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Lived Experiences of Adult Christian Men Navigating Religious Beliefs and Internet Pornography Use

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

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Chiante' Josiah Jemison

MS, Purdue University Global, 2017

BS, The University of Phoenix, 2008

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Religious individuals who engage in pornography use often experience guilt, shame, and cognitive dissonance, creating internal conflict that may lead to anxiety, depression, and strained personal and spiritual relationships. Guided by cognitive dissonance theory, this qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of 15 adult Christian men (ages 18-44) who struggled with problematic internet pornography use and scrupulosity. Data were collected through semistructured interviews and analyzed using Yin's five-step process to identify recurring themes. Findings revealed that faith served both as a source of strength and a contributor to emotional distress, with participants experiencing cycles of guilt, secrecy, and relapse. Additionally, scrupulosity intensified moral conflict, reinforcing obsessive guilt and ritualistic coping behaviors. Participants emphasized the importance of nonjudgmental spiritual and community support in fostering recovery and resilience. These findings may inform faith-integrated interventions, support systems, and therapeutic strategies aimed at promoting emotional and spiritual well-being among Christian men navigating pornography-related struggles.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to you, my brothers. Thank you for taking the time to share your story with me. I want you to know that your challenges or your suffering do not define you; you are a testament to strength, perseverance, and the unfathomable love of God. From the beginning, God chose you, knowing every part of your journey. He loved you thoroughly, not for who you might become, but for who you are, his beloved child. Through Christ's sacrifice, you belong to him forever. Let today be a new beginning, a day of love, self-forgiveness, and the freedom from knowing and believing that "therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1, NIV). Remember the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness; therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (NIV). You are powerful, my brothers redeemed and strengthened by his grace. Walk boldly in that power, knowing you are deeply loved and divinely purposed.

Be well, brothers, and may God's peace and strength guide you always.

Acknowledgments

Heavenly Father, thank you for your unwavering presence and guidance throughout this journey. Before I was formed in my mother's womb, you knew your plans for me, as Jeremiah 1:5 reminds me. Remember God, when I told you, "I am not going for my Ph.D.," you swiftly reminded me that your plans are not my plans (Isaiah 55:8-9). This journey has been anything but easy, yet you have walked before me every step of the way, fulfilling your promise in Deuteronomy 31:8: "The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged" (NIV). Lord, you are the head of my life, creator, anchor, and sustainer. Thank you for holding me up, loving me, and leading me to this mountaintop moment.

To my King, Jesus Christ, thank you for believing in me and teaching me about the power I possess through our father. You have been my constant encourager, reminding me through Philippians 4:13 that I can do all things through you my King who strengthens me. To my beautiful wife, my love, my best friend, and my rock, your love reflects God's own, love so pure and unconditional. The way you pour into me, with such patience and understanding, is truly divine. Thank you for taking care of our children and keeping our home strong while I immersed myself in this work. I am endlessly grateful to you. To my children, my greatest joy and proudest legacy, thank you for being my biggest cheerleader. I love you, my son. I love you, my beautiful daughter.

To my parents and my sister in Heaven, I see glimpses of you in God's beautiful creation all around me. I feel your presence and love. I know you are rejoicing with tears

of joy, celebrating this milestone from above. To my dream team committee, Dr. Magy Martin and Dr. Carlos Diaz-Lazaro, your wisdom and contributions have been instrumental in shaping this dissertation. Thank you for your guidance and encouragement and for helping bring light to a subject so deeply important to me. Lastly, and never least, to all my family, my brothers in the community, my professional colleagues, and my friends, thank you. A special shout-out to my mentors, Dr. Sheldon Jacobs and Dr. Wendy Hoskins, for your kindness, knowledge, and unwavering support you both are truly appreciated.

To God be the glory for all that he has done through and around me in this journey.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

This study investigated the personal experiences of adult Christian men who engage in internet pornography use, focusing on the psychological, emotional, and moral tensions that arise from engaging in behavior conflicting with their religious beliefs. The tension between behavior and religious teachings results in guilt, psychological distress, and the internalization of pornography use as a moral failure (Grubbs et al., 2020). This internal conflict leads to cognitive dissonance, in which a person's beliefs and behaviors are at odds, creating emotional tension as a form of psychological discomfort (Vaidis & Bran, 2019).

Chapter 1 introduces the study by outlining the background, focusing on the prevalence of internet pornography and the emotional and psychological conflicts Christian men experience due to the tension between behavior and religious teachings. The background also introduces the gap that the study addressed, while the problem statement frames how religiosity shapes these challenges, often resulting in guilt and distress. The study aimed to explore these experiences through a phenomenological lens. This chapter also presents the research question and theoretical framework, incorporating cognitive dissonance theory (CDT) to explain conflicts when behavior misaligns with values. The qualitative nature of the study emphasizes participants' lived experiences. Key terms are defined, assumptions are acknowledged, and the scope and delimitations are provided, focusing on Christian men and excluding other populations. Limitations address potential constraints. The chapter concludes by underscoring the study's

significance in advancing understanding of the interplay between religiosity, pornography use, moral incongruence, and scrupulosity.

Background

Research demonstrated that internet pornography use is pervasive among men, including Christian men, despite opposition from their faith communities (Wright et al., 2023). Studies indicated that many religious individuals experience significant internal conflict when engaging in pornography use, driven by the clash between their behavior and religious values (Grubbs et al., 2019). This conflict, known as moral incongruence, leads to psychological distress as individuals perceive their use as a moral failure rather than an addiction (Grubbs et al., 2019). Despite religious opposition, pornography use remains common among these populations, highlighting the persistent tension between personal behavior and faith-based expectations (Wright et al., 2023). Men constitute the majority of Pornhub's audience, with reports indicating that 79.96% of its users are male (McNichols, 2023). Studies showed that pornography consumption is prevalent among religious populations, with Christian men experiencing heightened internal conflict due to the tension between their behavior and faith-based teachings (Grubbs et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2023). Pornography consumption is exceptionally high among emerging adults aged 18–25, with up to 70% reporting regular use (Hewitt, 2024). Pornography consumption remains widespread among adult men, with those aged 26–40 reporting higher engagement compared to older age groups, reflecting distinct behavioral patterns within this demographic (Ballaster-Arnal et al., 2023).

Individuals with strong religious identities, such as Christians, express some of the strongest moral objections to pornography (Palazzolo & Bettman, 2020). This creates a significant emotional and psychological conflict because religiosity, defined as the extent of a person's religious commitment, has been found to heighten feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety associated with pornography use (Binnie & Reavey, 2019). Research suggested that pornography use among religious individuals often leads to heightened psychological distress driven by feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety (Hotchkiss, 2021). The concept of pornography problems due to moral incongruence explains how religious beliefs can intensify the emotional burden by framing pornography use as a moral failure where religiosity can exacerbate these struggles, increasing the psychological impact of religiosity on individuals who engage in pornography use (Grubbs et al., 2019). Many Christian men experience isolation when struggling to reconcile the tension between their religious beliefs and pornography consumption, exacerbating their psychological distress (Grubbs et al., 2019).

Although studies have examined the impact of religiosity and moral incongruence (the disconnect between beliefs and behaviors) on mental health outcomes, few have explored the role of scrupulosity in amplifying these effects (De Jong & Cook, 2021). Scrupulosity is a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder characterized by religious or moral obsessions, which manifests through persistent fears of sinning or divine punishment (Buchholz et al., 2019). Scrupulosity is known to magnify guilt and shame, prompting ritualistic behaviors to alleviate these emotions (De Jong & Cook, 2021). The research highlighted that these individuals often struggle with intrusive thoughts about

perceived transgressions. However, these behaviors tend to exacerbate their distress rather than alleviate it (McCauley & Graham, 2020). Research further examined how this dynamic can lead to cyclical struggles, as individuals engage in repeated efforts to mitigate guilt but experience further distress when behaviors persist (Borgogna et al., 2024).

The complex interplay of religiosity, moral incongruence, and scrupulosity was underexplored, particularly regarding how it impacts Christian men's mental health (Borgogna et al., 2020). Further research indicated that religiosity, when coupled with internal religious conflicts and obsessive thought patterns, can impair mental health (Moroń et al., 2022). Religious scrupulosity has been shown to mediate the relationship between religiosity and psychological distress, causing heightened anxiety and depression that impair well-being (Bailey et al., 2023). The current study addressed the gap by investigating how these factors intersect and provide insights into the hidden psychological burdens Christian men face. Findings from this research may inform faith communities and mental health professionals, offering strategies to reduce isolation, improve well-being, and support individuals struggling with these conflicts. These approaches involve integrating spiritual elements into cognitive-behavioral therapy using narrative therapy to help individuals reshape their understanding of religious struggles and developing collaborative care models in which mental health professionals work alongside faith leaders to provide holistic support (Exline et al., 2014).

Problem Statement

The social problem addressed in this study was the moral incongruence experienced by Christian men who consume internet pornography, resulting in psychological distress and spiritual conflict (Grubbs et al., 2019). Religious individuals who engage in pornography use often experience guilt, shame, and cognitive dissonance due to the clash between their behavior and moral beliefs (Binnie & Reavey, 2019), which can lead to significant mental health challenges, such as anxiety and depression, and strain personal relationships and spiritual well-being (Palazzolo & Bettman, 2020). For many Christian men, these emotional consequences go beyond feelings of moral failure, reflecting a more profound disconnection from their faith and relationship with God, which are central to their emotional and spiritual stability (Lloyd & Reid, 2022). Although previous research explored the relationship between religiosity and pornography consumption (Perry & Whitehead, 2019), less attention has been given to the combined influence of scrupulosity (an obsessive focus on moral behavior) and moral incongruence on mental health outcomes (Buchholz et al., 2019). High levels of scrupulosity have been shown to intensify psychological distress by amplifying guilt and anxiety (Abramowitz & Jacoby, 2014), further complicating how individuals navigate these struggles. Addressing this gap was essential to understanding how scrupulosity, religiosity, and moral incongruence interact to shape the lived experiences of Christian men, providing valuable insights into the challenges they face. The current study may inform the development of more effective, tailored interventions that integrate

psychological and spiritual healing to support these individuals better (Exline et al., 2014; Lloyd & Reid, 2022).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how religiosity and scrupulosity shape the lived experiences of adult Christian men who engage in internet pornography use, addressing a gap in understanding the intersection of faith, moral conflict, and behavior.

Research Question

How do adult Christian men experience and interpret the intersection between their religious beliefs, scrupulosity, and problematic internet pornography use?

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in CDT, developed by Festinger (1957) and further elaborated by Harmon-Jones and Mills (2019). CDT explains that individuals experience psychological discomfort when their actions conflict with their beliefs or values, motivating them to resolve this tension through behavioral, cognitive, or emotional adjustments. This discomfort, referred to as dissonance, can arise when there is an inconsistency between core religious beliefs, such as prohibitions against pornography, and behavior, such as consuming internet pornography. For Christian men, this conflict results in moral incongruence in which their behavior contradicts deeply held faith-based values, contributing to emotional distress marked by guilt and shame (Grubbs et al., 2020). These negative emotions can disrupt mental well-being and spiritual identity as individuals struggle to align their actions with their religious commitments (Buchholz et

al., 2019; Palazzolo & Bettman, 2020). CDT identifies multiple strategies for reducing dissonance, such as changing behavior, adjusting beliefs, or introducing justifications to alleviate the tension (Festinger, 1957). In the context of the current study, some Christian men may develop maladaptive behaviors such as scrupulosity (an obsessive focus on moral perfectionism) to cope with the psychological tension. However, high levels of scrupulosity have been linked to heightened distress by amplifying guilt and anxiety, creating a cycle of emotional turmoil (Abramowitz & Jacoby, 2014; Buchholz et al., 2019).

CDT emphasizes dissonance is more intense when individuals believe they are personally responsible for conflicting behavior, particularly when it challenges their core identity (Grubbs et al., 2019). Because religious identity is central to many Christian men, unresolved dissonance resulting from pornography use can deepen psychological and spiritual conflict, often leading to repeated failed attempts to quit and further distress (Lewczuk et al., 2020; Perry & Whitehead, 2019). The application of CDT aligned with the current study's phenomenological approach, which sought to explore the lived experiences of these men as they navigated the conflict between their faith and pornography use. CDT provides a framework to understand how unresolved dissonance contributes to maladaptive coping strategies, such as scrupulosity, and how this interplay exacerbates psychological distress (Buchholz et al., 2019). CDT also explains the role of post-decision dissonance, in which unsuccessful attempts to quit pornography heighten anxiety and shame, reinforcing a cycle of perceived failure (Lewczuk et al., 2020). By examining these intersections, the current study addressed gaps in the literature regarding

the emotional, psychological, and spiritual challenges Christian men face. The findings may provide critical insights for developing more effective, tailored interventions that integrate psychological and spiritual healing (Exline et al., 2014; Lloyd & Reid, 2022).

Nature of the Study

A qualitative phenomenological approach was selected to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the complex and subjective experiences of adult Christian men who engage in internet pornography use. This approach was well-suited for capturing the richness of participants' lived experiences, emphasizing their narratives and the meanings they assigned to their behaviors within the framework of their religious beliefs (Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenology allows the study to remain flexible and iterative, as themes naturally emerge from the data collected from multiple participants, accommodating a diversity of perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I employed interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the research design to achieve this. IPA offers a focused, detailed examination of participants' lived experiences and the psychological interpretations they develop (Eatough & Smith, 2017). This design aligned with the current study's objective of exploring the intersections between religiosity, scrupulosity, and problematic pornography use, facilitating a nuanced understanding of how participants navigate these challenges.

Semistructured interviews served as the primary method for data collection, providing participants the freedom to articulate their experiences in their own words while allowing me to adapt the discussion as new themes emerged (Kallio et al., 2016). This approach ensured the exploration of complex issues such as guilt, shame,

temptation, faith, and coping strategies, which were central to the study. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a systematic framework to identify recurring patterns and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thematic analysis effectively moved beyond surface-level descriptions to uncover underlying ideologies and internal conflicts embedded within participants' narratives, offering more profound insight into their psychological and spiritual struggles (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This method ensured that the personal meanings participants attached to their behaviors were carefully captured, providing a comprehensive interpretation of how Christian men experience and manage the dissonance between their faith and pornography use (Lewczuk et al., 2020). Employing thematic analysis further supported the study's aim of identifying key themes that aligned with its research objectives and contributed to developing effective interventions.

Definitions

Moral incongruency: A psychological state in which individuals' behaviors conflict with their personal or religious values, resulting in guilt, shame, and emotional distress (Grubbs et al., 2020).

Religiosity: The extent to which individuals engage with, commit to, and practice religious beliefs, including participation in organized and personal religious activities (Koenig, 2018).

Scrupulosity: A form of obsessive-compulsive disorder characterized by excessive concern with religious or moral issues, often manifesting as ritualistic behaviors or fear of moral failure (Abramowitz & Jacoby, 2014).

Assumptions

This study included several key assumptions in collecting valid, reliable, and meaningful qualitative data. I assumed that participants would provide truthful and accurate responses during interviews, sharing insights about their engagement with internet pornography and the struggles they encounter with their religious beliefs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This assumption was critical for gathering rich data accurately reflecting participants' internal conflicts. I also assumed that participants would have sufficient self-awareness to reflect on their experiences meaningfully, enabling them to articulate their emotions, cognitive dissonance, and religious struggles in ways that contributed to the phenomenological exploration (Smith et al., 2009).

Another key assumption was that participants' Christian faith and moral framework significantly shaped their psychological experiences, including distress, guilt, and efforts to reconcile their behavior with their beliefs (Grubbs et al., 2019; Palazzolo & Bettman, 2020). Some participants may have exhibited scrupulosity or obsessive-compulsive tendencies related to moral perfectionism, which could have influenced the findings on moral incongruence (Buchholz et al., 2019). I further assumed that participants would interpret their pornography use within the context of their religious identity, contributing to experiences of cognitive dissonance and guilt. The study's phenomenological approach was expected to capture the nuanced interplay between behaviors, beliefs, and emotions, revealing the complexity of participants' lived experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Finally, thematic analysis was used to identify meaningful patterns within participants' narratives, uncovering recurring themes such as

guilt, shame, faith struggles, and coping mechanisms and providing deeper insights into how Christian men navigate the psychological and spiritual challenges associated with pornography use (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Scope and Delimitations

The current study focused on adult men age 18 years or older representing various Christian traditions including Protestant, Catholic, and Evangelical denominations. Participants were selected based on their Christian self-identification and engagement with internet pornography, ensuring alignment with the study's focus on faith-based concepts such as moral conflict and cognitive dissonance (Grubbs et al., 2019; Lewczuk et al., 2020). Although the geographic context may have encompassed individuals from different regions, the study centered on participants actively practicing Christianity, ensuring alignment with the religious values explored (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I sought to understand the psychological, emotional, and spiritual challenges these men encounter through the lens of religiosity and scrupulosity. Data collection emphasized participants' recent experiences, allowing for relevance to contemporary social and psychological issues (Smith et al., 2009).

I employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences of participants using semistructured interviews as the primary data collection method. Thematic analysis was used to identify meaningful patterns within participants' narratives, such as guilt, shame, faith struggles, and coping mechanisms (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The study was limited to adult Christian men who self-reported engagement in legal and consensual problematic internet pornography and religious

commitment, ensuring that the research remained focused on the target population and research question. Women, individuals from non-Christian faiths, Christian men who do not consider their use of pornography problematic, and Christian men who engage in illegal forms of pornography use, including but not limited to child pornography, or who use pornography in a manner that involves nonconsensual elements such as voyeuristic content or recorded sexual acts without consent, were excluded from the study. Inclusion of these groups would have introduced variables beyond the study's intended focus. The scope was further narrowed by emphasizing Christianity and not including other religious traditions because the research aimed to explore moral conflicts and cognitive dissonance within a Christian context (Perry & Whitehead, 2019).

The current study's findings cannot be generalized to all Christian men and cannot indicate causal relationships. Instead, the goal was to provide a deep exploration of the subjective experiences of this population through phenomenological inquiry (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Quantitative analysis and large sample sizes were excluded because the current study prioritized qualitative insights over statistical findings. Topics such as the prevalence rates of pornography use among Christians were beyond the study's scope. The theoretical focus was primarily on CDT, with limited exploration of other psychological frameworks, such as behavioral theories of addiction, which were beyond the study's focus on moral conflict and scrupulosity (Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019).

Limitations

This study faced several limitations inherent in qualitative research, primarily due to its reliance on semistructured interviews. Participants' responses reflected personal perspectives, emotions, and subjective interpretations, introducing variability in how experiences are articulated (Smith et al., 2009). This subjectivity can impact the consistency of the data and pose challenges to achieving objective insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the sample was limited to a group of adult Christian men, which aligned with the phenomenological focus on in-depth exploration but limited the generalizability of the findings to other populations, such as non-Christian men or Christian women (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Self-report bias was another concern because participants may have overreported or underreported their pornography use or emotional struggles due to shame, guilt, or fear of judgment, potentially affecting the accuracy of the data collected (Grubbs et al., 2019). Furthermore, the study focused on Christian religious practices, so the findings may not apply to individuals from other faith traditions or nonreligious backgrounds, thereby narrowing the scope of applicability (Perry & Whitehead, 2019).

Another potential limitation was researcher bias because the interpretation of data relied on my subjective understanding of participants' narratives. Although steps were taken to ensure neutrality, such as peer debriefing or audit trails, personal biases may have unintentionally influenced the identification of themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The limited temporal perspective of the study was another constraint because it captured participants' experiences at a specific time. This restricted my ability to account for

changes in behaviors, beliefs, or emotional states over time, limiting insight into the long-term effects of pornography use and religious struggles (Lewczuk et al., 2020). Additionally, the complexity of ensuring scrupulosity posed a challenge, which may have manifested differently among participants, complicating consistent identification and analysis (Abramowitz & Jacoby, 2014). The study also excluded quantitative methods, focusing on qualitative exploration. Although this approach offered deep insights into participants' lived experiences, it limited my ability to quantify patterns, such as pornography use frequency or the intensity of guilt and shame, which could have offered additional perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Significance

This study addressed a critical gap in the literature by exploring how adult Christian men experience moral conflict through engagement with internet pornography, focusing on the interplay between behavior, religious beliefs, and emotional distress. Through the application of CDT (Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019), this research may extend the understanding of how religiosity and scrupulosity contribute to heightened emotional distress, including feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety (Buchholz et al., 2019; Grubbs et al., 2019). Examining these dynamics may provide a nuanced perspective on the psychological challenges that emerge when behaviors contradict deeply held religious values, resulting in moral incongruence (Grubbs et al., 2019).

The findings may offer valuable insights for mental health professionals, faith-based counselors, and clergy. They may inform the development of effective interventions tailored to individuals struggling with pornography use within religious

contexts. The research emphasized fostering supportive and nonjudgmental environments within religious communities to facilitate spiritual and psychological healing (Exline et al., 2014). These findings may contribute to existing literature and lay the foundation for future studies to explore similar issues across diverse religious traditions or demographic groups, broadening the understanding of moral conflict and dissonance in various cultural contexts (Perry & Whitehead, 2019).

Summary

Chapter 1 explored the emotional and psychological challenges faced by adult Christian men engaging in internet pornography, emphasizing the experiences of guilt, shame, and moral incongruence that emerge when behaviors conflict with religious beliefs. Framed by the CDT (Festinger, 1957), the study examined how the misalignment between actions and beliefs generates cognitive dissonance, resulting in emotional distress. A key focus of the chapter was identifying a gap in the literature concerning the influence of scrupulosity (an obsessive focus on moral perfectionism) on these experiences, introducing the research question that was addressed through a qualitative phenomenological approach. The chapter underscored the potential importance of this research in informing mental health care, faith-based counseling, and support systems by offering nuanced insights into the intersection of faith, behavior, and emotional well-being (Exline et al., 2014; Grubbs et al., 2019). Chapter 1 also acknowledged potential limitations, including the subjective nature of qualitative analysis and the challenges posed by self-reported data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive review of relevant literature, focusing on theories and research related to internet

pornography, religiosity, morality, moral incongruence, and scrupulosity among Christian men.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem addressed by this study was the emotional and psychological conflict experienced by adult Christian men who engage in internet pornography use. These men often struggle with guilt, shame, and moral incongruence because their behavior conflicts with their religious beliefs, creating cognitive dissonance. The study aimed to fill a gap in the literature by examining the role of scrupulosity, a form of religious obsessive-compulsive behavior, in amplifying distress among these men. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, I explored how adult Christian men navigate the intersection of religious beliefs, moral incongruence, and problematic pornography use. Although internet pornography is prevalent among men, including those who identify as religious, the existing literature focused mainly on religiosity and moral incongruence (Grubbs et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2023). Limited research examined how scrupulosity interacts with these factors, highlighting the need for further investigation into its role in contributing to the mental health challenges of Christian men struggling with pornography use.

This chapter begins by detailing the literature search strategy, outlining the databases, search terms, and iterative process used to identify relevant studies. The theoretical foundation is then introduced, focusing on applying CDT to understand the psychological conflict these men experience. The chapter then presents the theoretical framework, emphasizing key constructs such as religiosity, scrupulosity, and moral incongruence. The chapter concludes with a comprehensive review of recent research on

these constructs and an exploration of gaps in the literature, providing a foundation for why further study on the interplay of these factors was necessary.

Literature Search Strategy

The scope of the literature review focused on peer-reviewed articles published within from 2020 to the present, supplemented by seminal literature on religiosity and pornography use to provide historical context. The review included journal articles, dissertations, and conference proceedings where available. In cases in which recent research was limited, older studies and theoretical work were incorporated to provide a foundation for understanding the phenomenon. A comprehensive review was conducted using EBSCO, Google Scholar, ProQuest, ScienceDirect, and other Walden University Library database to gather relevant literature.

The search included key terms such as *internet pornography*, *religiosity*, *scrupulosity*, *moral incongruence*, *Christian men*, *cognitive dissonance*, and *qualitative phenomenology*. The search began with broader terms, such as *pornography* and *religiosity*, and was refined using combinations such as *scrupulosity* and *pornography*. When recent research was sparse, seminal studies were included to build a theoretical foundation. When recent research was lacking, highly cited older sources were used to frame gaps and justify the study's relevance.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

The theoretical framework grounding this study was CDT, which provided a lens to understand adult Christian men's engagement with pornography. Proposed by Festinger (1957) and discussed by Harmon-Jones and Mills (2019), CDT explains the

psychological discomfort when actions contradict beliefs. In the current study, the theory provided insight into how adult Christian men experience distress due to their pornography use conflicting with their faith, which encompasses several tenets that explain the behaviors centered around their pornography consumption. Cognitive dissonance occurs when a Christian man's behavior, such as viewing pornography, conflicts with his religious beliefs, creating inner tension (Borgogna et al., 2024). This dissonance results in psychological discomfort, often experienced as guilt, shame, or anxiety, which is more intense for men with strong religious identities (De Jong & Cook, 2021).

To reduce this discomfort, these men may try to stop the behavior or rationalize it, saying, for example, that temptation is usual, or that prayer can restore their sense of moral alignment (Hewitt, 2024). Because religious beliefs are central to Christian men's identity, inconsistencies between faith and behavior generate more profound distress than minor conflicts (Jennings et al., 2021). These conflicts foster religious obsessions, including recurring fears of sinning, intrusive blasphemous thoughts, doubts about being sufficiently faithful or moral, anxieties about performing religious prayers or rituals incorrectly, and concerns about facing punishment from God (Abramowitz & Buchholz, 2020). The internal conflict is found in many men justifying their efforts to quit as spiritual growth, valuing progress even when they relapse, and telling themselves that God sees their efforts (Lloyd & Reid, 2022). After deciding to quit, they may experience post-decision dissonance, doubting their choice and missing the relief pornography provided. However, they often alleviate this by reframing quitting as the right decision,

emphasizing the harm pornography could have caused to their spiritual and personal lives (Mestre-Bach et al., 2021).

CDT has been applied to various contexts involving moral and behavioral conflict, such as religious struggles (Grubbs et al., 2020). This framework supported the exploration of moral incongruence and the development of scrupulosity as a coping mechanism. CDT aligned with the current study's focus on internal conflict, offering a foundation to understand how these men interpret their experiences and navigate moral challenges.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

This section presents a review of the relevant literature on the key study variables of internet pornography use, religiosity, scrupulosity, and moral incongruence. The review explores psychological and emotional experiences, including distress, religious guilt, and moral conflicts within Christian populations. Additionally, it examines the role of scrupulosity and moral incongruence in contributing to feelings of anxiety, shame, and spiritual disconnection. The section concludes with a discussion of religious coping strategies and faith-integrated therapeutic approaches for addressing the spiritual and emotional conflicts experienced by Christian men engaging in pornography use.

Internet Pornography Use

Mestre-Bach et al. (2021) noted that the term pornography originates from the Greek word *eros*, meaning love or desire. The shift from print media to digital platforms, including websites and social media, has increased access and privacy, contributing to the growth of the pornography industry. The accessibility of pornographic material has

evolved with technological advancements, making online content more readily available. Wright et al. (2023) reported that approximately 80% of the audience on popular platforms like Pornhub are men, with men comprising 79.96% of the site's global audience, underscoring the gender disparity in pornography consumption.

Research indicates that pornography use remains prevalent, particularly among men, with significant usage rates observed within religious populations (Wright et al., 2023). Christian men often experience shame and guilt linked to perceived moral failure, as their pornography consumption creates moral incongruence with their religious beliefs (Burke & Haltom, 2020; Mestre-Bach et al., 2021).

Religiosity and Psychological Distress

Religious individuals often experience significant psychological distress when their behaviors conflict with their faith, with distress arising from internalized moral conflicts (Mestre-Bach et al., 2021; Sorrell et al., 2024). Religiosity, a commitment to religious practices and beliefs, can provide coping mechanisms but may also heighten distress when individuals perceive their behaviors as sinful (Sorrell et al., 2024). This internal conflict can lead to symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and social isolation. Mestre-Bach et al. (2021) found that for religious individuals, distress often stems from moral incongruence rather than the behavior itself, resulting in guilt, shame, and spiritual disconnection. Sorrell et al. (2024) emphasized that individuals facing moral incongruence are prone to anxiety and depression, often compounded by fears of judgment from their religious communities. Such experiences may lead to secrecy, self-condemnation, and social withdrawal.

Scrupulosity and Moral Incongruence

Scrupulosity, a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) involving religious or moral obsessions, amplifies religious guilt and leads to compulsive behaviors aimed at mitigating perceived sins (Borgogna et al., 2020; Moroń et al., 2022). Individuals with scrupulosity often experience distress driven by intrusive thoughts about sin and morality, leading to compulsive acts such as excessive prayer or confession (Moroń et al., 2022). Moral incongruence, the misalignment between behaviors and personal values, predicts psychological distress. Grubbs et al. (2020) found that individuals who viewed pornography infrequently but perceived it as morally wrong reported higher anxiety and depression than those who viewed it more frequently without such moral conflict. Jennings et al. (2021) further linked moral incongruence to religious commitment, noting that those with stronger religious identities were more likely to experience guilt and self-condemnation.

Christianity and Morality

Ethical living involves aligning one's actions with moral values and principles often shaped by religious, philosophical, or cultural teachings (Ottuh & Godwin, 2022). This way of life promotes honesty, compassion, integrity, and justice in personal and social conduct. Within Christianity, ethical living stems from the teachings of Jesus Christ, encouraging love for God and others, humility, and selfless service. For Christian men, behaviors perceived as morally wrong, such as pornography use, can evoke significant guilt and shame due to the emphasis on sexual purity (Sorrell et al., 2024). Hanseder and Dantas (2023) found that self-perceived moral incongruence caused the

most harm among Christian men who viewed pornography, resulting in religious guilt and emotional turmoil.

Religious Guilt and Religion-Related Distress

Burke and Hallom (2020) identified religious guilt as a key factor in the psychological distress of Christian men engaging in pornography. Their study of 35 Christian men revealed that feelings of guilt and shame heightened emotional turmoil and led some participants to seek treatment. Moroń et al. (2022) associated religious guilt with scrupulosity, emphasizing its impact on individuals experiencing moral conflicts related to sexual behaviors. Lewczuk et al. (2020) further found that distress stemmed from the incongruence between sexual behavior and internalized religious norms. Religion-related distress often results from conflicts between religious beliefs and behaviors. Ince et al. (2023) used the moral incongruence framework to demonstrate that individuals with traditional religious practices are prone to distress over pornography use, even at low levels of consumption.

Religious Coping and Spiritual Struggles

Research highlights the role of religious coping in mitigating or exacerbating psychological distress. Negative religious coping, such as feelings of abandonment by God or perceiving struggles as divine punishment, is associated with increased distress, including anxiety and depression (Pirutinsky, 2024). Conversely, positive religious coping, such as prayer and spiritual support, has been linked to lower emotional distress (Pirutinsky, 2024). Addressing negative coping patterns through faith-integrated

therapeutic interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and spiritual counseling, is essential for reducing emotional distress (Pirutinsky, 2024).

This literature review underscores the complex intersection of religiosity, moral incongruence, scrupulosity, and religious coping in the experiences of Christian men engaging with internet pornography. The research highlights the importance of faith-integrated approaches in addressing the psychological and spiritual distress arising from these conflicts.

Research Question and Gaps in Literature

Exploring the lived experiences of adult Christian men and their problematic internet pornography use, I aimed to address a critical gap in the literature by examining the combined impact of moral incongruence, scrupulosity, and religiosity on problematic pornography use among Christian men. Existing research highlighted the emotional distress caused by moral incongruence, where personal behaviors conflict with religious beliefs, and showed that religiosity exacerbates feelings of guilt and shame (De Jong & Cook, 2021). However, few studies explored how scrupulosity, which involves obsessive concerns about moral transgressions, interacts with these factors. Although studies focused on the individual effects of moral incongruence and religiosity (Borgogna et al., 2020; Lewczuk et al., 2020), there was limited research on how scrupulosity amplifies the psychological distress associated with pornography use. The current study filled this gap by investigating the combined effects of these and how the factors provide insights into the complex relationship between mental health, religious beliefs, and pornography use. Exploring the gap in the study would provide context in answering the research question:

How do adult Christian men experience and interpret the intersection between their religious beliefs, scrupulosity, and problematic internet pornography use?

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter reviewed key literature on the psychological and spiritual challenges faced by adult Christian men engaging in internet pornography. The research highlighted significant distress from moral incongruence, religiosity, and scrupulosity. However, limited studies addressed how these factors influence Christian men's emotional well-being. The current study explores the intersection of these variables through a phenomenological approach. The findings may extend knowledge on how religious beliefs shape mental health outcomes and provide insights for faith-based counseling and mental health interventions. Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methodology used to explore these experiences.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to deepen the understanding of the experiences of adult Christian men who engage in internet pornography use, focusing on how religiosity and scrupulosity shape these experiences. Using a phenomenological approach, I aimed to explore potential internal conflicts arising from religious beliefs and problematic pornography use, providing insights into the emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of these men's lives. This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the research methodology. The chapter also covers the research design and rationale, the research question, and the study's key concepts. Additionally, my role as the researcher and ethical considerations are described. The methodology section includes participant selection logic, data collection instruments, and the data analysis plan. Trustworthiness issues are discussed, including credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Finally, ethical procedures to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality are addressed.

Research Design and Rationale

I employed a qualitative approach to explore how adult Christian men experience the intersection between their religiosity, scrupulosity, and internet pornography use. This approach is well-suited for capturing subjective experiences and the meanings participants assign to them, especially regarding personal and internal conflicts (Smith et al., 2009). This approach aligned with the current study's goal of understanding the complexities behind participants' religious beliefs and behaviors.

The central concepts of this study were religiosity, scrupulosity, and problematic internet pornography use. These concepts intersect with the phenomenon of problematic internet pornography use, which refers to compulsive engagement in pornography leading to emotional and psychological distress, where research highlighted that problematic and chronic use of internet pornography can result in significant personal suffering (Palazzolo & Bettman, 2020).

Role of the Researcher

I acted as an observer-participant, conducting semistructured interviews to collect data without influencing participants' responses. As a researcher, I acknowledged the importance of remaining cognizant of personal biases throughout this study. A specific preconception I held was the belief that Christian men experiencing distress related to pornography use may find relief by shifting their focus from the behavior to a deeper understanding of their spiritual identity in Christ. From this perspective, freedom from sin is found not through self-effort but by embracing the belief that they are already set free through Jesus Christ. I assumed that a sustained focus on spiritual practices would be more effective than continued preoccupation with pornography use.

I was committed to bracketing my personal bias, ensuring that participants' narratives were interpreted authentically and free from the imposition of theological assumptions or prescriptive spiritual solutions. Strategies to maintain objectivity and reduce bias during data collection and analysis included engaging in peer debriefing, consulting with advisors and colleagues, and maintaining communication with a personal counselor to further reflect on the current and potential biases and emotional responses

throughout the research process. Open-ended, nonjudgmental interviewing techniques supported neutrality by allowing participants to freely express their experiences without being guided toward specific outcomes (Bryman & Bell, 2019). A reflexive journal was used throughout the study to manage biases by recording and examining thoughts, feelings, and assumptions (Dodgson, 2019). These strategies fostered rigor and authenticity, ensuring the research process remained unbiased and objective.

Participants with whom I had prior counseling relationships were excluded to avoid conflicts of interest. To manage potential conflicts of interest and ensure unbiased data collection, I also excluded participants with current counseling relationships. This approach protected the integrity of the research process and allowed participants to share their experiences candidly, free from external influence.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The population for this study was adult Christian men aged 18 and older who identified their pornography use as problematic. A homogeneous sampling strategy was employed to recruit adult Christian men with problematic pornography use, aligning with the study's objective of exploring shared experiences in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A sample size of 10–15 participants was sought to ensure data saturation was reached when no new themes emerged. A participant prescreening checklist and a recruitment flyer ensured that participants met the study's inclusion criteria.

Instrumentation

Semistructured interviews allowed me to explore participants' experiences while ensuring that critical themes related to religiosity and scrupulosity were thoroughly investigated (Busetto et al., 2020). Interviews addressed participants' experiences with religiosity, scrupulosity, and pornography use. The semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B) included open-ended questions to elicit comprehensive responses, ensuring participants would share their thoughts and feelings in depth (Kallio et al., 2016).

A demographic questionnaire was also used to collect background information such as age, marital status, and religious affiliation (Appendix A). While the semistructured interviews captured detailed personal experience narratives (Tomaszewski et al., 2020), the demographic questionnaire provided essential background information that complemented the qualitative data. Together, these instruments offered a comprehensive view of how demographic factors, such as religious denomination and frequency of pornography use, influenced participants' perceptions and behaviors. A postinterview check-in protocol focused on member checking to enhance the accuracy and credibility of the study. Participants were invited to review a summary of the findings to confirm that they accurately represented their experiences, which took approximately 10–20 minutes. Feedback was provided in person, by phone, via email, or virtually, depending on the participant's preferences. The postinterview check-in also served as an opportunity for participants to ask follow-up questions. Zoom interviews or in-person interviews were conducted based on the participant's preference. I interviewed the

participants using HIPAA-compliant Zoom software for online interviews and audio recording devices with transcribing services to ensure data security and accuracy.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment for the study commenced by disseminating recruitment flyers across social media platforms, specifically Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram, ensuring broad visibility and accessibility to potential participants. Additionally, outreach efforts included visiting local churches to engage with clergy, where I introduced the study and left the recruitment flyers for review. Targeted outreach also extended to Christian universities through online networks, facilitating the distribution of recruitment materials through email notification invitations. Community-based peer support groups were also engaged to discuss the study and disseminate recruitment information, further expanding the participant pool.

Snowball sampling was used to supplement these recruitment strategies, leveraging participant networks to identify additional eligible individuals. I explained the snowball sampling process during the interviews and invited participants to refer others. Participants were allowed to share study information directly with potential referrals or, with prior consent, provide their contact details to me. This multitiered recruitment strategy ensured a robust and ethically sound approach, maximizing outreach while fostering trust and rapport within relevant communities. Participants reviewed and signed a participant informed consent form for in-person and virtual interviews. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes; if participants experienced emotional distress during or after the

interview, I provided resources for counseling and support. All data were stored on a password-protected computer, and transcripts were anonymized using pseudonyms.

I was qualified to conduct the study throughout all data collection procedures. I had completed extensive training in research methods, ethical standards, and interview techniques through Walden University to conduct this study responsibly and effectively. I was also under the guidance of two experienced faculty advisors: a research study chair and a secondary research study member serving as a methodology expert. These advisors oversaw the study, supporting and managing sensitive topics and ensuring participants' well-being.

Data disposal will be secure and thorough to protect participant confidentiality. Physical documents containing sensitive information will be shredded. At the same time, electronic data will be permanently deleted from my computer and storage systems using secure deletion software (file shredder for Windows), ensuring that the files cannot be recovered. Backup copies will also be identified and securely erased. After the study and the required retention period of 5 years have passed, all data will be reviewed to confirm complete disposal.

Data Analysis Plan

Data were analyzed Yin's (2016) five-step method for qualitative data analysis was used to organize and interpret the data systematically. This process included compiling data by categorizing similar ideas, disassembling data into smaller segments to create broader categories, reassembling themes while eliminating redundancies, interpreting the themes to develop narratives, and concluding the analysis by comparing

findings with existing theories (Yin, 2016). The thematic analysis further enhanced this process by systematically analyzing the themes and capturing how participants reconciled their pornography use with their religious beliefs (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Outliers were examined and reported to ensure transparency.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility was achieved through reflexivity, peer debriefing, member checking, and triangulation. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, ensuring participants' perspectives were accurately represented (Candela, 2019). I first prepared a clear summary of the initial findings, organizing key themes and representative quotes into a straightforward, nontechnical document. After participants received the document, they had time to reflect on whether the findings accurately represented their experiences, allowing them to confirm or suggest adjustments to my interpretations. During the feedback session, participants were asked to provide specific insights and clarify misunderstandings, and I carefully documented their feedback to identify common patterns. This approach ensured that findings genuinely reflected participants' experiences and enhanced research trustworthiness.

Peer debriefing with committee members further enhanced credibility through discussion of researcher biases and eliciting feedback. Triangulation was used to enhance credibility by conducting semistructured interviews, collecting demographic data, and analyzing data by cross-verifying between participants to check for emerging themes and patterns (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Transferability was bolstered by thick descriptions of participants' backgrounds and experiences, allowing for applicability to similar

contexts. Dependability was maintained through a clear audit trail of research activities, and confirmability was ensured through reflexive journaling and external validation from peer reviewers.

Ethical Procedures

All recruitment and data collection procedures followed the American Psychological Association's (2020) ethical standards and Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB approval number 12-18-24-1119910) requirements, ensuring that participants provided informed consent voluntarily and fully understood their rights. IRB approval was obtained before data collection began. Participants provided written consent and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all data will be securely stored and destroyed 5 years after the study. Counseling resources were available to participants experiencing distress. Participants were invited to choose a $25.00 Amazon gift card or a 25.00 Visa gift card. I emailed the 25.00 gift card to participants who met the inclusion requirements and completed the interview.

Summary

Chapter 3 outlined the research design, including the methodology, participant selection logic, data collection instruments, and data analysis plan. Ethical considerations and strategies to ensure trustworthiness were also addressed. This chapter provided a detailed framework for the study, ensuring transparency and rigor in the research process. Chapter 4 presents the findings from the data analysis, highlighting the themes that

emerged from exploration of participants' lived experiences with internet pornography, religiosity, and scrupulosity.

Chapter 4: Results

This qualitative study examined the lived experiences of 15 adult Christian men who engaged in problematic internet pornography use, with a focus on scrupulosity as a mediator of moral incongruence. The study explored how participants navigated tensions between their pornography use and religious beliefs. This chapter presents findings with the research question: How do adult Christian men experience and interpret the intersection between their religious beliefs, scrupulosity, and problematic internet pornography use?

The chapter outlines the research setting, participant demographics, data collection, and thematic findings. A qualitative, phenomenological approach was used, guided by Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957), to interpret findings.

Setting

No organizational conditions influenced the participants' experiences or the interpretation of the results in this study. Each participant independently selected their preferred interview format, with all choosing Zoom. This approach ensured their comfort and reduced external pressures or influences. I maintained neutrality throughout the process by minimizing personal data collection and analysis biases. This neutrality was upheld by prioritizing participants' voices and experiences avoiding personal assumptions or interpretations.

While no direct organizational or personal factors shaped the study, broader cultural and religious contexts significantly influenced participants' experiences. For instance, the increasing accessibility of pornography and its growing discussion within

faith-based communities appeared to be influential. Research by Kurbanova and McLean (2025) suggests that religiosity often shapes individuals' attitudes toward pornography, leading to negative perceptions and feelings of guilt after consumption. Some participants noted that their faith communities had recently begun addressing pornography use through sermons, workshops, or small group discussions. These initiatives may have heightened participants' awareness of the topic, influencing their reflections during the study.

Demographics

Participants were recruited via social media and engaged in semistructured interviews via Zoom. The sample included men aged 18–44 with diverse marital statuses, educational backgrounds, and religious affiliations (Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal). Most participants first encountered pornography in adolescence (ages 12–17), consistent with broader societal trends (Wright et al., 2023). A majority reported frequent use (multiple times per week) and experienced significant emotional distress, guilt, and moral incongruence (Table 1) .

Table 1: Participant Demographic Data

Participant	Age range	Marital status	Education level	Religious background	Age of first exposure to pornography	Frequency of pornography use
P01	18–25	Single	Bachelor's degree	Protestant	12–17	Regularly once per week
P02	26–34	Single	Some college	Roman Catholic	12–17	Frequently multiple times per week
P03	26–34	Married	Associate's degree	Pentecostal	12–17	Frequently multiple times per week
P04	35–44	Married	Bachelor's degree	Protestant	12–17	Frequently multiple times per week
P05	26–34	Single	Bachelor's degree	Protestant	Under 12	Frequently multiple times per week

P06	26–34	Single	Associate's degree	Roman Catholic	12–17	Frequently multiple times per week
P07	26–34	Single	Bachelor's degree	Roman Catholic	12–17	Frequently multiple times per week
P08	26–34	Divorced	Associate's degree	Roman Catholic	12–17	Frequently multiple times per week
P09	26–34	Married	Bachelor's degree	Pentecostal	Under 12	Regularly once per week
P10	26–34	Single	Associate's degree	Roman Catholic	12–17	Frequently multiple times per week
P11	35–44	Married	Bachelor's degree	Pentecostal	12–17	Frequently multiple times per week
P12	35–44	Single	Bachelor's degree	Roman Catholic	12–17	Frequently multiple times per week
P13	35–44	Married	Bachelor's degree	Roman Catholic	12–17	Frequently multiple times per week
P14	26–34	Married	Associate's degree	Protestant	12–17	Frequently multiple times per week
P15	26–34	Single	Bachelor's degree	Roman Catholic	12–17	Frequently multiple times per week

Data Collection

Data collection for this qualitative study began after receiving approval from Walden University's IRB on December 18, 2024. Recruitment commenced on December 30, 2024, using social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. This approach attracted 100 potential participants, who were screened using a prescreening checklist emailed to confirm eligibility. Participants had to be adult Christian men (18 years or older) who engaged in legal and consensual internet pornography use and experienced emotional or psychological distress and moral conflict. Approximately one-third of inquiries were automated or unsolicited and excluded. After reviewing responses, 10 eligible participants were selected, while others were excluded due to not meeting the study criteria (e.g., lack of distress, moral conflict, or Christian male identity). Snowball sampling led to five additional referrals, bringing the final participant count to 15.

Interviews were conducted via a HIPAA-compliant Zoom platform between January 4 and January 9, 2025. All interviews were conducted as audio-only sessions lasting 45 to 60 minutes to maintain participant privacy and comfort. Zoom's transcription software was used to record and transcribe the sessions. Before each interview, participants reviewed the informed consent form, confidentiality protocols, and their right to withdraw or skip questions. They were also provided with mental health resources, including www.FindTreatment.gov, 1-800-662-HELP (4357), and the 988 crisis hotline. As a token of appreciation, participants received a $25 electronic gift card upon completion of their interview.

While the original recruitment plan considered outreach to churches, Christian colleges, and support groups, the high response rate from social media made this unnecessary. Additionally, snowball sampling, not initially planned, was incorporated to enhance recruitment. Data were manually coded using Microsoft Excel. Overall, the data collection process proceeded smoothly, with participants engaged and appreciative of the opportunity to share their experiences. The online format provided a secure and accessible setting, ensuring the collection of rich, meaningful data aligned with the study's objectives.

Data Analysis

Data collection followed Yin's (2016) five-step process for qualitative data analysis: familiarization, coding, categorization, theme development, and synthesis. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was conducted using Microsoft Excel for manual coding. Key themes emerged: faith and moral incongruence, scrupulosity and psychological distress, coping strategies, and relational/social impact.

Thematic Findings

Faith and Morale Incongruence

Participants described their faith as a guiding principle and a source of internal conflict. Religious teachings shaped their moral understanding of pornography use as sinful, amplifying feelings of guilt and self-judgment. One participant stated: *"Each time I watch, I feel like I have failed God"* (P11).

Scrupulosity and Psychological Distress

Scrupulosity emerged as a significant factor in intensifying moral distress. Eleven participants exhibited obsessive concerns about sin, excessive prayer, and heightened fear of divine punishment. This finding aligns with prior research on religious moral perfectionism (Moroń et al., 2022). For instance, one participant noted:

"I pray multiple times a day for forgiveness, but the guilt always returns" (P08).

Coping Strategies

Participants used a mix of faith-based and behavioral coping mechanisms, including prayer, Scripture reading, avoiding triggers, and seeking spiritual guidance. While faith provided solace for some, others found their struggles unresolved. One participant shared:

"I sought help from my minister, who advised me to stay engaged and pray" (P15).

Relational and Social Impact

Pornography use had consequences on social relationships, marked by secrecy, avoidance, and fear of judgment. Several participants reported withdrawing from church and social groups. One explained:

"Watching pornography drains a believer's spiritual and moral life, and I keep it private because everyone believes I am holy" (P15).

Discrepant Cases

Two participants reported lower levels of scrupulosity, experiencing general guilt rather than obsessive religious worry. Additionally, one participant noted dissatisfaction with the lack of church-based resources:

"I wish my church provided more practical support; it feels like this is something we are not supposed to discuss" (P02).

Evidence of Trustworthines

Ensuring trustworthiness in this qualitative study required systematically implementing strategies to establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Initially outlined in Chapter 3, these strategies were refined throughout the research process to maintain methodological rigor and accurately capture participants' lived experiences (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

To enhance credibility, reflexivity, member checking, and triangulation were employed. Reflexivity involved maintaining a reflective journal throughout the study, allowing for continuous self-examination of potential biases and their influence on data collection and analysis. Additionally, peer debriefing with colleagues facilitated external feedback and critical discussion, further mitigating researcher bias. Member checking was conducted by providing participants with non-technical summaries of their responses, including key themes and representative quotations. Thirteen of the 15 participants confirmed the accuracy of their summaries, with one offering additional insights via an audio file. This feedback was integrated into the final analysis to ensure authenticity in the representation of participants' perspectives. Triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple data sources and methods, including a structured

interview guide and demographic data. The 14-question semistructured interview guide ensured a comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences, fostering a well-rounded and reliable data set (Carter et al., 2014).

Transferability was supported through thick descriptions of participants' demographic characteristics, religious backgrounds, and contextual experiences. Providing detailed accounts of age, marital status, education level, and faith tradition enabled readers to assess the relevance and applicability of the findings to similar populations. Additionally, descriptions of participants' emotional, spiritual, and relational challenges and their coping strategies offered nuanced insights into their lived experiences. The study setting, including a HIPAA-compliant Zoom platform for audio-only interviews, was also documented to facilitate transferability assessments (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Dependability was established through meticulous research documentation, creating an audit trail encompassing data collection, coding, thematic development, and analysis. The study employed Yin's (2016) five-step qualitative analysis method, ensuring a structured and systematic approach to organizing data. Consistency was maintained across all interviews through a semistructured interview guide, giving participants equal opportunities to share their experiences. Additionally, interview transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy, with direct participant quotations incorporated to substantiate identified themes. The transparent documentation of these procedures reinforced the study's dependability and replicability (Carcary, 2020).

A reflexive journal was maintained to document researcher reflections, decision-making processes, and potential biases to ensure confirmability, thereby enhancing objectivity. External validation was sought through peer feedback, ensuring that the findings were grounded in participants' data rather than researcher interpretations. The semistructured interview guide, which utilized open-ended questions, allowed participants to express their experiences in their own words, reducing the potential for researcher influence. The coding process was conducted systematically to preserve the integrity of participants' narratives. These measures collectively reinforced the objectivity and reliability of the study's findings (Stahl & King, 2020).

By implementing these strategies, the study upheld the highest standards of qualitative research, ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This rigorous approach provided a trustworthy foundation for understanding participants' lived experiences and contributed to the study's overall methodological integrity.

Results

This study examined the lived experiences of 15 adult Christian men, ages 18 to 44, who participated in semistructured interviews conducted via a HIPAA-compliant Zoom platform. The central research question: How do Christian men experience and interpret the intersection of their religious beliefs, scrupulosity, and problematic internet pornography use? guided both the data collection and analysis. Using Yin's (2016) five-step qualitative analysis approach, participant responses were coded, categorized, and synthesized into key themes. The iterative process allowed for a thorough examination of

shared experiences while integrating discrepant cases to provide a more nuanced understanding of individual variations.

Faith as a Moral Compass

A central theme that emerged was the role of faith as a moral compass, shaping participants' beliefs about pornography and their subsequent experiences of guilt and shame. Many referenced religious teachings as a framework for understanding pornography as sinful. For example, one participant stated, *"Pornography is against the Bible and the followers of Christ"* (P06), while another expressed that his faith provided reassurance, noting, *"Christianity teaches me that God is always there to forgive"* (P09).

A subtheme within this category involved early religious instruction, with participants recalling childhood messages that framed pornography as immoral. One participant noted, *"We were taught from a young age in a Catholic home that pornography was bad, but peer pressure led us to explore it"* (P05). Although faith served as a strong moral guide for most, it also intensified moral conflict, highlighting the dual role of religion in both promoting behavioral change and exacerbating guilt.

Emotional and Psychological Conflict

Participants described significant emotional and psychological distress resulting from their pornography use, often characterized by cycles of guilt, shame, and regret. This distress was frequently heightened during religious practices, such as attending church or Bible study. One participant stated, *"I feel guilt and regret after watching, but the immediate relaxation kept me going for a long time"* (P05). Another shared, *"I avoid people, especially women, because I feel overwhelmed by their presence, and my*

emotions change. I feel weak, discouraged, and ashamed after engaging with pornography" (P08).

Many participants also described experiencing scrupulosity, a form of religious obsessive-compulsive disorder marked by moral perfectionism and excessive guilt. One individual explained, *"I feel guilty after watching pornography and pray for forgiveness and strength to overcome temptations"* (P04). These findings suggest that deeply internalized religious values contribute to an internal struggle, reinforcing feelings of moral failure and self-condemnation.

Coping Strategies

To manage their struggles, participants employed a combination of faith-based and behavioral coping strategies. Many turned to prayer, Scripture reading, and church engagement as methods for seeking forgiveness and self-restraint. One participant stated, *"I pray, read Scriptures, and engage in activities to distract myself"* (P07). Others sought guidance from clergy or spiritual mentors; as one noted, *"I sought help from my minister, who advised me to stay engaged and pray"* (P15).

Beyond faith-based approaches, some participants adopted practical behavioral modifications, such as removing access to pornography. One participant shared, *"I deleted apps and avoided triggers on social media"* (P12). These strategies reflect varying approaches to managing moral incongruence, with some relying on religious support and others focusing on self-imposed restrictions.

Social and Relational Impact

Pornography use often had profound social and relational consequences, leading to secrecy, avoidance, and fear of judgment. Several participants described self-imposed isolation, particularly in religious settings. One noted, *"It makes me avoid talking to religious leaders and elders to prevent judgment"* (P11). Another explained how faith-based expectations exacerbated his need for secrecy: *"Watching pornography drains a believer's spiritual and moral life, and I kept it private because everyone believes I am a holy person"* (P15).

Relational struggles were daily, with participants reporting strained interpersonal relationships, particularly with spouses and romantic partners. One participant stated, *"It affects my sexual relationships, and it is challenging"* (P09). These findings highlight the tension between personal struggles and social expectations, underscoring the broader impact of moral incongruence.

Triggers and Accessibility

Participants identified easy access to pornography and exposure to online triggers as ongoing challenges in managing their behaviors. The internet and social media were frequently mentioned as enablers of pornography use. One participant explained, *"The internet makes it so easy to access, and it just pops up everywhere"* (P09). These findings

emphasize the importance of addressing environmental influences in behavioral interventions, as digital accessibility complicates efforts to abstain.

Advocacy for Support and Community Engagement

A strong advocacy and communal support theme emerged as many participants wanted to help others facing similar struggles. Several highlighted the importance of community engagement and accountability, encouraging others to seek help rather than suffer in isolation. One participant advised, *"I tell others to engage with their community and avoid isolation"* (P11). Another stated, *"I encourage others to stay engaged and avoid idleness to prevent falling into the habit"* (P10). These findings suggest that, despite their struggles, many participants sought to foster awareness and support systems within their faith communities.

Discrepant Cases

While most participants described their faith communities as sources of support, a minority expressed dissatisfaction with the availability of faith-based resources for addressing pornography use. One participant stated, *"I wish there were more church-based resources for support"* (P12), indicating that not all religious environments provided adequate guidance.

Additionally, while most participants exhibited intense scrupulosity, a small subset reported more generalized moral conflict without obsessive guilt. One individual shared, *"I feel bad about my actions, but it is not something that consumes me"* (P06).

These discrepancies suggest variations in how religious beliefs influence personal responses to moral incongruence.

Summary of Key Findings

Applying Yin's (2016) five-step data analysis method, the study identified several key themes regarding how Christian men experience the intersection of faith, scrupulosity, and problematic pornography use:

1. Faith as a moral compass – Religion provided ethical guidance but also intensified guilt and shame.
2. Emotional and psychological distress – Participants described cycles of guilt and moral struggle, often linked to scrupulosity.
3. Coping mechanisms – Strategies included prayer, Scripture reading, seeking clergy support, and behavioral modifications.
4. Social and relational impact – Many participants experienced secrecy, avoidance, and relational strain due to their pornography use.
5. Triggers and accessibility – The internet and social media served as significant enablers of pornography consumption.
6. Advocacy for support – Many participants emphasized the importance of community and peer accountability.
7. Discrepant cases – Some participants expressed dissatisfaction with church-based support, and a minority reported less severe moral conflict.

These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of moral incongruence and its resolution within faith-centered contexts, emphasizing the psychological complexities individuals face navigating religious beliefs and personal behaviors. The next chapter will explore how these findings align with existing literature and theoretical frameworks while offering future research and intervention strategy recommendations.

Summary

This study explored how Christian men experience and interpret the intersection of their religious beliefs, scrupulosity, and problematic internet pornography use. Findings revealed a complex interplay between faith, emotional distress, and behavioral struggles. Participants described their religious beliefs as both a guiding moral framework and a source of internal conflict, with pornography use contributing to heightened feelings of guilt, shame, and spiritual disconnection.

As outlined in Chapter 3, the study's methodological approach ensured a rigorous and systematic examination of participants' lived experiences. Recruitment strategies, including social media outreach and snowball sampling, facilitated the selection of a diverse yet homogeneous sample of 15 Christian men. Data were gathered through open-ended, semistructured interviews, which provided rich, detailed narratives. Using Yin's (2016) five-step method for qualitative data analysis, themes and subthemes were systematically identified, offering insights into participants' struggles, coping mechanisms, and perspectives on moral incongruence.

Key findings highlighted the role of faith in shaping participants' moral perspectives on pornography use, often reinforcing cycles of guilt, secrecy, and self-

reproach. Coping strategies varied, with many participants relying on prayer, Scripture reading, and behavioral modifications to manage their struggles. The study also identified discrepancies in participants' experiences; while most exhibited intense scrupulosity marked by obsessive guilt and moral perfectionism, a minority reported a more generalized sense of moral conflict without excessive religious worry.

The results presented in this chapter provide a deeper understanding of how Christian men navigate the moral and emotional complexities associated with pornography use within a faith-based framework. Chapter 5 will expand on these findings by integrating them into existing literature and theoretical models, examining their implications, addressing study limitations, and offering recommendations for future research and practical interventions. The study aims to contribute to broader conversations on moral incongruence, faith-based identity struggles, and potential pathways for psychological and spiritual reconciliation through this discussion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This study examined how religiosity and scrupulosity shape the lived experiences of 15 adult Christian men engaged in internet pornography use. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study explored how participants interpreted their behaviors and the significance they ascribed to them within their religious framework. The study addressed a gap in understanding the intersection of moral conflict, scrupulosity, and behavior. Data were collected through semistructured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), providing deep insights into participants' emotional and spiritual struggles.

Findings revealed that while religious beliefs served as a moral compass, they also intensified emotional distress, creating cycles of guilt, secrecy, and self-reproach. Scrupulosity emerged as a significant theme, with participants expressing obsessive concerns about sin and moral purity. Despite these struggles, many participants found solace in spiritual practices and faith communities, underscoring the need for supportive religious environments.

This chapter interprets the findings within the context of existing literature and CDT. It also discusses the study's limitations, implications, and future research and practice recommendations.

Interpretation of the Finding

This study confirms, challenges, and extends existing research by exploring how Christian men experience the intersection of religiosity, scrupulosity, and problematic internet pornography use.

Confirmation of Existing Literature

The findings align with prior research, indicating that moral incongruence contributes to distress among religious individuals. Similar to Grubbs et al. (2020) and Wright et al. (2023), participants reported cycles of guilt, shame, and self-reproach as they struggled to reconcile pornography use with religious beliefs. One participant stated, "*Each time I watch, I feel like I have failed God*" (P11), underscoring how faith framed pornography use as a moral failure.

Additionally, this study affirms the role of scrupulosity in amplifying moral incongruence, as highlighted by Moroń et al. (2022) and Jennings et al. (2021). Most participants exhibited scrupulosity, including excessive guilt, ritualistic prayer, and intense concerns about moral purity. One participant prayed multiple times daily for forgiveness, only to have guilt resurface (P08).

The applicability of CDT was also confirmed, as participants employed strategies such as prayer, confession, and rationalization to reduce dissonance (Hewitt, 2024). This tension between deeply held religious beliefs and conflicting behaviors manifested in secrecy and psychological distress.

Disconfirmation of Existing Literature

While this study supports much of the existing literature, it also challenges certain assumptions. For instance, while most participants experienced intense scrupulosity, a subset described their struggles as a general moral conflict without obsessive guilt. This finding contrasts with Borgogna et al. (2020), who suggested that religious guilt and worry are uniformly intense among those experiencing moral incongruence. One participant noted, "*I feel bad about my actions, but it is not something that consumes me*" (P06), suggesting that individual factors influence the severity of moral conflict.

Extensions to Literature

This study extends previous research by exploring how scrupulosity fosters obsessive patterns, such as ritualistic prayer and fear of divine punishment, which were less emphasized in earlier studies (Lewczuk et al., 2020). Participants described feeling trapped in cycles of self-reproach and religious worry. Additionally, this study highlights the dual role of faith communities. While many participants found encouragement through their faith, others expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of church-based resources for addressing pornography use. This aligns with Sorrell et al. (2024), who emphasized that faith environments can be protective but may lack open discourse on sensitive topics. One participant stated, "*I wish my church provided more practical resources; it feels like this is something we are not supposed to discuss*" (P02).

Theoretical Framework: Cognitive Dissonance Theory

The findings are consistent with CDT (Festinger, 1957), which explains the psychological tension arising when behaviors conflict with deeply held beliefs. Participants' pornography use contradicted their moral frameworks, intensifying emotional distress. CDT's principle that dissonance is magnified when beliefs are central to identity was evident, as one participant stated, "*My faith is the foundation of who I am, so every time I fail, it feels like I'm losing part of myself*" (P07).

Scrupulosity further exacerbated this tension. Eleven participants described obsessive concerns about sin and moral purity, driving them toward ritualistic coping behaviors. These findings align with Borgogna et al. (2024), who highlighted how scrupulosity complicates efforts to resolve dissonance by perpetuating guilt and cycles of repentance.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations must be acknowledged. A homogeneous sampling strategy focused on adult Christian men, limiting the transferability of findings to other demographics, such as women or individuals from different religious traditions. Additionally, the age range (18–44) may not fully capture the experiences of adolescents or older adults. Virtual interviews via Zoom provided accessibility but may have restricted the depth of data collection due to the lack of nonverbal cues. Future research could incorporate in-person interviews to enhance data richness.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should employ longitudinal studies to examine how moral incongruence and scrupulosity evolve, particularly with shifting faith perspectives and coping mechanisms. Understanding these changes could provide insight into whether moral conflict diminishes, intensifies, or transforms across life stages.

Intervention studies are also necessary to assess the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral and faith-based interventions in reducing psychological distress related to pornography use. Examining how these interventions help individuals struggling with moral incongruence could inform therapeutic best practices.

Additionally, research should be expanded to include Christian women, older adults, and individuals from diverse religious traditions. Investigating how gender, age, and theological differences shape moral incongruence and scrupulosity can offer broader insights into faith-based struggles.

Lastly, given the role of technology in shaping pornography use, future studies should explore how digital exposure contributes to moral incongruence among religious individuals. Understanding the impact of internet accessibility and social media on guilt and secrecy could inform strategies for prevention and intervention.

Implications

Positive Social Change

Findings underscore the need for grace-centered, nonjudgmental faith environments where individuals can seek support without fear of stigma. By raising awareness of religiosity's dual role in distress and resilience, this research empowers faith communities, therapists, and policymakers to create more effective interventions.

Recommendations for Practice

Mental health practitioners should integrate faith-sensitive approaches into counseling to help religious clients navigate moral conflict and scrupulosity. Churches and faith-based organizations should actively foster open discussions on sensitive topics, developing support groups and educational programs. Clergy and pastoral counselors should receive training in addressing moral incongruence and scrupulosity in ways that promote healing rather than reinforcing guilt.

Conclusion

This study reveals the profound impact of faith on the emotional and behavioral experiences of Christian men struggling with pornography use. While religious beliefs often intensified guilt and secrecy, they also provided a pathway to empowerment when coupled with supportive faith communities. These findings emphasize the importance of integrating compassion, understanding, and faith-based support into interventions addressing moral and behavioral challenges. By fostering a more open and supportive dialogue within religious and therapeutic settings, this research contributes to meaningful social change, enhancing well-being among individuals facing moral incongruence.

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Appendix A: Participant Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

This questionnaire aims to gather background information relevant to understanding participants' experiences. Your responses will remain confidential and only be used to provide context for the analysis of the study.

Instructions for Completion

Please answer all questions honestly. Your responses will provide essential context to this study's findings and will remain strictly confidential. If you have any concerns or wish to modify any responses, you may contact the researcher before submitting the questionnaire

Section 1: Basic Information

Age Range:
☐ 18–25
☐ 26–34
☐ 35–44
☐ 45–54
☐ 55–64
☐ 65 or older

Marital Status:
☐ Single (never married)
☐ Married
☐ Divorced
☐ Separated
☐ Widowed

Highest Level of Education Completed:
☐ Some high school (no diploma)
☐ High school diploma or equivalent (e.g., GED)
☐ Some college (no degree)
☐ Associate's degree
☐ Bachelor's degree

☐ Postgraduate degree (e.g., Master's, PhD)

Section 2: Religious Background

Christian Denomination or Affiliation:

☐ Roman Catholic

☐ Protestant (e.g., Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian)

☐ Evangelical

☐ Pentecostal/Charismatic

☐ Non-denominational

☐ Other (please specify): _____

Section 3: Internet Pornography Use and History

Age of First Exposure to Pornography:

☐ Under 12

☐ 12–17

☐ 18–24

☐ 25–34

☐ 35 or older

Perceived Frequency of Pornography Use:

☐ Rarely (once a month or less)

☐ Occasionally (a few times a month)

☐ Regularly (once a week or more)

☐ Frequently (multiple times per week)

☐ Daily

Appendix B: Semistructured Interview Questions and Protocols

Semi-Structured Interview Questions and Protocols

The interview will commence by establishing rapport, wherein the researcher will share brief personal details (introductory statement) to foster a comfortable and trusting environment. Following this, a warm-up question will introduce the participant to the discussion, leading into the 9 core questions. These questions are strategically ordered from less to more sensitive topics, gradually guiding the participant toward deeper reflection. Three follow-up questions are included to promote thorough exploration and elicit nuanced insights into the participant's experiences. The interview will conclude with an invitation for any final thoughts from the participants, followed by a post-interview check-in.

Study Purpose and Confidentiality

The following interview questions are designed to explore the lived experiences of adult Christian men who engage in problematic internet pornography use. These questions investigate how religious beliefs, scrupulosity, and moral conflicts intersect with participants' behaviors, thoughts, and emotions. The interview will allow participants to share personal reflections on how these factors shape their experiences and well-being. Participants' confidentiality is of the utmost importance, and by consenting to participate in this study, personally identifiable information will be protected using pseudonyms throughout the study.

Handling Emotional Distress

Participants will be reminded at any time during the interview of their right to pause or withdraw from the interview. If participants become emotionally distressed, a break will be offered, and support resources will be provided.

Primary Research Question: How do adult Christian men experience and interpret the intersection between their religious beliefs, scrupulosity, and problematic internet pornography use?

Introductory Statement

Thank you for participating in this study. I am Chiante' Jemison, a doctoral student in Clinical Psychology at Walden University and an Army veteran currently based in Las Vegas, Nevada. My goal is to contribute valuable insights that support the development of faith-based counseling programs, integrating psychological practices with religious teachings to address problematic pornography use.

Warm-up Question

Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your background?

Core Interview Questions

1. What aspects of your faith do you find comforting or challenging when reflecting on your beliefs around pornography?
2. How does your faith community, if you are part of one, address or speak about pornography, and how have these views influenced your perspectives?
3. Have you experienced any tension or conflict between your personal beliefs and your use of internet pornography? If so, describe how you navigate or make sense of that tension. (If applicable).
4. What kind of emotions arise for you when you reflect on your use of pornography in the context of your faith?
5. How has your use of pornography, if at all, led to feelings of excessive moral or religious worry, such as intense guilt, fear of punishment, or concerns about your moral standing? If so, how does it manifest in your life? (If applicable).
6. Suppose you have experienced feelings of moral dissonance (such as internal conflict about right and wrong) or excessive religious worry (scrupulosity, like feeling overly concerned about sin or moral purity). How has this experience played a role in your relationships with others?
7. If you have sought spiritual or psychological help related to your pornography, what was your experience like seeking spiritual or psychological support?

8. What strategies or coping mechanisms (if any)—whether religious, psychological, or behavioral—do you use? Do you find these coping mechanisms helpful or challenging in managing your experiences with pornography? (If applicable)
9. If your pornography use has affected your spiritual life and your relationship with God, how do you manage and cope with these feelings?

Follow-up Questions

1. How often do you find yourself thinking about whether your actions with pornography align with your beliefs? How would you describe what that's like for you?
2. How do you describe your personal beliefs, and how do they influence your views on pornography use?
3. How do your emotions change, if at all, before and after using pornography? Can you describe what that experience is like for you?

Concluding Question

1. Before we conclude, is there anything else you would like to share that we have not discussed or any additional thoughts or insights about your experiences that you feel are important?