

# Compulsive Pornography Behaviour and Religiosity of Malaysian Teenagers in Juvenile Rehabilitation Institution

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## Abstract

In this post-pandemic era, teenagers have access to the internet at a very young age and are easily exposed to explicit materials. Excessive consumption of pornography can lead to compulsive pornography behaviour (CPB), a subtype of compulsive sexual behaviour (CSB) which has been added to the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (11th ed.), ICD 11 by the World Health Organisation (WHO). CPB have many damaging effects especially to teenagers including increased risky behaviour, depressive symptoms and interpersonal relationship problems. There are multiple factors that cause teenagers to engage in pornography behaviour and the measures to curb this phenomenon currently is ineffective. Past researchers suggest that comprehensive sexual education including religiosity may help prevent teenagers from engaging in the behaviour. Therefore, this study aim to investigate the relationship between CPB and religiosity in teenagers. This study is a qualitative research design to describe the relationship between religiosity and the CPB of teenagers in a juvenile rehabilitation education institution. Semi-structured interviews were done on 10 teenagers with CPB and 3 professionals with experience handling them. Interview participants was recruited from recommendations of the professionals. The data was analysed thematically. The themes that emerged from interviews for the influence of religiosity towards pornography behaviour are 'irrelevant', 'discomfort', 'knows sinful but no effects' and 'easier rehabilitation'. Meanwhile, themes that emerged for the influence of pornography behaviour towards religiosity are 'no consequences', 'reduced worship' and 'reduced faith'. The findings in this study shows that there are little direct relationship between religiosity and CPB for teenagers in juvenile rehabilitation institution. This means that religion may not be the most effective preventive factor against CPB. However, the personality development and social activities aspect from religion may help with prevention and intervention measures. Although this research is not generalizable to the entire teenage population in Malaysia, the insights from the findings of this research could potentially

generate more research in this field in the future and serve as a guide for preventive and intervention programmes by stakeholders

**Keywords:** Pornography, Religiosity, Teenager, Juvenile Rehabilitation

## Introduction

The rapid innovations in information technologies, including the internet allow for faster and more accessible information to the public. Unfortunately, this is also true for malicious content which can be detrimental to society, including online pornography in which online pornography engagement has been shown to increase significantly in recent years (Lewczuk et al., 2022). Especially in this post-pandemic era, society is forced to adapt to new norms and more young generations have access to the worldwide web and can be easily exposed to pornography (Mesce et al., 2022). Various local studies in Malaysia shows that the prevalence of exposure to pornography is in the range of 70% - 90% (Goh et al., 2023; Zohor Ali et al., 2021) and Malaysia is among the top countries to surf pornographic website (Malik, 2021; Stoops, 2018). More alarming, pornography behaviour may lead to social problems and other problematic behaviours in teenagers as well as their psychological well-being (Adarsh & Sahoo, 2023; George et al., 2019; Jhe et al., 2023). In recent years, mental health issues have received the attention they deserve. Without good mental health, individuals are not able to connect, function, cope or thrive. Currently, about one in eight people in the world live with a mental disorder (World Health Organization; WHO, 2022). Mental health disorders also include behavioral disorders including impulse control disorder (Kraus et al., 2018). In recent years, compulsive sexual behaviour has been added to the International statistical classification of diseases and related health problems (11th ed.), ICD 11 and this includes problematic sexual behaviour through online media (WHO, 2021). Globally, as published in the Global Burden Disease Study 2019 it was reported that the prevalence of mental health issues in teenagers is as high as 14% according to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (2019). This is worrying as the mental health issues in teenagers will hinder individuals potential and thus decrease the potential contribution to the society and the world at large. Although the issues are prevalent for many years in Malaysia and global in nature, the number of young teenagers involved keeps on increasing. The previous measures proposed might not be as effective to cater the issue. Pornography is illegal in Malaysia with owning any kind of obscene materials is punishable (Sulistiyanta et al., 2023) and there are efforts to block the distribution by blocking access to several pornography websites but this measure had proven to be ineffective by the high access from this country (Malik, 2021). Different preventive measure such as psychological or developmental approaches (Jodi et al., 2023) need to be further explored to suit the current generations. Previous studies on pornography suggested that one of the major factor teenagers was exposed to pornography is to learn about sexual behaviour (Andrie et al., 2021; Farre et al., 2020; Goh et al., 2023; Jhe et al., 2023; Setyawati et al., 2020; Sudin & Loganathan, 2022). Jodi et al. (2023) suggested Islamic-based human development approach be integrated into comprehensive sexual health education can help reduce pornography issue among teenagers which can build the internal resistance of teenagers themselves. Development of psychological internal strength through strengthening of the personality, creating awareness towards influencing factors and religiosity level among the teenagers will be able to enhance the resilience level. (Che Wil & Othman, 2021). Therefore, religiosity is something worthwhile to be examined among teenagers with pornography behaviours, especially in the local context both in terms of

protective factor against the behaviour or the behaviour having effects towards their connection with their religious values.

In the Malaysia context itself, Tan, Goh, et al. (2022) found contrasting results from Zohor Ali et al. (2021) in which the authors suggest the majority Muslim Malaysian sample in the latter research is a factor in why the degree of problematic pornography behaviour is found to be lower as compared to former research which sampled the majority Chinese Malaysian sample. In a study among Malaysian TVET students with a majority Malay Muslim sample, it was also found that samples that perceive themselves as religious have lower permissive feelings towards pornography (Sudin & Loganathan, 2022). This suggests that being Muslim reduces the frequency of pornography behaviour and this is in line with the research by Farre et al. (2020) in which it was found that in Spanish samples being a Muslim decreases the odds of using pornography. For other religions and samples, other research found that the frequency of engaging in pornography behaviour is lower in the religious sample (Grubbs, Lee, et al., 2020; Hotchkiss, 2021). Hotchkiss (2021) suggested that this happens because it is a lesser sin as compared to extramarital sexual relationships. Religious practice is negatively correlated with the frequency of engaging in pornography behaviour suggesting that moral reasons are effective inhibition towards pornography behaviour. In contrast, Klein and Cooper (2019) have shown that undergraduate samples that identify as Christian in their research showed more engagement in pornography.

Other than the frequency of engagement with pornography behaviour, religiosity can affect the severity of the pornography behaviour. For example positive correlation between religiosity and severity of compulsive sexual behaviour (CSBD) disorder which includes pornography behaviour has been found (Efrati, 2023). The researcher inferred that the correlation may be due to repressed sexual desires that were brought from their religiosity. The results are also supported by other research in which although the religious sample spent less time with pornography behaviour, the religious sample exhibited higher compulsive pornography behaviour symptoms disregarding the actual time spent engaging in the behaviour (Grubbs, Lee, et al., 2020; Hotchkiss, 2021). This phenomenon can be explained by the feelings of shame and guilt that arise from engaging with pornography while being religious which may facilitate the progress of the severity of the behaviour to a compulsive level (Hotchkiss, 2021). This is speculated to happen due to the negative perception towards pornography perpetuated by religious groups (Grubbs, Lee, et al., 2020). This is supported by De Jong and Cook (2021) which found that shame is a moderating factor that causes the findings of positive correlation of religiosity and self perceived compulsive pornography behaviour. This phenomenon is called moral incongruence. These may be due to them feeling guilty and sinful as engaging in pornography is against most religion teaching in the samples. Furthermore, the teenagers that continue to engage with pornography become less religious as they get older (Alexandraki et al., 2018) probably to avoid these negative feelings due to moral incongruence.

It is important to note that religiosity could be a spectrum by the degree of faith and belief and also engagement with the religious activities. The existing research mainly utilizes self-reported religiosity on a scale and while some uses the dichotomy of "yes or no" or what religion the samples identify as. In a multicultural country like Malaysia, this is further complicated by the different religions that different individuals identify as and therefore may

view pornography and sexual desires differently. For example, Tan, Goh, et al. (2022) speculated that their research found differing prevalence due to the demographic of sample population. This shown that being Malay and Muslim, reduces frequency of pornography as it is viewed as sinful and immoral (Jodi et al., 2023). Meanwhile, Malaysian Chinese with more liberal belief and faith find pornography behaviour more permissive.

Thus it is more important to view the aspects of religiosity more openly in qualitative design research with careful open-ended questions to view the relationship between religiosity and pornography behaviour as subjectively experienced by the teenagers in Malaysia.

### **Objectives**

The objective of this research is to examine the relationship between compulsive pornography behaviour and religiosity of teenagers in a juvenile detention institution which can be a guidance towards developing pornography behaviour prevention policies. The current study focuses on teenagers' compulsive pornography behaviour and religiosity to obtain data about the common lived experiences of the participants within this aspect. Thus the objective of this research are:

1. To examine the influence of religiosity on pornography behaviour
2. To examine the influence of pornography behaviour on religiosity

### **Methods and Instruments**

This study is a qualitative research design focused on teenagers in juvenile institution's compulsive pornography behaviour and religiosity to obtain data about the common lived experiences of the participants within this aspect. The study will be descriptive and will not attempt to explain or have an in-depth understanding or the "why" of the behaviour..

The chosen site is a rehabilitation institution for juvenile delinquents. The institution houses troubled adolescents with experience in engaging with pornography (Habidin et al., 2023; Mohammad & Nooraini, 2020). The experts and caretakers such as the social worker or correctional officer who handle the teenagers were interviewed as well to get a different set of data based on secondary observation. Purposeful sampling was used where participants consisted of teenagers in the juvenile rehabilitation institution who had a history of pornography behaviour based on the recommendations from the caretaker or experts. 10 teenagers currently in a juvenile institution with a history of pornography interview were interviewed. Their age ranged from 13-19, all male, with 8 identifying as Malay and Muslim, and 2 Indian race and of Hindu religion. For the secondary observatory participant interview, 3 caretakers were interviewed, 2 of them correctional officers and one religious teacher (ustaz).

This research employed interviews with open-ended semi-structured questions. The interview sets of questions were validated by experts in psychology and counselling research to confirm the validity of the questions were relevant to the research objectives. Among the questions asked included questions about how religiosity was related to their pornography behaviour during the onset of the behaviour and how their religiosity was affected by the pornography behaviour after the behaviour started. One by one interview sessions were conducted by a registered counsellor after consents were obtained. The interviews were recorded. The verbatim from the interviews were analysed thematically. Inductive open

coding was used. This research was approved by the University Technology Malaysia (UTM) Ethics Committee. (Approval no: UTMREC-2024-77).

### Results and Discussion

The themes that emerged from interviews for the influence of religiosity towards pornography behaviour are *'irrelevant'*, *'discomfort'*, *'knows sinful but no effects'* and *'easier rehabilitation'*. Meanwhile, themes that emerged for the influence of pornography behaviour towards religiosity are *'no consequences'*, *'reduced worship'* and *'reduced faith'*.

For the influence of religiosity on pornography behaviour among 10 teenagers interviewed, 6 of them shared that their religiosity was *irrelevant* or has no effect towards pornography behaviour. They shared that their amount of worship and strength of faith did not reduce or increase the frequency of them engaging in pornography behaviour and did not also alter their emotional state while or directly after engaging pornography. This was also agreed universally by all 3 caretakers interviewed. For example; P1 mentioned *"only now (there's regret). At the time any regret etc is not there. Then when came in here, I don't regret getting inside..."* Similarly P5 shared *"no I don't think so (there any relationship between pornography behaviour and religiosity)"*. Similarly, E1 shared that *"In my opinion, in this world there are only two things that cannot be how to say, change or difficult to change or can relate it to religiosity. What is the cause? One sexual, two drugs. It does not matter who you are, poor or rich, high religiosity or low, because of these two things, they can lose. They will still do it"*. Other than that, 4 of the participants shared that due to religiosity, they experienced *discomfort* because of pornography behaviour. They feel regret and sinful. For example P4 said *"it is like we are muslim, but we still do things that are prohibited. Like that I felt some regret"*. 3 of the participants shared that they *know sinful/wrong but does not affect pornography behaviour*. P7 shared, *"I know it sinful, but when I am bored, I do it anyways"* Similarly a Hindu teenager, P8 shared *"it is a sin, but I don't care"*.

Additionally, although the religious teacher agreed that religiosity does not reduce or prevent pornography behaviour, the religiosity allows *easier rehabilitation*. He shared *"The difference is obvious, between those with high religiosity and low religiosity. Like I said earlier, they will still do it. But the difference is for those who have understanding of religion and those without is, the ones who understand religion, when we give advice, they will start to change, because they understand. While the other one, what we say will go in one ear and out of the other"*

Meanwhile for the influence of pornography behaviour towards religiosity, half (5) of the participants shared that there are *no consequences* or they noticed no changes in their religiosity after pornography behaviour. For example, P3 further elaborated, *"After doing that (engaging in pornography), settled(satisfied)... I would go out, do prayers etc. Even though I do watch and do that, I still do my prayers. And thought about it, do it again. And still, go out, do my prayers."*

There are also shared experiences of *reduced worship* where 3 of them shared that their act of worship had lessened since they started engaging in pornography behaviour. For example, P1 shared that *"prayers becoming less, not reciting the Quran, something like that"*. *Reduced worship* is also a theme that emerged. P4 shared that he became less interested in his religion.



He shared, *'Well before I watched, I was starting to learn more about religion, but afterwards I feel like I got further away.'*

The findings in this study show that there are little direct relationship between religiosity and pornography behaviour for teenagers in the juvenile rehabilitation institution. Although as discussed before in other research, religion have contrasting correlation in the frequency of engaging in pornography (Farre et al., 2020; Grubbs, Lee, et al., 2020; Hotchkiss, 2021; Klein & Cooper, 2019; Sudin & Loganathan, 2022; Tan, Goh, et al., 2022; Zohor Ali et al., 2021) the results were found in quantitative studies. This means the correlation between pornography behaviour and religiosity found in those research were not causation or direct relation and may be explained by other factors such as social factors (Gallagher & Tierney, 2013)

Similar findings were found where religiosity brings discomfort to teenagers with pornography behaviour. Pornography behaviour concerning religiosity brings shame and moral incongruence (De Jong & Cook, 2021; Grubbs & Kraus, 2021; Hotchkiss, 2021). This is brought upon by negative perception towards pornography by religious group (Grubbs, Lee, et al., 2020). It is also viewed as sinful and immoral in Islam (Jodi et al., 2023). Although religiosity has shown no direct influence on pornography behaviour, pornography behaviour may reduce their religiosity.

The findings from this research mean that religion may not be the most directly effective preventive factor against pornography behaviour. However, a religion-based human development approach integrated into prevention and intervention means is still worth exploring to reduce pornography issues among teenagers (Jodi et al., 2023) as developing teenagers' personalities through religion helps enhance resilience levels which will help them make better choices (Che Wil & Othman, 2021).

This research findings add to the limited body of knowledge about pornography in which the previous research is done quantitatively and in a cross-sectional design to get a reliable correlation and generalizability, but unable to prove cause and effect relationships. (Bothe et al., 2021; De Jong & Cook, 2021; Dwulit & Rzymiski, 2019b; Efrati, 2023; Farre et al., 2020; George et al., 2019; Goh et al., 2023; Grubbs & Kraus, 2021). This research presents the subjective experience of participants about religiosity and pornography. This research can also be a precursor for more research in this topic in the future.

The findings may help develop a more efficient preventive measure and intervention to be planned by the stakeholders. Adopting a religious-based intervention and prevention may be helpful, but focusing on the morals of pornography regarding religion is not the right focus and perhaps focusing on the personality development and social aspects of religion in this program could be more effective (Setyawati et al., 2020).

Finally, the findings in this research have limitations. The limited sample makes these research findings not generalizable to the teenagers population in Malaysia. However, this research could help in guiding further research in this field in the future.

## Conclusion

The findings of this research show that there is not much influence between religiosity and pornography behaviour and vice versa in teenagers currently in juvenile rehabilitation institutions. However, incorporating religion in preventive and intervention measures could still be helpful by focusing more on the personality development and social aspects instead of the moral aspects of religion. Although this research is not generalizable to the entire teenage population in Malaysia, the insights from the findings of this research could potentially generate more research in this field in the future and serve as a guide for preventive and intervention programmes by stakeholders.

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