



New Trends
in Psychology

From Screens to Intimacy: Pornography Consumption as an Intimate Cultural Practice

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Abstract: This article re-conceptualizes pornography consumption as an intimate cultural practice, exploring how it is embedded within complex relational, cultural, and interpretive dimensions. **Prior Work:** Traditional research relies on frameworks emphasizing pathology, addiction, or relational dysfunction (e.g., sexual scripting theory, media effects), largely underrepresenting regions like Southeastern Europe. **Approach:** The paper utilizes an integrative theoretical approach, synthesizing existing empirical findings, cross-cultural evidence, moral incongruence models, and usage contexts (solitary versus shared use). **Results:** Analysis demonstrates that the meanings and outcomes of pornography use vary substantially based on individual values, relationship dynamics, and specific socio-cultural backgrounds. **Implications:** The study provides researchers and practitioners with an expanded comprehensive framework, shifting future academic inquiry from pure pathology to contextual and intersectional analysis. **Value:** The original contribution lies in introducing a novel integrative theoretical model that fills geographical research gaps in Southeastern Europe and transcends the limiting paradigm of pathologization.

Keywords: pornography consumption; intimacy; cultural practice; sexual scripts; relational embedding

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1. Introduction

Pornography consumption is a prevalent phenomenon intersecting with questions of morality, intimacy, and culture. Psychological research has largely focused on pathology, addiction, or relational disruption, generating important findings but neglecting the broader cultural and relational context in which pornography is consumed (Duffy et al., 2016; Grubbs & Kraus, 2021; Puerto, 2020; Upasani & Jain, 2024). From a socio-cultural perspective, pornography is a practice embedded within daily intimate life, contributing to identity formation, sexual exploration, and negotiation of desire (Attwood et al., 2018; Duffy et al., 2016; Scarcelli & Stella, 2020). For example, qualitative studies reveal that pornography is used for sexual education, leisure, and identity exploration, particularly among sexual minority populations, highlighting dimensions of intimacy beyond dyadic sexual relationships (McCormack & Wignall, 2017; Melgoza, 2025; Navarro-Mantas & Sáez-Lumbreras, 2025).

Despite robust research in Western Europe and North America, Southeastern Europe remains under-researched, leaving cultural, relational, and normative aspects largely unexplored. Existing regional studies indicate that pornography consumption interacts with moral norms, secrecy, and relational dynamics, but culturally situated frameworks remain scarce. This study addresses this gap by integrating empirical evidence with theoretical insights, positioning pornography consumption as a complex intimate cultural practice.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Approach

Given that this article is a conceptual and theoretical paper rather than an empirical study, the methodology employs a systematic conceptual synthesis approach. The primary goal is to integrate diverse, fragmented frameworks - such as sexual scripting theory, media effects, moral incongruence, and addiction models - into a novel, multidimensional theoretical model. This synthesis was conducted by mapping existing empirical findings against sociological and cultural dimensions of intimacy, specifically addressing the geographical and contextual gaps identified in Southeastern European literature.

2.1. Search Strategy and Information Sources

To ensure a robust, unbiased, and multidisciplinary foundation for the proposed model, a comprehensive literature search was executed across major electronic databases. The databases included PubMed/MEDLINE, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The search terms targeted three core intersections:

- a) The behavioral and psychological aspects of consumption (*“pornography use”*, *“problematic pornography consumption”*, *“moral incongruence”*).
- b) The interpersonal and systemic dynamics (*“intimate practices”*, *“relational quality”*, *“secrecy”*, *“online infidelity”*).
- c) The socio-cultural and geographical variables (*“cross-cultural variations”*, *“sexual scripts”*, *“Southeastern Europe”*, *“stigma”*).

The chronological scope of the gathered literature primarily spanned peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2026, ensuring that the theoretical model accounts for contemporary shifts in digital sexuality, streaming platforms, and modern relationship configurations.

2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To establish the ecological validity of the proposed framework, rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied during the literature screening process. The literature selection prioritized (1) empirical, meta-analytic, or theoretical papers published in peer-reviewed journals; (2) studies examining the psychological, relational, or cultural predictors and outcomes of pornography consumption; (3) cross-cultural or regional studies that specifically investigated how moral norms, religiosity, or societal stigma shape the interpretation and emotional outcomes of usage; and (4) research addressing the subjective meanings of use, including comparisons between solitary, shared, and secretive dynamics.

Conversely, certain parameters were established to systematically omit irrelevant data from the conceptual matrix. The exclusion process strictly filtered out (1) studies focusing exclusively on clinical populations with neurological or biomedical conditions unrelated to normative population dynamics; (2) findings relying solely on simplistic behavioral frequency metrics without incorporating contextual, relational, or interpretive variables; and (3) gray literature, non-peer-reviewed essays, or opinion pieces lacking empirical grounding or rigorous theoretical

frameworks. The full systematic breakdown of the search parameters, alongside the explicit eligibility boundaries, is synthesized in **Table 1**:

Table 1. Literature Search Strategy and Sample Selection Matrix

Methodological Phase	Operational Criteria and Search Parameters
Electronic Databases	PubMed/MEDLINE, PsycINFO, Scopus, Google Scholar.
Core Keyword Intersections	(1) Behavioral: pornography use, problematic consumption, moral incongruence; (2) Interpersonal: intimate practices, relational quality, secrecy; (3) Contextual: cross-cultural variations, Southeastern Europe, stigma.
Chronological Scope	Peer-reviewed academic literature published between the years 2000 and 2026. (1) Peer-reviewed empirical, meta-analytic, or theoretical papers; (2) Studies on psychological, relational, or cultural predictors of use;
Inclusion Criteria	(3) Regional/cross-cultural studies on moral norms and religiosity; (4) Research on solitary, shared, and secretive relational dynamics.
Exclusion Criteria	(1) Clinical populations with unrelated neurological/biomedical conditions; (2) Studies relying solely on frequency metrics without contextual variables; (3) Gray literature, non-peer-reviewed essays, or non-grounded opinion pieces.

Note. This matrix outlines the systematic parameters used to filter the literature, ensuring that the final synthesis directly accounts for both interpersonal dynamics and geographical gaps in Southeastern European research.

2.3. Conceptual Integration and Model Development

The synthesis proceeded through three distinct analytical phases. First, a critical deconstruction of existing models was performed to isolate their structural limitations, particularly their tendency to pathologize behavior or ignore user agency. Second, a thematic matrix was constructed to cross-reference empirical findings from Western contexts with emerging data from underrepresented regions like Southeastern Europe. Finally, through conceptual abstraction, the core overlaps among personal values, relational configurations, and macro-level cultural forces

were synthesized. This iterative process resulted in the formulation of the four-dimensional integrative model detailed in the subsequent sections.

3. Models of Pornography Consumption

The scientific study of pornography consumption has been informed by several theoretical models, each emphasizing different mechanisms through which pornography is presumed to influence individual cognition, affect, and behavior (DasGupta, 2017; Kingston et al., 2009). While these models have contributed valuable insights, they often operate in relative isolation and vary considerably in their assumptions regarding agency, context, and cultural embeddedness. This section reviews the principal theoretical approaches that have shaped contemporary research, highlighting both their contributions and their limitations.

3.1. Sexual Script Theory

Sexual script theory conceptualizes sexual behavior as guided by culturally transmitted narratives that prescribe appropriate roles, expectations, and meanings associated with sexual activity (Gagnon & Simon, 2017). Within this framework, pornography is understood as a source of sexual scripts that inform beliefs about desire, performance, gender roles, and relational dynamics (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Empirical research drawing on this model suggests that repeated exposure to pornographic content may influence individuals' sexual expectations and fantasies by normalizing particular scripts.

However, sexual script theory does not posit a deterministic relationship between exposure and behavior. Rather, individuals are viewed as active interpreters who selectively adopt, modify, or reject scripts based on personal values, relational contexts, and cultural norms (McCallar et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2016). While this model effectively accounts for the symbolic and narrative dimensions of pornography consumption, it has been criticized for insufficiently addressing emotional processes, moral evaluation, and relational negotiation.

3.2. Media Effects and Exposure-Based Models

Media effects models represent one of the earliest and most influential approaches to pornography research. These frameworks, including cultivation theory and exposure-based learning models, focus on how repeated exposure to sexually explicit material may shape attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral tendencies (Hedrick, 2021). Within these models, pornography consumption is often treated as a causal factor that influences sexual norms, expectations, or behaviors through processes such as desensitization or normalization (Coyne et al., 2019; Zillmann & Bryant, 1988).

Although exposure-based models have yielded empirical evidence linking pornography consumption to certain attitudinal outcomes, they have been increasingly criticized for their limited consideration of contextual and interpretive variables (Ferguson & Hartley, 2022). These models often assume relatively passive media consumers and tend to underrepresent individual agencies, relational context, and cultural variation. As such, they offer a partial explanation of pornography consumption that is insufficient for capturing the complexity of lived experiences.

3.3. Problematic Use and Addiction-Oriented Models

Another prominent line of research conceptualizes pornography consumption through the lens of problematic use or behavioral addiction (Grubbs et al., 2018; Huntington et al., 2021). These models focus on compulsivity, impaired control, and negative functional consequences associated with excessive pornography use. Research informed by this perspective has been valuable in identifying individuals for whom pornography consumption is associated with distress or impairment.

However, addiction-oriented models have been subject to substantial debate, particularly regarding diagnostic criteria and the risk of pathologizing normative sexual behavior (Grubbs et al., 2019). Critics argue that these models may conflate high-frequency use with dysfunction and often fail to account for cultural norms, moral beliefs, and individual differences in sexual desire (Kafka, 2010; Kohut et al., 2018; Kraus et al., 2018). Consequently, while problematic use frameworks are relevant for specific clinical populations, their applicability to general populations remains limited.

3.4. Moral Incongruence Models

More recent theoretical developments emphasize the role of moral incongruence in explaining negative emotional and relational outcomes associated with pornography consumption (Böthe et al., 2026). According to this model, distress arises primarily when individuals perceive a conflict between their pornography use and internalized moral, religious, or cultural values (Floyd et al., 2020). Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that moral incongruence is a strong predictor of guilt, shame, and reduced sexual satisfaction, often surpassing consumption frequency as an explanatory factor.

This model represents a significant advancement by situating pornography consumption within normative and cultural frameworks. Nonetheless, moral incongruence models tend to focus predominantly on individual-level psychological processes and may insufficiently address relational dynamics and broader social representations that influence meaning-making (Doan et al., 2025).

3.5. Toward Integrative Cultural-Relational Models

While each of the models contributes important insights, none fully captures the multidimensional nature of pornography consumption as it is lived and interpreted within intimate relationships and cultural contexts. Emerging integrative approaches argue for frameworks that incorporate cultural norms, relational embedding, interpretive agency, and social representations alongside behavioral and moral dimensions (Shevlin & Ivey, 2024).

These integrative perspectives provide the theoretical foundation for reconceptualizing pornography consumption as an intimate cultural practice. By acknowledging the interaction between personal meaning-making, relational negotiation, and cultural context, such models offer a more comprehensive and ecologically valid understanding of pornography consumption (Aadahl et al., 2026; Farina, 2022). The theoretical model proposed in the present article builds on this integrative tradition, addressing limitations of existing frameworks and advancing a multidimensional approach to pornography research.

4. Conceptualizing Pornography as an Intimate Cultural Practice. Intimacy beyond Dyadic Sexuality

Intimacy is more than emotional or sexual closeness between partners; it encompasses practices of self-reflection, fantasy, and negotiation of desire (Thomas & Binnie, 2024). Pornography functions as a medium through which individuals explore sexuality, construct fantasies, and engage with relational and cultural norms (Attwood, 2005). Qualitative evidence demonstrates that pornography supports identity formation, sexual learning, and leisure, emphasizing its multidimensional role in intimate life (Gormezano & Van Anders, 2024).

4.1. Scopophilia and Visual Culture

The concept of scopophilia - pleasure derived from looking - situates pornography within broader visual cultures. In contemporary societies dominated by visual media, pornography is part of a cultural repertoire that shapes desire, expectations, and identity, linking personal pleasure to social and cultural norms (Carnicelli et al., 2016).

4.2. Sexual Scripts and Cultural Narratives

Pornography provides sexual scripts that users interpret in relation to personal values and relational dynamics (Sun et al., 2016). These scripts shape expectations regarding desire, gender roles, and sexual performance but are actively negotiated, highlighting the interplay between individual agency and cultural guidance.

5. Empirical Evidence on Pornography Consumption and Intimacy

Empirical investigations into the association between pornography consumption and intimacy have produced heterogeneous findings, reflecting substantial variability in study designs, populations, and theoretical assumptions (Wright et al., 2025). Rather than yielding uniform conclusions, this body of research increasingly demonstrates that the relational implications of pornography use are contingent upon contextual, relational, and individual factors. Recent studies have therefore shifted away from frequency-based approaches toward more nuanced examinations of relational

meaning, moral frameworks, and patterns of use (Dinçer et al., 2025; Fisher & Kohut, 2020; Sánchez-Fernández et al., 2026).

6. Socio-emotional Closeness and Relational Quality

Research examining the relationship between pornography consumption and socioemotional closeness suggests that pornography use does not exert a uniform effect on relational quality. Empirical studies focusing on male pornography consumption indicate that associations with emotional intimacy vary as a function of motivational factors, relational satisfaction, and communication patterns (Willoughby & Dover, 2024). In some contexts, pornography use is unrelated to perceived closeness, whereas in others it is associated with emotional distancing, particularly when consumption occurs in isolation from relational dialogue (Kohut et al., 2021).

These findings challenge deterministic interpretations that conceptualize pornography use as inherently detrimental to intimacy. Instead, they highlight the importance of relational context, suggesting that pornography consumption interacts with pre-existing relational dynamics rather than functioning as an independent causal factor. Consequently, relational quality appears to moderate the association between pornography use and emotional closeness, underscoring the bidirectional nature of these processes (Daspe et al., 2018).

7. Moral Incongruence and Individual Psychological Outcomes

An increasingly robust line of research emphasizes the role of moral incongruence in shaping individual experiences of pornography consumption (Grubbs & Perry, 2019). Moral incongruence refers to the perceived conflict between an individual's pornography use and their internalized moral, religious, or cultural values. Empirical studies employing mediation and moderation models consistently demonstrate that moral incongruence is a stronger predictor of psychological distress, guilt, and reduced sexual satisfaction than consumption frequency alone (Lewczuk et al., 2020).

These findings suggest that negative emotional outcomes often attributed to pornography use may be better understood as consequences of value-behavior discrepancies rather than exposure or usage per se. Importantly, moral incongruence

is culturally situated, reflecting broader societal norms and moral discourses surrounding sexuality (Su et al., 2024). This highlights the need to situate pornography consumption within its normative context when interpreting empirical associations with well-being and intimacy.

7.1. Patterns of Use: Shared, Solitary, and Secretive Consumption

Beyond individual frequency and moral orientation, patterns of pornography use within intimate relationships have emerged as critical determinants of relational outcomes (Wright & Herbenick, 2022). Empirical research distinguishes between shared consumption, solitary use, and secretive use, each of which is associated with distinct relational meanings and emotional consequences (Guidry et al., 2020). Shared or openly negotiated pornography use within couples is often associated with higher levels of communication, sexual openness, and relational satisfaction.

In contrast, secretive consumption—characterized by concealment or deception—has been consistently linked to negative relational outcomes, including increased shame, diminished trust, and reduced relational satisfaction (Bedrov & Leary, 2021). These effects appear to stem less from the sexual content itself and more from the perceived violation of relational norms surrounding transparency and exclusivity (Davis & Tabri, 2023). Consequently, secrecy functions as a key relational variable, mediating the association between pornography consumption and intimacy.

7.2. Cross-Cultural and Contextual Variability

Cross-cultural studies further demonstrate that the meanings and relational implications of pornography consumption are shaped by sociocultural context. Research comparing populations across different European regions indicates that religiosity, sexual norms, and cultural taboos significantly influence both consumption patterns and emotional responses to pornography (Ahorsu, et al., 2023; Floyd & Grubbs, 2022). In more sexually restrictive cultural contexts, pornography use is more likely to be accompanied by guilt, secrecy, and relational tension, whereas in more permissive contexts, consumption may be experienced as neutral or relationally inconsequential.

These findings underscore the limitations of universal models of pornography consumption and highlight the importance of culturally situated research. In regions

such as South-Eastern Europe, where empirical data remain limited and sexual norms may emphasize discretion and traditional relational values, pornography consumption may acquire distinct relational meanings that warrant further investigation.

Taken together, these empirical findings suggest that pornography consumption cannot be adequately explained by isolated behavioral indicators such as frequency or exposure alone. Rather, its intimate and emotional consequences must be understood through the interaction of relational context, moral frameworks, and culturally specific norms.

7.3. Pornography Consumption, Secrecy, and Online Infidelity

In intimate relationships, pornography consumption is not interpreted solely as an individual sexual behavior but is often embedded within relational expectations concerning exclusivity, transparency, and trust. When pornography use occurs in secrecy, some partners interpret it as a form of online infidelity, particularly when it violates implicit or explicit relational agreements regarding sexual boundaries.

Empirical research indicates that secrecy surrounding pornography consumption is more strongly associated with relational distress than consumption itself. Studies examining partner perceptions show that concealed use may evoke feelings of betrayal, emotional abandonment, and erosion of trust, especially in relationships where sexual exclusivity is understood to extend beyond physical encounters to include digital and mediated sexual activities. In this sense, pornography functions symbolically as a relational transgression rather than merely a private act of sexual gratification.

From a cultural perspective, the interpretation of pornography as online infidelity reflects broader societal shifts in how intimacy and fidelity are defined in the digital age. The expansion of sexualized online environments - ranging from streaming platforms to interactive sexual media - has blurred traditional boundaries between fantasy, consumption, and interpersonal engagement. Consequently, pornography may be perceived not only as media use but as participation in an alternative sexual sphere that competes with relational intimacy.

Importantly, whether pornography consumption is framed as infidelity depends less on objective characteristics of the content and more on relational meaning-making processes. Research highlights that couples who engage in open communication

about pornography use are less likely to frame it as betrayal, whereas secrecy amplifies moral incongruence and relational anxiety. This aligns with findings showing that perceived deception, rather than sexual explicitness per se, predicts negative relational outcomes.

Viewing pornography consumption through the lens of online infidelity further underscores the necessity of understanding it as an intimate cultural practice. It is shaped by cultural narratives about monogamy, digital sexuality, and moral responsibility, all of which vary across sociocultural contexts. In regions such as South-Eastern Europe, where traditional norms around sexuality and fidelity remain influential and public discourse on pornography is limited, secrecy may be particularly salient, intensifying perceptions of transgression and shame.

This perspective reinforces the argument that pornography consumption cannot be adequately understood outside of its relational and cultural context. When secrecy intersects with moral norms and expectations of exclusivity, pornography use may acquire meanings akin to infidelity, with significant implications for emotional intimacy and relational stability.

7.4. Meta-Analytic and Population-Level Insights

Meta-analytic research shows small-to-moderate negative correlations between pornography consumption and interpersonal satisfaction, with significant heterogeneity across studies. Variability is often explained by cultural norms, relational practices, and moral frameworks.

For instance, in culturally permissive environments, pornography may have neutral or even positive relational effects. Conversely, in regions with restrictive norms, consumption may generate guilt and relational tension. This evidence highlights the critical role of cultural context, particularly in under-studied regions like South-Eastern Europe, where societal norms, religiosity, and gender expectations strongly shape both use and perception.

7.5. Social Representations and Stigma

Social representations of pornography users influence emotional outcomes and identity construction. Studies from South-Eastern Europe demonstrate that users often face moral judgment and stigmatization, which contribute to internalized

shame, secrecy, and relational strain. Stigma operates as both an external and internal force, affecting how pornography is experienced psychologically and relationally. Understanding these dynamics requires acknowledging the interdependence of personal, relational, and cultural factors in shaping intimate experiences.

8. A Novel Integrative Theoretical Model: Structure and Contribution

Building on the limitations of previous theoretical frameworks, this study introduces a novel integrative model that conceptualizes pornography consumption as an emergent, contextually situated cultural practice rather than a simple exposure metric. This model represents a major contribution to the field as it: (1) synthesizes fragmented empirical and theoretical knowledge into a coherent framework; (2) explains the wide variability in psychological outcomes across different contexts; and (3) offers a solid foundation for culturally situated research, particularly in under-studied regions such as Southeastern Europe. The dynamic interplay and systemic layers of these dimensions are visually operationalized in **Table 2**. To capture the multifaceted nature of pornography use, the proposed model synthesizes four dynamically interrelated dimensions.

Table 2. Structural Breakdown of the Multilevel Conceptual Framework and Psychological Outcomes

Level of Analysis	Core Dimension	Operational Elements / Configurations
Macro-Level	Cultural Context & Social Representations	Southeastern Europe Norms, Patriarchal Values, Religious Stigma
Meso-Level	Relational Embedding	Solitary Use, Shared Use, Secretive Use Configurations
Micro-Level	Interpretive Agency	User Decoding, Personal Values
Target Outcome	Psychological Outcomes	Relational Intimacy

Note. The table delineates the hierarchical structure of the conceptual model, tracing the top-down flow from macro-level socio-cultural constraints to micro-level individual agency, culminating in the primary psychological outcome of relational intimacy.

8.1. Cultural Context

The first dimension posits that pornography consumption cannot be understood in isolation from the overarching cultural macro-structures that dictate sexual norms and moral boundaries. In Southeastern Europe, this context is deeply characterized by a historical overlap between traditional patriarchal values and strong religious institutions, such as Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, or Islam. This specific cultural configuration generates high levels of institutionalized sexual conservatism. For instance, an individual in Romania or Serbia consuming pornography often encounters a stark psychological conflict between their private digital behaviors and the public moral expectations of their community. This clash manifests as severe moral incongruence, where the distress associated with consumption is driven by perceived cultural transgression rather than the actual frequency of the behavior itself. Consequently, macro-level cultural norms actively frame personal interpretations, dictating whether pornography is viewed as an acceptable form of entertainment or an existential threat to personal morality.

8.2. Relational Embedding and Integration

The second dimension focuses on the relational micro-system, examining how interpersonal communication patterns, shared versus solitary use, and secrecy influence relational satisfaction. Rather than viewing pornography as an automatic driver of relationship dissolution, this model analyzes consumption based on its specific relational configuration. In the context of Southeastern European couples, where traditional gender roles still hold significant influence, secretive solitary use often carries a heavy stigma and is frequently interpreted by partners as a form of emotional or digital infidelity. For example, a husband secretly consuming pornography in a culturally conservative household may trigger severe relational strain, not due to the media content itself, but because secrecy breaches the relational contract of transparency. Conversely, when couples consciously engage in shared consumption, it can serve as a collaborative script-building tool that enhances intimacy, demonstrating how relational embedding directly mediates whether personal use translates into satisfaction or distress.

8.3. Interpretive Agency

The third dimension emphasizes the active role of the user as an interpretive agent who filters, decodes, and actively negotiates sexual scripts to construct personal meaning. Users are not passive recipients of media messages. In regions like the Balkans, where formal sex education is often scarce or absent, individuals rely heavily on pornography for sexual socialization, yet they simultaneously evaluate this content through a complex lens of personal guilt, validation, and individual values. For example, a young adult in Greece or Croatia may use pornography to explore sexual preferences while actively rejecting the unrealistic physical expectations or aggressive scripts depicted on screen. This interpretive agency demonstrates that psychological outcomes are entirely mediated by cognitive appraisal, determining whether the individual experiences consumption as an empowering exploration of intimacy or internalizes it as a source of shame.

8.4. Social Representation

The fourth dimension analyzes the macro-level social representations, public discourses, and collective stigmas that moderate emotional outcomes and identity processes within a given society. In Southeastern Europe, public discourse on sexuality is heavily polarized, often dominated by medicalized views of addiction or conservative political rhetoric that links pornography to moral decay and national demographic decline. These collective societal narratives directly shape how individuals self-report and conceptualize their own behavior, heavily influencing internal emotional responses. For instance, a user in Bulgaria or Bosnia and Herzegovina might quickly self-diagnose as an “addict” due to the overwhelming social stigma surrounding explicit content, even if their usage patterns do not meet any objective clinical criteria for compulsive sexual behavior disorder. This dimension highlights that the subjective pathology and distress reported in research is frequently a reflection of collective societal disapproval rather than biological addiction.

9. Discussions

The novel integrative theoretical model proposed in the current study offers a fundamental paradigm shift in how digital sexuality is investigated, directly challenging traditional frameworks that have long dominated the field. For decades,

researchers have relied on media effects models and exposure-based theories, which treat consumers as passive vessels automatically conditioned by explicit content, or on rigid clinical addiction models that pathologize high-frequency use. While these traditional frameworks have provided valuable data regarding extreme behavioral patterns, they suffer from a severe lack of ecological validity. They routinely fail to explain why individuals with identical consumption frequencies report radically different psychological and relational outcomes. By contrast, our model demonstrates a much higher ecological validity because it accounts for the real-world complexities where personal values, relational dynamics, and macro-level cultural forces intersect to shape human experience (see **Table 3**).

Table 3. Comparison of Traditional Frameworks and the Proposed Novel Integrative Model

Core Dimension	Traditional Pathology & Media Effects Models	Novel Integrative Theoretical Model
Primary Conceptualization	Linear exposure metric; direct media conditioning; biological/behavioral addiction.	Emergent, contextually situated, and multidimensional intimate cultural practice.
User Role & Agency	Passive recipient automatically conditioned by explicit content or aggressive scripts.	Active interpretive agent who filters, decodes, and negotiates meaning based on personal values.
Relational Configuration	Unilateral predictor of relational dysfunction, dissatisfaction, and inevitable dissolution.	Dyadic micro-system analyzed through configuration (solitary, shared, vs. secretive use).
Socio-Cultural Variables	Universalist/WEIRD assumptions; ignores localized moral, religious, or macro-level norms.	Context-driven matrix; accounts for regional stigma and moral incongruence (e.g., Southeastern Europe).
Clinical/Research Focus	Quantifying behavioral frequency; pathologizing high-use patterns as inherent disorders.	Assessing contextual distress, appraisal processes, systemic boundaries, and societal representations.

Note. WEIRD = Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. This table contrasts the reductionist focus on frequency in older frameworks with the context-centric, layered approach of the novel model.

Traditional models are particularly limited when applied outside Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WIRD) societies. By assuming a universal, direct link between pornography exposure and relational dysfunction, older frameworks ignore the powerful buffering or magnifying effects of localized norms.

Our model resolves this limitation by introducing a contextual matrix. For example, within the traditional framework, a user experiencing high distress would automatically be classified as suffering from a behavioral addiction. Our model, however, evaluates this distress through the lenses of moral incongruence and cultural context, revealing that anxiety is often a socio-cultural byproduct of regional religious stigma rather than a neurobiological dysfunction. By moving away from the pathologizing gaze and incorporating user agency alongside relational integration, this framework provides a scientifically rigorous and culturally sensitive tool that reflects how intimacy is lived and interpreted.

10. Limitations and Future Directions

A primary limitation of the current article is its purely conceptual and theoretical nature, as it lacks original empirical quantitative or qualitative data collected specifically to test the proposed framework. The model relies on the synthesis of secondary data and existing literature, which is itself structurally skewed, given that most peer-reviewed studies on pornography consumption have been conducted within Western contexts. Consequently, while the framework theoretically addresses the geographical gaps in underrepresented regions like Southeastern Europe, its specific propositions regarding the interaction of Balkan cultural norms, religious stigma, and relational dynamics remain to be empirically validated.

To address these limitations, future research must move toward empirical testing through diverse methodological designs specifically targeted at the Balkan and Southeastern European populations. First, future studies should implement longitudinal quantitative designs to track how changing relationship configurations (such as moving from solitary to shared use) impact marital satisfaction and moral incongruence over time within culturally conservative cohorts. Second, there is an urgent need for qualitative phenomenological research, using in-depth interviews or focus groups, to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of users in these regions. This would allow researchers to explore how individuals actively negotiate interpretive agency in countries where formal sex education is lacking. Finally, cross-cultural comparative studies between Western European and Southeastern European couples would help isolate exactly how different levels of societal secularization and institutionalized stigma influence self-perceived addiction and relationship quality.

11. Conclusions

Framing pornography consumption as an intimate cultural practice fundamentally transcends traditional, pathology-centered models by dynamically integrating personal, relational, and social layers of human experience. For decades, academic inquiry has been constrained by a binary reductionism that views pornography use either as a benign, consequence-free media exposure or as a destructive, compulsive behavioral addiction. This study's primary contribution is a novel theoretical framework that disrupts this binary by prioritizing the immediate context of use over mere consumption frequency metrics. By shifting the analytical focus toward how explicit media is actively decoded, relationally negotiated, and culturally evaluated, this model provides a comprehensive taxonomy for understanding why identical consumption patterns can result in either relational empowerment or profound psychological suffering.

11.1. Methodological Directions: Embracing Cultural Sensitivity

To validate and expand this integrative framework, future research must move away from ethnocentric, Western-centric assumptions and adopt culturally sensitive methodologies. This methodological evolution is particularly critical in historically overlooked and underrepresented regions such as Southeastern Europe. In these societies, where rapid digital modernization directly collides with deeply entrenched patriarchal structures and institutionalized religious frameworks, standard quantitative metrics fail to capture the nuanced realities of sexual socialization. Future investigative designs should prioritize mixed-method approaches, utilizing longitudinal quantitative tracking alongside deeply contextual qualitative phenomenology. Only by capturing the lived experiences and interpretive agency of users in these specific macro-climates can researchers map how localized stigma, collective social representations, and moral incongruence actively shape identity processes and subjective well-being.

11.2. Clinical Implications: Contextual and Non-Reflexive Interventions

Finally, the theoretical insights advanced by this model necessitate a major paradigm shift within clinical and psychological practices. Mental health practitioners must move away from the reflexive pathologization of high-frequency pornography use, which frequently misdiagnoses culturally induced distress as a biological or

behavioral control disorder. Instead, clinical practices should adopt holistic, integrative interventions that directly target the systemic roots of moral and relational distress. Therapeutic frameworks, such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) or systemic couples therapy, should be leveraged to deconstruct the specific relational configurations of use - such as secretive solitary consumption - and address the cognitive dissonance caused by conflicting personal values and social stigmas. Ultimately, by treating pornography consumption as a culturally situated, emergent practice, clinicians and researchers alike can cultivate a more ethically responsible, ecologically valid, and compassionate understanding of modern human intimacy.

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