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SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC FACTORS INVOLVED IN THE CONSUMPTION OF SEXUAL EXPLICIT MATERIAL. ETHICAL ASPECTS, MORAL INCONGRUENCE, AND THE FREQUENCY OF PORNOGRAPHY USE

Tudor-Daniel Huțu^{1*}, Adina Karner-Huțuleac¹

¹ Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași, Romania;

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

Abstract

This study aimed to explore socio-demographic and economic factors associated with pornography consumption. The research involved 348 participants: 157 were male (45.1%), and 191 were female (54.9%). Their ages ranged from 18 to 49 years ($M = 22.42$; $SD = 4.58$). Respondents completed questionnaires related to moral incongruence, the frequency of pornography use, and socio-demographic and economic factors. The results of this study indicated that individuals from rural areas had higher scores in terms of moral incongruence than individuals from urban areas. Furthermore, individuals with low income displayed higher scores in terms of moral incongruence than those with medium and high incomes. Concerning the frequency of pornography use, our results suggest that individuals with low income watch pornography less frequently than those with medium and high incomes. We discuss theoretical and practical implications, as well as ethical aspects related to this subject.

Keywords: socio-demographic factors; income; ethics; moral incongruence; frequency of pornography use

Introduction

Pornography, also referred to in academic literature as sexually explicit material (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015; Karner-Huțuleac & Huțu, 2023; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006) or content (Kraus & Russell, 2008), is generally understood as any textual, visual, or video material created to elicit sexual arousal in its audience or users (Willoughby & Dover, 2023). The consumption of explicit sexual content has notably increased in the last years (Willoughby et al., 2021), since the moment when pornography became highly accessible from any household with internet access (Cooper, 1998; Young, 2008).

As a highly prevalent behavior in people's lives, research on pornography has significantly increased. Clearly, there are positive aspects (or just neutral) associated with the use of sexual content in the online environment, such as sexual satisfaction, improving one's relationship with their partner when consumption occurs together, or intimate relationship satisfaction (Dwulit & Rzymiski, 2019; Grubbs & Gola, 2019; Kohut et al., 2017; Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2019). However, on the other hand, numerous other studies have focused on the aspects of pornography that may contribute to experiencing distress (Gola & Potenza, 2016; Grubbs, Stauner, et al., 2015; Grubbs et al., 2019; Kraus et al., 2015; Tan et al., 2022; Twohig et al., 2009).

The research examining the negative impact of pornography is highly diverse, primarily evolving as a result of the emergence of the “*Pornography Problems Due to Moral Incongruence*” model (PPMI; Grubbs et al., 2019). This theoretical model discusses the issue of distress caused by pornography use from a tripartite perspective (intrapersonal distress, interpersonal distress, and religious distress). As a result of this perspective, the scientific

community has focused on factors that contribute to this distress, such as individual differences (e.g. impulsivity, low self-control, deficient coping style, or poor emotional regulation) and moral disapproval of pornography (largely driven by religious disapproval of pornography). However, despite the crucial and imperative attention given to these factors for advancing the knowledge of pornography in academic literature, the focus on other fundamental factors, particularly socio-demographic and economic ones, has been, at best, limited and relegated to the background. Yet, in order to advance scientific research, it is important to understand these factors as comprehensively as possible, in a way that results should emerge from a wide range of cultural contexts (studies on pornography predominantly come from Central and Western Europe or the United States of America). Therefore, we believe that discussing the situation of pornography consumption in Romania from a socio-demographic and economic perspective is highly significant.

Socio-demographic and economic factors in the shape of moral incongruence and frequency of pornography use

One of the main directions of the PPMI model (Grubbs et al., 2019) is the role of moral incongruence in the context of pornography use, which can be observed right from the title of the conceptual framework ("*Pornography Problems Due to Moral Incongruence*"). In scientific literature, the concept of "*moral incongruence*" serves as a term employed to describe the disparity between moral disapproval beliefs concerning pornography consumption and actual behaviors associated with the utilization of pornography (Grubbs & Perry, 2019; Ostrander, 2021). This discrepancy between thoughts and behaviors regarding individually experienced outcomes following pornography use can have highly diverse sources. In the academic literature, sources of moral incongruence are discussed, ranging from religious beliefs (Grubbs, Exline, et al., 2015) to assumptions that such disparities may arise from the individual level of conservatism, the values imparted by one's upbringing, or the feminist ideology (Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2019). Without a doubt, all these aspects can influence the way we think and perceive the surrounding world. However, at the same time, our thinking and the way we perceive the world and moral values can also be influenced by other factors such as one's environment of origin and income. These factors, as previously mentioned, have been relatively understudied and deserve more attention to provide a significant background for the study of profound relationships in the context of pornography use and moral incongruence.

Thus, an important discussion that needs to be addressed is the perspective of urban areas and rural areas in the context of pornography use. The majority of studies regarding the consumption of explicit sexual material have been predominantly conducted in highly developed countries, where the population ratio between urban and rural areas heavily favors those residing in urban settings. Consequently, research concerning specific differences is extremely limited. However, significant findings discussed in the literature that require attention suggest that individuals in urban areas use pornography more frequently; this may be attributed to the greater prevalence of technology in urban settings compared to rural communities (Chen et al., 2013). Furthermore, we would like to add that we consider an additional argument for such an assumption in Romania is the higher level of religiosity found in rural areas than urban areas (Gheorghe, 2006). Thus, through logical deduction, the higher proportion of religious individuals in rural areas, coupled with the fact that religiosity is a predisposing factor to moral incongruence, leads us to believe that moral incongruence in the context of pornography is greater in rural areas compared to urban areas.

Regarding incomes, the study conducted by Buzzell (2005) reported that several decades ago, particularly before 2000, the consumption of pornography was much more

prevalent among individuals with high incomes, as a result of the accurate logic that prevailed during those times, where technology was extremely expensive and could only be afforded by individuals with very high incomes. Implicitly, those who used pornography were primarily individuals with very high incomes, primarily because these individuals had greater access to video pornography. However, the same study highlighted the fact that website use of pornography declined as income increased. Another, more recent study conducted by Yang (2016) reported that lower income and lower levels of education were associated with a higher likelihood of using pornography in the last month. Regarding moral incongruence, we posit that individuals with low incomes are less likely to experience such feelings compared to those with high incomes, due to the fact that individuals with higher incomes have greater access to technology. The more one utilizes technology and the internet, the more likely they are to be involuntarily exposed to pornography. In this context, a systematic desensitization towards explicit material consumption can occur. The more frequently one is exposed to it, the more they are likely to normalize it. Conversely, if you have a low income, lack access to advanced technology, or use the internet less frequently, you are more likely to experience moral incongruence when engaging with pornography.

Ethical aspects

In any case, regardless of the discussion we have regarding pornography, we must consider a series of ethical implications it can have. In Romania, these discussions are not only considered taboo but are also highly sensitive due to several existing negative realities. For example, pornography is associated with pedophilia, and Romania has the highest number of underage mothers in European countries (Digi24.ro, 2023). Therefore, when we talk about pornography, people can make this association, and inevitably, feelings of moral incongruence in the context of pornography use can be experienced very intensely. In this regard, in many circles in Romania, regardless of the level of education, it is universally accepted that discussing pornography is not exactly ethical. Simply put, engaging in such discussions can significantly amplify the degree of suffering that can be experienced as a result of confronting this harsh reality. All of this situation adds to the existing ethical concerns that scholarly literature already addresses (Mestre-Bach et al., 2021), such as the fact that online environments host images, including those depicting child sexual abuse or sexual violence (Lee et al., 2020; McGlynn et al., 2021), and that anyone can upload explicit sexual content, which can be used for purposes like “Porn Revenge” (DeKeseredy, 2021; Huțul & Karner-Huțuleac, 2022; Uhl et al., 2018). Furthermore, the recent discussion proposed regarding the ethical aspects related to pornography is linked to the associated incomes and the taxes that the Romanian state loses (Huțul & Karner-Huțuleac, 2023). It is well-known that in Romania, 13% of undeclared activities are conducted on digital labor platforms (Mațcu et al., 2023), and a significant portion of the pornography industry operates in the online domain, as mentioned in many public cases (Playtech.ro, 2020; Redacția Observatorului, 2021). In this scenario, another implication of online pornography in Romania is represented by the revenue lost by the state due to the non-payment of appropriate taxes by those engaging in these activities.

The present study

Building upon the previously mentioned research (Buzzell, 2005; Chen et al., 2013; Gheorghe, 2006; Grubbs et al., 2019; Grubbs, Exline, et al., 2015; Grubbs & Perry, 2019; Ostrander, 2021; Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2019), the purpose of the current study was to investigate the differences between individuals from rural and urban areas regarding moral incongruence and, additionally, to examine differences between individuals with low income,

medium income, and high income concerning moral incongruence and the frequency of pornography use.

Hypotheses

H1. There are significant differences between individuals from rural areas and those from urban areas regarding moral incongruence.

H2. There are significant differences between individuals with low income, medium income and high income regarding moral incongruence.

H3. There are significant differences between individuals with low income, medium income and high income regarding frequency of pornography use.

Method

Participants and procedure

A total of 348 participants participated in this research, ranging in age from 18 to 49 years ($M = 22.42$; $SD = 4.58$). 157 participants were male (45.1%), and 191 participants were female (54.9%). Regarding the level of education, 167 individuals had lower education – at most, completed high school (48%), and 181 participants had higher education – at least, completed a bachelor's degree or higher education institution. (52%). Out of the total study participants, 183 individuals had low income (52.6%), 62 individuals had medium income (17.8%), and 103 individuals had high income (29.6%). Based on the place of origin, 169 individuals come from rural areas (48.6%), and 179 come from urban areas (51.4%).

Measures

Frequency of pornography use. Regarding the frequency of pornography use, we used one item (e.g. “*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 = “*only once in the last 6 months*” and 7 = “*daily or almost daily*”. This approach has been previously employed in studies involving the Romanian population (Huțul & Karner-Huțuleac, 2023). The responses were subjected to averaging, where higher scores reflected greater frequency of pornography use.

Moral incongruence. To assess this variable, we used one question (e.g., “*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.*”) that had been utilized in previous studies (Huțul & Karner-Huțuleac, 2023; Lewczuk et al., 2020). The item was rated on a 3-point Likert scale, with 0 = “*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*”. The responses were subjected to averaging, where higher scores reflected greater moral incongruence.

Socio-demographic. Regarding the measured socio-demographic factors, the current study focused on income and place of origin. Participants were required to indicate their income within the following categories: low income (below 2000 Romanian LEI – approximately below 400 EUR), medium income (between 2000-5000 Romanian LEI – approximately 400-1000 EUR), and high income (over 5000 Romanian LEI – approximately over 1000 EUR). The place of origin had to be specified as either an urban area or a rural area.

Results

Overview of the statistical analysis

Firstly, we conducted preliminary analyses, and then we tested for differences based on place of origin in terms of moral incongruence, using Independent Sample t-Test. Finally, we tested for differences based on income (low, medium, high) in terms of moral incongruence and frequency of pornography use, using One-Way ANOVA.

Preliminary data analyses

Secondly, we computed the Skewness and Kurtosis values to assess the normality of the distributions (Table 1), and all the Skewness and Kurtosis values were within the 2/-2 limit suggested by George and Mallery (2010).

Table 1. Descriptive statistic

	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Moral incongruence	0.54	0.72	0.92	-0.52
Frequency of pornography use	2.04	1.13	0.72	-0.49

Hypothesis testing

Differences based on the place of origin

To test the differences based on the place of origin regarding moral incongruence, we used the Independent Samples t-Test. The results for the differences between individuals from rural areas and individuals from urban areas are presented in detail in Table 2. The results suggested that are significant differences between individuals from rural areas and individuals from urban areas in terms of moral incongruence. As predicted, individuals from rural areas presented higher scores compared to individuals from urban areas in terms of moral incongruence.

Table 2. Differences based on the place of origin in terms of moral incongruence

	N	Mean	t	df	p
Rural areas	169	0.68	3.47	329.19	0.001
Urban areas	179	0.41			

Differences based on the income

To test the differences based on the income regarding moral incongruence and frequency of pornography use, we used One-Way ANOVA. The results for the differences between individuals with low income, medium income and high income are presented in detail in Table 3.

Regarding moral incongruence, the results suggested that are significant differences between individuals with low income and those with high income, individuals with low income had higher scores compared to those with high income. No significant differences were obtained among the other categories in terms of moral incongruence.

In addition, regarding frequency of pornography use, the results suggested that are significant differences between individuals with low, medium and high income, individuals with medium income had higher scores compared to those with low and high income. However, we observe that the differences between low income and medium income, as well as low income and high income, are much more pronounced than those between medium income and high income. Thus, individuals with low income consume significantly less pornography than those with higher incomes.

Table 3. Differences based on the income in terms of moral incongruence and frequency of pornography use

	N	Mean	p
Moral incongruence			0.01
Low income	183	0.68	
Medium income	62	0.64	
High income	103	0.37	
Frequency of pornography use			0.001

Low income	183	1.83
Medium income	62	2.38
High income	103	2.21

Discussions

Our study has revealed a series of significant results. Firstly, regarding moral incongruence, our findings indicate that individuals from rural areas exhibit higher levels of moral incongruence compared to those from urban areas. Our results align with our hypothesis that individuals from rural area may experience higher moral incongruence than those from urban area. We attribute this result to the fact that religiosity is the most significant precursor of moral incongruence (Grubbs et al., 2019), and the level of religiosity among individuals in Romania is higher in rural areas (Gheorghe, 2006). Therefore, the likelihood of individuals in rural areas who consume pornography being religious and experiencing moral incongruence is greater. Furthermore, an additional argument is represented by the fact that in rural areas, conservative and traditional values and traditions are more pronounced. Consequently, moral norms are more rigid, and moral incongruence may be more pronounced, accompanied by greater psychological distress. In addition, access to education and information is more limited in rural areas in Romania. This situation leads to a lower capacity for individuals residing in rural areas to be exposed to new distinct moral perspectives, which can result in a different outlook on morality. Secondly, also regarding moral incongruence, our findings indicate that are significant differences between individuals with low income and those with high income: individuals with low income had higher levels of moral incongruence compared to those with high income. This result is also in line with the hypothesis formulated by us. A potential explanation for this outcome arises from the fact that those with high income have greater access to technology and are consequently more predisposed to interact with pornography, which is highly prevalent on the internet. In this context, there may be a systemic desensitization effect, wherein the more frequently one is exposed to pornography (due to higher income and more frequent technology use), the more they may normalize the consumption of explicit sexual material. Thus, if one is not exposed to pornography, when they do consume it, they may exhibit higher scores in moral incongruence

In addition, regarding frequency of pornography use, the results suggested that are significant differences between individuals with low, medium and high income: individuals with medium income had higher scores compared to those with low and high income. However, the differences between medium income and high income are much less pronounced than those between low income and medium income, as well as low income and high income. In this context, in discussions regarding the frequency of pornography use, we will address the arguments for why those with low income use pornography less frequently among the three categories. It is interesting to note that our results are in contradiction with the findings in the literature, where Yang's (2016) study showed that individuals with low income reported higher pornography use. However, when we contextualize these results within the Romanian context, the findings are not as surprising. In Romania, social stigma against individuals with low income is highly pronounced, and the use of pornography is a highly taboo subject. Therefore, there is a possibility that individuals with low income may not openly acknowledge the extent of their pornography usage. Additionally, nationally available statistics in Romania confirm that individuals with low income are those who work longer hours, consequently having less leisure time overall and specifically less time available for pornography consumption. Ultimately, in Romania, conservative and religious values, which the literature suggests influence pornography use (Grubbs et al., 2019; Grubbs,

Exline, et al., 2015; Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2019), are much more prevalent among individuals with low income.

In conclusion, we consider our findings to be valuable contributions to the specialized literature. They provide added clarity regarding the socio-demographic and economic factors concerning moral incongruence and the frequency of pornography use in the Romanian context. Results from such a geographical context are significant, as the majority of studies on pornography use are predominantly conducted in Western Europe and the United States.

Theoretical and practical implications

From a theoretical standpoint, our results represent a step forward in the knowledge within the specialized literature, as the results obtained by us have not been previously researched, as we know, neither in the context of Romania nor in the context of Eastern Europe. These findings provide a deeper understanding of the existing relationships and can contribute to global knowledge. With regards to practical utility, we believe that our results can be of assistance to mental health workers who deal with individuals reporting psychological distress as a result of pornography use. Taking these findings into consideration, interventions could be personalized and more specifically directed towards the existing needs.

Limitations and future directions

However, despite the obtained results, it is essential to address a series of significant limitations. Firstly, the instruments employed were self-report in nature, which implies a high degree of subjectivity. To gain a more comprehensive perspective in the future, close associates (e.g., life partners perception) of pornography users could be surveyed. This approach may offer a more objective view of explicit content consumption. Secondly, a drawback that future studies should consider is the absence of questions related to respondents' levels of religiosity and the religious denomination to which they belong. Thirdly, we believe that the social representation of pornography users in Romania could be an influential factor impacting our variables. Several studies in Romania have demonstrated that social representation is particularly significant in various contexts (Arhiri et al., 2022; de Rosa & Holman, 2011; Holman et al., 2010; Todeancă et al., 2019), and, in our view, future research should also investigate the social representation of pornography consumers in Romania.

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