Under the Hood .....	55
Thomas D. Zweifel	
Using Nonlinear and Structural Equations (Sem) for Testing the Correlation Between Political Culture and Substantive Democracy. Cross-National Comparisons .....	65
Silviu-Petru Grecu	
How Can the Balint Approach Contribute to Contemporary Management Education? .....	81
David M. Brock, Clive D. Brock	

# “ARE YOU ASHAMED TO TALK ABOUT IT?” PORNOGRAPHY, MORAL INCONGRUENCE, MORALITY, ETHICS, AND RELIGIOUS DISTRESS IN ROMANIA

Tudor-Daniel Huțul<sup>1\*</sup>, Adina Karner-Huțuleac<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași, Romania;

\* corresponding author, E-mail: tudordanielhutulsih@gmail.com

## Abstract

This research aimed to explore factors implicated in pornography consumption. The study involved 237 individuals, out of whom 56 were male (23.6%) and 181 were female (76.4%). All participants had voluntarily viewed pornographic material at least once in the last 6 months. Their ages ranged from 18 to 76 years ( $M = 22.83$ ;  $SD = 8.09$ ). Respondents completed surveys related to the frequency of pornography use, moral disapproval of pornography, moral incongruence, and religious distress. The results indicated significant associations between our main variables. Additionally, this paper highlights important gender differences existing in the Romanian population regarding the frequency of pornography use and discusses the relevant ethical implications of pornography in the online environment. The present work contributes by enhancing knowledge about the relationships of the variables mentioned above in the shape of theoretical model “*Pornography Problems Due to Moral Incongruence*” (Grubbs et al., 2019) on a population predominantly of Orthodox Christian faith. In addition, from a practical perspective, our results can serve as a starting point reference for mental health workers (e.g., clinical psychologists and psychotherapists) in Romania when developing diverse approaches to address the cases of pornography consumption they encounter within their practices.

**Keywords:** frequency of pornography use; moral disapproval of pornography; moral incongruence; religious distress; ethics

## Introduction

It is well-known that people consume explicit sexual content, with the onset of engagement in such behaviors occurring at increasingly earlier ages (Dines, 2010). The reasons why individuals engage in pornography consumption are highly diverse, ranging from seeking improved sexual arousal, facilitating masturbation, learning about sexual techniques, and facilitating the path to orgasm, to engaging in this activity at the request of their romantic partner (Fritz et al., 2022). The majority of research in the field highlights that men consume pornography more frequently than women (Carroll et al., 2017; Komlenac & Hochleitner, 2022; Landripet & Štulhofer, 2015; Miller et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2016). Additionally, it should be noted that men watch pornography even when they are alone, whereas women are more inclined to consume such materials during partnered sexual activity to enhance sexual stimulation (Albright, 2008; Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Komlenac & Hochleitner, 2022; Solano et al., 2020).

Regarding the Romanian context, studies exploring pornography consumption among the population are almost nonexistent. An exception is the research conducted by Burtăverde et al. (2021), which shows some relevant aspects. Within this study, following a quantitative analysis, the authors concluded that both men and women in Romania reported three general content themes as reasons for consuming sexual explicit material. These themes were (i) a

desire for sex or a high sex drive, (ii) learning about sex and improving sexual performance, and (iii) regulating mood and emotions.

On a different note, we highlight that pornography use has become widespread after the 2000s, as the internet gradually developed and has now, in 2023, reached nearly every household. Therefore, the field of studying the effects of pornography consumption is in its childhood. Despite the fact that scientific research on the effects of pornography is still in its early stages, with the topic gaining particular interest in the last decade, we know that the effects of using explicit sexual content materials are diverse. However, as Lewczuk et al. (2022) mention, on one hand, pornography may have negative consequences on psychoemotional health, relationships, social connections, and even brain functions (Gola et al., 2016, 2017; Gola & Draps, 2018; Kowalewska et al., 2018; Lewczuk et al., 2017; Love et al., 2015; Potenza et al., 2017; Voon et al., 2014); on the other hand, there are examples suggesting that pornography viewing has positive effects (or neutral) on aspects such as physical, sexual satisfaction, or intimate relationship satisfaction (Dwulit & Rzymiski, 2019; Grubbs & Gola, 2019; Kohut et al., 2017; Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2019).

### **Morality and “Pornography Problems Due to Moral Incongruence” (PPMI; Grubbs et al., 2019)**

When discussing pornography, one of the most commonly encountered subjects is related to morality (Floyd & Grubbs, 2022; Grubbs et al., 2018a; Mestre-Bach et al., 2021; Ostrander, 2021). In the context of morality and pornography consumption, the most well-known and extensively discussed theoretical framework is the “*Pornography Problems Due to Moral Incongruence*” (Grubbs et al., 2019) model. This model represents a theoretical and conceptual framework based on empirical literature concerning problematic pornography use; it focuses on perceptions related to the experience of moral incongruence in the context of pornography. The term “moral incongruence” is used within academic communities to describe the discrepancy between beliefs related to moral disapproval of pornography use and behavior regarding pornography use (Grubbs & Perry, 2019; Ostrander, 2021).

The literature has established that religious individuals tend to morally disapprove of the consumption of pornography (Grubbs, Exline, et al., 2015). Also, there is evidence in the specialized literature that people maintain prohibitions on consuming explicit material, mostly based on religious beliefs, even though they continue to use pornographic material (Grubbs et al., 2017; Grubbs, Exline, et al., 2015; Perry, 2018; Perry & Hayward, 2017; Whitehead & Perry, 2018). As a consequence of this state of affairs, individuals with a higher degree of religiosity tend to experience moral incongruence regarding their use of pornography (Grubbs & Perry, 2019), with religiosity being a contributor to moral incongruence as a result of pornography material usage (Grubbs et al., 2019). In this case, there is no surprise that numerous studies have confirmed the link between religiosity and moral incongruence (Grubbs et al., 2015; Grubbs et al., 2018a; MacInnis & Hodson, 2016). Considering that religiosity has been shown to be a motivation factor in the seeking of therapy among pornography consumers (Lewczuk et al., 2017; Ross et al., 2012; Twohig et al., 2009; Winters et al., 2010), we can start from the premise that this motivation originates from experienced religious distress.

As we previously mentioned, experiencing religious distress may occur due to the fact that religious individuals who watch pornography may face moral difficulties (Grubbs et al., 2019). Religious individuals experiencing feelings of moral incongruence and self-perceived addiction report negative outcomes in a wide range of diverse areas (Ostrander, 2021); among these, the most pronounced and intensively studied outcomes include relationship anxiety (Leonhardt et al., 2018), lower self-esteem (Wilt et al., 2016), psychological distress ((Grubbs,

Volk, et al., 2015), depression (Volk et al., 2019), and increased anger toward God (Grubbs et al., 2017; Wilt et al., 2016).

However, none of the previously mentioned studies on the contexts of moral disapproval of pornography, moral incongruence, and pornography consumption have been conducted in a setting similar to that of Romania, where Orthodox religion predominates. Therefore, before undertaking more ambitious research, it is important to verify if the main relationships established in the specialized literature are maintained in Romania. Hence, we aim to investigate the link between variables in the Romanian context, providing a starting point for research in this niche of psychology within this geographic area.

### **Ethical aspects of pornography in the online environment**

Furthermore, before delving into the actual research we propose, it is essential to address the ethical issues that may arise in pornography consumption. Both ethical and moral aspects have been debated in this context (Mestre-Bach et al., 2021). In the academic literature, among the most significant ethical aspects regarding the use of pornography, the following three considerations are taken into account:

1. In the online environment, images depicting sexual abuse, child sexual abuse, and sexual violence are also uploaded (Lee et al., 2020; McGlynn et al., 2021);
2. Among online pornography, non-consensual pornography or 'Revenge Porn' can also be found, where individuals depicted in explicit materials have not consented to their exposure (DeKeseredy, 2021; Huțul & Karner-Huțuleac, 2022; Uhl et al., 2018);
3. In addition to the ethical aspects already discussed in the literature regarding online pornography, we propose the theme of "undeclared activities" from an ethical perspective. A highly recent study conducted in Romania revealed that 13% of undeclared activities are conducted on digital labor platforms (Mațcu et al., 2023). Considering that pornography is predominantly conducted in the online environment, it is natural to question whether all income is declared, and if the specific taxes required by the legislation in Romania are duly paid.

Thus, despite the discussed positive effects that pornography can bring (Dwulit & Rzymiski, 2019; Grubbs & Gola, 2019; Kohut et al., 2017; Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2019), we must take into account the three moral/ethical aspects presented earlier when discussing pornography in the online environment. When individuals navigate the online environment and accidentally come across pornographic images depicting sexual abuse, child sexual abuse, or sexual violence, feelings of guilt about their own behavior may significantly increase due to their moral and ethical values. Consequently, moral incongruence and religious distress may arise at a heightened level. Additionally, we postulate that if some pornography users become aware of the existence of non-consensual pornography on the internet and then unintentionally view it, this situation can lead to emotional distress, religious distress, anxiety, or other negative outcomes. Moreover, when online pornography-related activities are not declared to the state, and the corresponding taxes are not paid, the Romanian government suffers. This is particularly significant considering the high popularity of the video chat industry in the country, and it is widely known through various public cases (Playtech.ro, 2020; Redacția Observatorului, 2021) that not all workers in the industry comply with the current legislation regarding tax payments.

### **The present study**

Based on the findings of previous studies concerning moral disapproval of pornography, moral incongruence, and religious distress, the main objective of the current research is to assess the extent to which these results are applicable to the Romanian population. The main novelty of this study lies in examining primary relationships from the PPMI Model

(Grubbs & Perry, 2019) within a population characterized by distinct features (e.g., a predominant Eastern Orthodox Christian religion) compared to those in which the model has been previously tested, such as the Polish (Lewczuk et al., 2020) or US population (Grubbs & Perry, 2019).

### **Hypotheses**

**H1.** There is a significant association between moral incongruence and moral disapproval of pornography.

**H2.** There is a significant association between moral incongruence and religious distress.

**H3.** There is a significant association between moral disapproval of pornography and religious distress.

**H4.** Gender differences exist regarding frequency of pornography use.

### **Method**

#### **Participants and procedure**

A total of 237 individuals participated in this research, aged 18 to 76 ( $M = 22.83$ ;  $SD = 8.09$ ). Out of all participants, 56 were male (23.6%) and 181 were female (76.4%). All participants voluntarily participated in the study and were provided with information regarding data anonymity, data protection, and their right to withdraw from the research at any time. Upon reading and agreeing to the informed consent, they proceeded to complete an online questionnaire. Participants were recruited via social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram and Reddit). For this study, two specific eligibility criteria were set: first, participants had to be at least 18 years of age at the time of completing the questionnaire, and second, they needed to have voluntarily watched pornography at least once within the last 6 months. Individuals who did not meet both criteria simultaneously were excluded from participating in the study. The questionnaire battery was administered during the period from May 2, 2023, to June 18, 2023, and the research protocol was developed in accordance with the ethical guidelines from “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University (where the authors are affiliated), respecting the 2013 Declaration of Helsinki. The average time to complete the survey was approximately 5 minutes.

Of all the participants, 86 are not in a relationship, 130 are in a relationship, 19 are married, 1 is divorced, and 1 is a widow. The majority of the participants were Orthodox Christians (214 participants: Orthodox Christians, 14 individuals identified as Roman Catholic Christians, 4 as Neo-Protestant Christians, and the remaining participants identified themselves as atheists until reaching the total number of participants).

#### **Measures**

Regarding the pornography-related items, we adhered to the literature's recommendations (Kohut et al., 2020), and adopted a definition for pornography that had been previously utilized in other research (Grubbs et al., 2022), as follows: “*Pornography refers to any sexually explicit films, video clips, or pictures displaying the genital area, with the intention to sexually arouse the viewer; this may be seen on the internet, in a magazine, in a book, or on television.*”

**Frequency of pornography use.** Regarding the frequency of pornography consumption, a single item was employed (“*How often have you voluntarily viewed pornographic material in the last 6 months?*”). Participants rated their responses on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating “only once in the last 6 months” and 7 representing “daily or almost daily”. Higher scores indicated a higher frequency of pornography use.

**Moral incongruence.** To measure this construct, we used one item (“*Often I felt strong discomfort because of the fact that my sexual fantasies, thoughts and behaviors were inconsistent with my moral and/or religious beliefs.*”) from prior works (Lewczuk et al., 2020). The item was rated on a 3-point Likert scale, with 0 representing “This statement was never true for me.”, 1 representing “This statement was true for my life, but not during the last 12 months”, and 2 representing “This statement was true for my life for at least 6 out of last 12 months”. Responses were averaged. Higher scores indicated a higher moral incongruence.

**Moral disapproval of pornography.** To measure this construct, we used four items (e.g., “*I believe that viewing pornography online is morally wrong.*”) from prior works (Grubbs et al., 2018b; Grubbs, Exline, et al., 2015). The items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 representing “strongly disagree” and 7 representing “strongly agree”. Responses were averaged. Higher scores indicated a higher moral disapproval of pornography.

**Religious distress.** To measure this construct, we employed three items (e.g., “*When I access pornographic material, I feel guilty towards God/divinity*”) similar to the “distress” subscale of the Cyber Pornography Use Inventory-9 (CPUI-9; (Grubbs, Volk, et al., 2015). The items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 representing “strongly disagree” and 7 representing “strongly agree”. Responses were averaged. Higher scores indicated a higher religious distress.

## Results

### Overview of the statistical analysis

We first conducted preliminary analyses, and we computed Pearson correlations among the variables – moral incongruence, moral disapproval of pornography, and religious distress. Then, we tested for gender differences in terms of frequency of pornography use.

### Preliminary data analyses

We computed the Skewness and Kurtosis values to assess the normality of the distributions (Table 1), and all the values were within the 2/-2 limit suggested by George and Mallery (2010). Statistical analyses were performed using the SPSS program, version 26.

Table 1. Descriptive statistic and Pearson correlations

	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Skewness</b>	<b>Kurtosis</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Moral incongruence	0.36	0.64	1.55	1.12	-		
Moral disapproval of pornography	3.11	1.96	0.56	-0.90	0.18*	-	
Religious distress	2.58	2.04	0.99	-0.38	0.18*	0.28*	-

Note: \*  $p < 0.001$

### Hypothesis testing

#### Associations between moral incongruence, moral disapproval of pornography and religious distress

The results of the correlation analyses (see Table 1) indicate that are significant associations between moral incongruence, moral disapproval of pornography, and religious distress. In additions, there is a significant association between moral disapproval of pornography and religious distress.

#### Differences based gender

To test this hypothesis we used Mann Whitney. The results for the differences between genders are shown in detail in Table 2. The results suggested that are significant differences between male and female in terms of frequency of pornography use. As predicted, male presented higher scores compared to female in terms of frequency of pornography use.

Table 2. Gender differences in terms of frequency of pornography use

	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean Rank</b>	<b>p</b>
Male	56	165.66	0.001
Female	181	104.56	

## Discussions

Our study has yielded several important findings for the specialized literature. Firstly, we identified significant positive correlations between moral incongruence and moral disapproval of pornography. This result aligns with prior research, which has reported similar outcomes (Lewczuk et al., 2020). The result can be explained by religious factors. Within our study, 213 individuals who identified themselves as Orthodox Christians persons (constituting 90.3% of the total participants), and it is known that the religious dogma of the Orthodox Christian faith strongly opposes the use of pornography, morally disapproving of it. Therefore, we expect Orthodox individuals to also morally disapprove of pornography, as is generally observed among religious individuals (Grubbs, Exline, et al., 2015). Consequently, users who still consume pornography despite their moral values are likely to experience feelings of moral incongruence. Secondly, our research has revealed the presence of a positive correlation between moral incongruence and religious distress. The finding is not surprising, as even though religious individuals, as the vast majority, morally disapprove of pornography, they may sometimes continue to use it (Grubbs et al., 2017; Grubbs, Exline, et al., 2015; Perry, 2018; Perry & Hayward, 2017; Whitehead & Perry, 2018), and as a consequence of this situation, those individuals may experience moral incongruence due to their own patterns of pornography consumption (Grubbs & Perry, 2019). Additionally, religiosity is a contributing factor to the feelings of moral incongruence resulting from the consumption of pornographic materials (Grubbs et al., 2019). Thirdly, the significant positive correlation between moral disapproval of pornography and religious distress is not surprising, as mentioned earlier, religious individuals, as the vast majority, morally disapprove of pornography (Grubbs et al., 2017; Grubbs, Exline, et al., 2015; Perry, 2018; Perry & Hayward, 2017; Whitehead & Perry, 2018),

Regarding the frequency of pornography use, our study's results revealed that men consume more pornography than women. Our findings are in line with the existing literature, where similar results are reported (Komlenac & Hochleitner, 2022; Landripet & Štulhofer, 2015; Miller et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2016). These differences regarding the frequency of pornography use can be explained by the fact that men tend to watch explicit sexual content alone, not just as a couple, whereas women are more inclined to watch pornographic materials to enhance sexual stimulation during partnered sexual activity (Albright, 2008; Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Komlenac & Hochleitner, 2022; Solano et al., 2020). In this context, the instances when a man can engage in pornography consumption are more numerous, while the moments when a woman can engage in pornography consumption are fewer.

## Theoretical and practical implications

We consider that our findings are important both theoretically and practically. Regarding the theoretical novelty, our results align with the existing knowledge in the literature concerning research on moral disapproval of pornography, moral incongruence, and religious distress. Furthermore, our findings confirm the relationships within the theoretical PPMI model on a population predominantly of Orthodox Christian faith. Moreover, our findings serve as a starting point for testing the PPMI model in Romania and for other studies concerning pornography use in the Romanian context. From a practical perspective, our results can serve as a starting point for psychologists, psychotherapists, and other mental health workers who



encounter individuals with problematic pornography consumption in their daily practice. Based on our results with the Romanian population, mental health workers can build various premises for the cases they encounter.

### Limitations and future directions

Despite the fact that our research has highlighted several important aspects, we must also address a series of limitations. Firstly, the gender proportion is disproportionate, and future studies should take additional measures to ensure equivalent groups. Additionally, another limitation is the use of self-report instruments, which inherently involve a high degree of subjectivity. In the future, for instance, it would be beneficial to explore the perception of life partners regarding pornography consumption. Also, in the perspective of future research, we consider that an aspect worthy of consideration in researching pornography consumption is the exploration of content, medium, or motivation, as proposed by other authors (Hald & Štulhofer, 2016; Komlenac & Hochleitner, 2022; Solano et al., 2020). Furthermore, future research should focus on both individual factors (coping style, attachment style) and social factors (family values regarding pornography, social representation of pornography consumption, feminist perspective) that may be involved in problematic pornography consumption. Concerning social factors, we emphasize that an approach based on social representations could bring added value to this area of research, as it is increasingly studied in Romania, yielding promising results in other research domains from psychology (Arhiri et al., 2022; Holman et al., 2010; Todeancă et al., 2019). In the context where an individual consumes pornography, the fact that its consumption is taboo and that sexuality can be perceived in this manner may impact individual distress stemming from social factors. Additionally, we recommend a comprehensive testing of the PPMI model (Grubbs et al., 2019) on the Romanian population based on our results, as well as the utilization of diverse methods (such as a qualitative approach) and more ambitious research designs (such as longitudinal studies) to underpin future findings.

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