Pornography and Moral Incongruence Among Young Men in the Western Church

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**Abstract**

Moral incongruence theory posits that moral disapproval is a primary factor leading to perceived pornography-related problems and distress for those from religious contexts, potentially to greater degrees than actual pornography usage. This research explores the correlation between pornography and moral incongruence among young Christian men, a demographic at the convergence of three high risk indicators (age, sex, and religiosity) and caught between the opposing moral frameworks of younger generations and the Western Church.

**Pornography and Moral Incongruence Among Young Men in the Western Church**

The issue of pornography is a cultural phenomenon that has been vastly redefined and amplified over recent decades with the rise of technology and internet accessibility (Cooper et al., 2000). In many ways, the growth and expansion of pornography has occurred at rates that culture did not anticipate or prepare for, causing communities, families, and individuals from all spheres and demographics to react and attempt to catch up with both its scope and impact (McDowell & Barna Group, 2016). The Western Church has not been exempted from this rapid expansion and evolution of pornography, as research indicates that it is not only a present reality for a growing number of Christians, but also that it has unique and potentially amplified impacts among religious demographics (Baltazar et al., 2010; McDowell & Barna Group, 2016; Nelson et al., 2010; Short et al., 2015). The purpose of this work is to explore the impact of pornography among young Christian men within the emerging moral incongruence framework, which has evolved in recent years as moral approval has been identified as a key correlating variable to pornography and its impacts on religious demographics (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019).

Research indicates that young Christian men lie at the intersection of three demographics—males, younger generations, and religious individuals—that experience unique and amplified effects from pornography (Abell et al., 2006; Baltazar et al., 2010; McDowell & Barna Group, 2016; Nelson et al., 2010; Patterson & Price 2012; Perry, 2019; Short et al., 2015; Stack et al., 2004). Additionally, younger Christians are at the intersection of two diametrically opposing moral frameworks regarding sexual values and pornography, ​with Christians generally believing that pornography is morally unacceptable, while younger generations are increasingly classifying pornography as a normative and morally acceptable aspect of culture (McDowell & Barna Group, 2016; Nelson et al., 2010; Whitehead & Perry, 2017).

This work aims to explore this specific demographic, which lies at the intersection of multiple high-risk indicators (age, sex, religiosity) and is caught between these opposing moral framework, yet has not been explored within the emerging moral incongruence framework. While pornography is a present and growing reality for both males and females, the focus of this work will be on young males, a demographic that the literature indicates is affected at greater rates than females, and in unique ways (Cooper et al., 2004; Lofgren-Martenson & Mansson, 2010; Poulsen et al., 2013; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2005). This research aims to answer the following question, “What effect does religiosity have on pornography usage, moral incongruence, and subsequent perceived problems due to pornography use among young men in the Western Church?” In exploring this question, the potential correlations between pornography use, religion, both perceived and actual problems due to pornography use, and moral approval will be explored and analyzed within a recently developed moral incongruence theoretical model. As young men in the Church will soon be the fathers, husbands, laymen, and potential church or ministry leaders, it is critical for educators, parents, and Christian leaders to deepen their understanding of how this rapidly growing cultural phenomenon is uniquely impacting this demographic, not only in their formative developmental years, but as they move into adulthood as well. From this understanding, ministry leaders can begin developing research-based strategies that are rooted in the gospel of Christ, as they seek to proactively combat this cultural phenomenon and issue.

**Intersection of Religion and Pornography**

**Religion as Protection or Compulsion?**

There has been an increased curiosity among researchers in understanding how complex phenomena such as religion and pornography converge and interact with one another. Challenges inevitably arise when examining a morally sensitive topic, such as pornography, among groups that have stigmas against it, such as those from religious contexts (MacInnis & Hodson, 2015; Perry, 2019). As a result of these challenges, there is some discrepancy among researchers regarding the role and effect of religion on pornography usage. Many have reported that religion may provide a protective factor against pornography use (Hardy et al., 2013; Rasmussen & Bierman, 2016). However, a study by Abell et al. (2006) reported those with higher religious or spiritual measures had slightly higher rates of pornography use. The authors posited that religion may actually create a compulsion to pornography use, as those with stronger spiritual beliefs or from religious contexts are more likely to participate in isolated sexual activity like pornography, rather than more overt forms of sexual expression that are criticized and viewed as immoral in religious contexts (Abell et al., 2006). In general, the multi-faceted nature of religiosity and pornography create challenges and wide variability in conclusions among researchers, and additionally seem to suggest that other factors, such as cultural context and internal versus external religious motivation, may be key variables in understanding the correlation between these complex constructs (Abell et al., 2006; Short et al., 2015).

**Scope of Pornography Among Young Christian Men**

Due to these challenges, it is not surprising to find that the scope of the issue of pornography among young Christian men, as well as in the Church more broadly, is difficult to clearly identify (McDowell & Barna Group, 2016). Perry & Schleifer (2018a) found that although those in Western Protestantism view less pornography overall, the rates of usage within the church over time have been increasing at similar rates to those outside the church. In one study, 28% of practicing Christians ages 13 and older reported that they actively seek out pornography on a regular basis (McDowell & Barna Group, 2016). While this is drastically less than the 61% of the general population in that age range that reported to actively seek out pornography, it does indicate that it is a present reality in the Church for a significant number of young people (McDowell & Barna Group, 2016). One report indicated that 41% of self-reported Christians between the ages of 13 and 24 actively seek out pornography on a regular basis at least once per month (McDowell & Barna Group, 2016). An earlier study reported that 47% of students at a Christian university, including 68% of males, reported some level of pornography use (Baltazar et al., 2010). However, in this study, only 11% were considered regular users of pornography, which is a significantly lower number than the 41% reported by McDowell & Barna Group (2016) (Baltazar et al., 2010). In a study of a similar demographic, 64% of students at a Christian university reported having viewed internet pornography at some point, with 26% regularly viewing at the time of the study (Short et al., 2015).

**Impact of Pornography on Young Christian Men**

While there is some variability regarding the actual scope of pornography use among young Christians, there appears to be more consensus surrounding its detrimental effects. Researchers have reported negative impacts among younger religious demographics within a variety of domains, including relationally, socially, emotionally, and spiritually. While not exhaustive in scope, a brief summary of some of these impacts is provided in Table 1. While some of these impacts are not limited to Christians, researchers have found that this group experiences many effects to greater degrees than those considered less religious (Doran & Price, 2014; Perry, 2016). Further, among younger demographics, research has shown that the negative effects on self-reported measures of spirituality, such as importance of faith, closeness to God, and religious doubt are more prominent for teenagers than adults (Perry & Hayward, 2017). This highlights that pornography may not only be associated with and affect religiosity and spirituality for young men in the Church but may do so to greater degrees than either adults or those outside of a religious context (Perry & Hayward, 2017). The research appears to support the assertion that a convergence of the effects on males, younger generations, and those in the Western Church, potentially creates a unique and amplified impact on young Christian men, as each of these individual indicators have displayed heightened effects (Perry & Hayward, 2017).

**Table 1**

Impact of pornography on religious demographics

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Demographic**  | **Impact**  |
| Christians (all ages) | * Lower views of self (Nelson et al., 2010)
* Lower levels of reported happiness (Nelson et al., 2010)
* Decreased involvement in religious activities (Perry, 2019)
* Negative impact on marital happiness (Doran & Price, 2014)
* Increased divorce rates (Perry, 2016; Perry & Schleifer, 2018b).
* Decreased engagement by fathers with their children regarding religious matters (Perry, 2015)
 |
| Christian adolescents & emerging adults  | * Higher levels of depression (Nelson et al., 2010).
* Lower levels of religious-practice involvement (Nelson et al., 2010).
* Lower levels of self-worth and identity (Nelson et al., 2010).
* Diminished relationship quality with parents (Nelson et al., 2010)
* Diminished views of marriage (Malcolm & Naufal, 2014)
 |

**Amplified Impacts on Younger Christians**

Kwee (2007) recognized this potential amplification, indicating that young Christian men experience a unique distress from the use of pornography. Young men in the Church may experience amplified uncertainty about the role of sexuality in their lives as they transition from adolescence into adulthood in today’s culture, as they are growing up in the tension between the sexual values promoted in culture and within the Church (Kwee, 2007; Perry, 2019; Regnerus, 2007; Ward, 1996). It has long been known that social control, or the pressure which encourages or discourages specific behaviors, is one of the mechanisms underlying the reduction of deviant behaviors in religious contexts (Durkheim, 1966; Hardy et al., 2013). Within the social control framework, one’s perceptions of social norms are what develop the standards for appropriate behavior within a specific context (Hardy et al., 2013). As with any moral community united around common beliefs and values, a unique subculture exists within Christian churches, with broadly accepted expectations, values, and behavioral standards (Hardy et al., 2013; Patterson & Price, 2012; Ward, 1996). As young men are exposed to both the values and standards for behavior presented within the Church and those promoted, whether overtly or covertly, by the secular culture, they are forced to attempt to reconcile these differing views and opposing cultural messages. This phenomenon can create a tension for young people in religious contexts that is not experienced to the same degree by those outside of the Church.

One study reported that states with greater rates of church attendance and higher levels of conservative values also had higher levels of internet pornography searches (MacInnis & Hodson, 2015; Whitehead & Perry, 2017). One hypothesis that has been presented to explain this phenomenon is that the youth in these homes and communities are searching for online pornography (Whitehead & Perry, 2017). Conservative parents and those considered more religiously devoted generally provide less sex education to children and provide more active oversight of their children’s sexual activities (Regnerus, 2007). Therefore, it is possible that the youth in these homes and communities, who have received less sexual education and more active restriction, both from their churches as well as in their households, are more prone to pursue covert means of sexual exploration, such as accessing pornography online (Whitehead & Perry, 2017).

This hypothesis appears to connect with that presented by Abell et al. (2006), which offered that those with higher measures of religiosity may be more likely to turn to anonymous internet pornography rather than more overt forms of sexual expression which are likely to be condemned within religious contexts (Patterson & Price, 2012). This highlights the tension that exists surrounding a morally sensitive topic such as pornography among groups that have traditionally been morally opposed to overt forms of sexual expression. Recent research exploring this phenomenon has consistently found that moral views, or more specifically internal moral congruence, appears to be a root issue and a critical component for understanding the broader impact of pornography on religious demographics, such as young men in the Western Church.

**Pornography Addiction Among Christians**

One unique amplified impact that has consistently been found to correlate with moral views is the idea of perceived pornography addiction, which has been shown to be elevated among religious demographics (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019). While there is much contention in clinical and academic circles surrounding the actual nature of compulsive pornography use as a clinically diagnosable addictive disorder, the reality is that a high number of individuals report “feeling” addicted or out of control with their pornography use (Cooper et al., 2000; Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019). Additionally, the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), which recently adopted compulsive sexual behavior disorder (CSBD) for inclusion in its upcoming edition that will come into effect in January 2022, included a caveat in its formal definition, stating that CSBD does not include distress that is “related to moral judgments and disapproval about sexual impulses, urges, or behaviors” (World Health Organization, 2020). The inclusion of this statement indicates that some percentage of people experience distress due to sexual activity and pornography usage that is rooted in moral concerns rather than actual dysregulated or compulsive use, so much so that a delineation of these two issues was warranted in the official ICD definition (World Health Organization, 2020). It has been consistently found across the literature that religious men are more likely to consider themselves addicted to pornography, even at similar or lesser rates of actual usage, than those that who do not consider themselves religious (Fisher et al. 2019; Perry, 2019; Rasmussen et al., 2018). These findings, along with the ICD delineation, highlight that moral approval is a key variable relating to pornography and its impacts among religious demographics who have strong stigmas and convictions against it.

**Moral Views & Pornography Distress**

**Cultural Moral Views of Pornography**

Moral views of pornography have been connected to a range of generational and cultural factors, with a wide disparity existing between views among younger generations and older ones. One study found that 59% of Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) considered pornography bad for society, compared to only 31% of young adults and 43% of teens (McDowell & Barna Group, 2016). In a secular study, nearly two thirds of young male participants and half of young females reported that viewing pornography was acceptable (Carroll et al., 2008). A study of adolescents noted a cultural shift in the views of pornography from a behavior that once was regarded as shameful or immoral to one that is now socially acceptable (Lofgren-Martenson & Mansson, 2010). These findings indicate that generational influences appear to have a strong effect on individual beliefs regarding the moral acceptance of pornography, even in an age when the broader research is increasingly indicating its potential dangers and harm (Truth about Porn, 2020). This highlights a unique tension for young men in the Western Church, as they are among the younger generations that are increasingly more likely to morally accept pornography, despite the general views in the Church being quite different (McDowell & Barna Group, 2016).

**Moral Views of Pornography in the Church**

Although there appears to be a growing acceptance of pornography as a new norm among younger generations, those in religious communities have continued to hold strong condemning views towards it (Grubbs, Exline, et al. 2015; Sherkat & Ellison, 1997; Thomas, 2016). Subsequently, as expected, religious individuals have been more likely to disapprove of pornography usage over time (Grubbs, Exline, et al. 2015; Sherkat & Ellison, 1997; Thomas, 2016). Among Christians, there has historically been little debate regarding the moral and ethical concern presented by pornography, as it is viewed to be in opposition to traditional Biblical ideals and moral values regarding sexuality (Whitehead & Perry, 2017). Moral communities, such as churches or religious groups, naturally create cultural norms and associated behavioral standards which generally condemn certain acts, such as overt expressions of sexuality, based on their perception as immoral or unnatural (Baker et al., 2015; Gault-Sherman & Draper, 2012;Hardy et al., 2013; Whitehead & Perry, 2017). Within the Western Church, these standards and norms are built upon Biblical principles and mandates, as well as historically on natural law theory, which provides both a philosophical and theological foundation for moral opposition to pornography in the Church (Hsiao, 2016; Whitehead & Perry, 2017).

While there have historically been strong negative correlations between religiosity and acceptability of pornography, there appears to be some discrepancy between the views of religious groups and that of individuals within the specific religious contexts (Nelson et al., 2010; Perry & Schleifer, 2018a; Wilt et al., 2016). One broad study found that 77% of practicing Christians believed pornography was morally wrong and bad for society, compared to only 37% of the rest of the population, highlighting the stark difference in moral approval between Christians and the secular population (McDowell & Barna Group, 2016). However, it is important to point out that, despite the strong moral stance of the Church as a whole, the results of this study would indicate that 23% of those who consider themselves Christians do not have a level of moral opposition to pornography that would deem it bad for society (McDowell & Barna Group, 2016). It has been posited that this shift toward some level of acceptance among practicing Christians is due to a shift in the foundations on which moral opposition to pornography has been built in the Church among younger generations towards more secular and humanistic forms of authority (Thomas, 2013). This shift of the anti-pornography narrative within the Church is one potential reason that the issue has appeared to grow within the church walls at similar rates as in secular culture (Perry & Schleifer, 2018a; Thomas, 2013). Additionally, this introduces a tension that exists for young men, as well as all from Christian contexts, as they must attempt to reconcile the narratives and messages surrounding the moral nature of sexuality and pornography presented by culture versus those within the Church (Hardy et al., 2013).

**Moral Incongruence**

As research indicates most churchgoers generally regard pornography as immoral and unethical, yet a growing number regularly engage in it, a unique tension becomes apparent among those from moral communities like the Western Church (Perry, 2019). Perry (2019) coined the term *moral incongruence* to describe the unique phenomenon in which a number of churchgoers morally reject, yet regularly view, pornography. Similarly, Rasmussen & Kohut (2017) described the disconnect between one’s moral conviction or beliefs regarding pornography and their actual behaviors as a form of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Short et al. (2015) expanded on this phenomenon, describing the effect as scrupulosity, or the feelings of guilt associated with the violation of individual moral standards. Each of these terms describes a similar phenomenon that is the result of a disconnect or discrepancy between one’s individual convictions or values and their behaviors or actions.

Within the current research, this phenomenon will be described as moral incongruence, as this term has been adopted within the most recent research, with theories and models of moral incongruence recently emerging in this field of inquiry (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019; Perry, 2019). This effect has been especially noted among religious demographics such as the Western Church. The core tenets of the Christian faith provide a framework for moral opposition, but also provide the conditions to amplify the negative effects of pornography, thus creating a scenario that fuels shame, guilt, and discouragement (Perry, 2019). As previously noted, churchgoers typically reported belief that pornography viewing is wrong, yet a growing number still participate or engage in it to some degree (Perry, 2019). This ultimately creates cycles that can lead to withdrawal from faith, along with other internal and external effects, presumably driven by guilt and shame from the growing internal incongruence between core beliefs and actions (Perry, 2019; Perry & Whitehead, 2018).

Patterson & Price (2012) hypothesized that among those from religious contexts that have strong social norms, such as the Western Church, the impacts or costs of deviant activity, such as pornography use, is greater than in the general population. Research has found that practicing Christians are one of the highest demographics that admit to feeling a sense of shame and guilt after viewing pornography, almost twice as likely as non-religious participants (McDowell & Barna Group, 2016; Nelson et al., 2010). This effect has been observed in young people, as well as the population at large (McDowell & Barna Group, 2016). One report indicated that 53% of practicing Christians between the ages of 13 and 17, and 40% of those between the ages of 18 and 24, reported feeling a sense of guilt about using pornography, which was approximately twice as high as those not associated with Christian beliefs and practices (McDowell & Barna Group, 2016). A meta-analysis which looked at studies for over 2000 participants consistently found that those with higher levels of religious participation demonstrated higher levels of feelings of internal incongruence from pornography usage (Grubbs, Kraus, & Perry, 2019).

***Moral Incongruence and Amplified Effects***

It has been consistently found that religious men are more likely to consider themselves addicted to pornography, even at similar or lesser rates of actual usage, than those who do not consider themselves religious (Fisher et al. 2019; Perry, 2019; Rasmussen et al., 2018). The phenomenon of elevated moral incongruence has been linked to the higher rates of perceived pornography addiction, as well as many of the amplified effects of pornography among religious groups noted in Table 1 (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019). A study by Grubbs, Grant, and Engelman (2019) found that moral incongruence and religiousness were some of the strongest predictors of self-reported feelings of pornography addiction. In the previously noted meta-analysis, moral incongruence was the most consistent predictor of the belief that one was experiencing pornography issues or problems, even more than actual pornography use (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019).

Researchers have indicated that effects of pornography among religious groups, such as higher levels of depression, decreased participation in religious activities, and withdrawal in relationships, were associated with issues of cognitive dissonance and internal moral inconsistency (Doran & Price, 2014; Nelson et al., 2010). Perry (2019) attributed the tendency to withdraw from religious participation among those viewing pornography to “failing to reconcile discrepancies between one’s sexual behavior and one’s religious values and identity” (p. 77). Shame and cognitive dissonance associated with increased pornography use were presented as the correlating factor that most significantly impacted religious engagement of fathers with children (Perry, 2015). With the issues of cognitive dissonance and moral incongruence rising to the surface as potential root issues and catalysts of the increased negative effects among those from religious contexts, the scholarly community has begun to further explore this connection in recent years, with the field of moral incongruence emerging as researchers aim to further understand the interaction of these complex phenomena (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019; Perry, 2019).

***Moral Incongruence Model***

Drawing upon these correlations between religious measures, moral incongruence, and perceived problems due to pornography usage such as perceived addiction, Grubbs, Perry, et al. (2019) introduced a new theoretical framework and model for understanding this phenomenon. They posited that the feelings of dysregulation and perceived problems or addiction that many individuals feel related to pornography use are better understood as distress connected to the incongruence between behaviors and moral beliefs, rather than a result of actual dysregulation or addiction (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019). As previously noted, this hypothesis is consistent with the ICD-11’s definition of CSBD, which delineated distress due to “moral judgments and disapproval” from distress due to elevated or dysregulated use (World Health Organization, 2020). Based on their research and a meta-analysis, Grubbs, Perry, et al. (2019) developed the perceived problems due to moral incongruence (PPMI) theoretical model to outline the potential connection between moral incongruence and perceived problems due to pornography usage, such as distress and perceived addiction, which is shown in Figure 1 (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019).

Within the PPMI model, multiple pathways may lead to distress from pornography use. The first pathway to pornography-related distress stems from dysregulated or elevated pornography use which an individual feels is beyond their control (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019). This pathway is supported by an abundance of literature that indicates that many individuals do in fact experience dysregulation and subsequent distress regarding elevated levels of pornography usage, even if it is not officially deemed as addiction or a diagnosed clinical disorder (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019; Kraus et al., 2015; Gola & Potenza, 2016). However, the model’s primary contribution is the second pathway, which shows moral disapproval of pornography leading to moral incongruence, distress, and other perceived pornography-related problems (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019). As this second pathway is the primary new development, the model has become more widely known within the academic field as the PPMI Model (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019). Within the PPMI pathway, one’s moral disapproval of pornography leads to incongruence between one’s values and behaviors, thus creating perceived problems and distress from usage that is independent of actual levels of usage (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019). It is important to recognize that within the PPMI pathway, religiousness was included as the primary variable leading to the moral disapproval of pornography (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019). The primary and central assertion offered by the PPMI model is that moral incongruence, stemming from religious beliefs, serves as the primary correlating variable to perceived problematic pornography use, such as perceived addiction and distress (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019).

**Figure 1**

Perceived Problems Due to Moral Incongruence (PPMI) model (Grubbs, Perry, et al. 2019).



*Note.* Bold pathway represents the proposed moral incongruence pathway.

While the proposed PPMI model demonstrates two possible but distinct pathways to perceived problems and distress, it is quite possible that the two paths are not mutually exclusive, as many individuals may experience some level of dysregulation and moral incongruence surrounding pornography usage simultaneously (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019). An understanding of, and delineation between, problems stemming from actual dysregulation and those resulting from moral incongruence is critical not only for future research, but for professionals, church leaders, and clinicians as well (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019). The root cause of distress and perceived problems differs greatly if stemming from moral disapproval and subsequent incongruence rather than actual dysregulated use. As these root issues differ greatly, so would the types of necessary supports or approaches to address the issues (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019). For clinicians and ministry leaders, understanding these root issues would help determine whether support needs to focus on behavioral modification strategies or resolution of internal conflict and incongruence, which have drastically different implications (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019). Additionally, for ministry and church leaders, understanding the potential correlation between moral incongruence and pornography use among young men in the Church will be critical to developing appropriate gospel-based strategies and interventions aimed at the root of the issue and based on research, rather than historical or anecdotal approaches.

**Current Research**

**Moral Incongruence Among Young Christian Men**

Moral incongruence and the potential application of the PPMI model among young Christian men has not yet been thoroughly examined among researchers (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019; Kohut & Stolhufer, 2018). Young men from religious contexts are at the convergence of multiple demographic indicators (biological sex, age, and religious factors) which have individually shown elevated or amplified impacts from pornography (Cooper et al., 2004; Kwee, 2007; Patterson & Price, 2012; Perry, 2019; Poulsen et al., 2013). One’s feeling of being addicted to pornography was reported to be most strongly associated with male gender, younger age, and greater measures of religiosity, along with greater moral incongruence and pornography usage (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019).

Additionally, while a few recent studies have begun to explore the validity of the PPMI model more broadly, currently no known studies have explored the model among young men in the Church. However, from a moral incongruence perspective, this demographic is one of heightened interest as they are at the crossroads of two opposing moral frameworks, with those from religious settings and younger generations generally holding different views regarding the moral acceptability of pornography (Caroll et al., 2008; McDowell & Barna Group, 2016; Whitehead & Perry, 2017). While those from religious contexts generally are more disapproving of pornography, younger generations have been shown to have higher levels of acceptance and moral approval (McDowell & Barna Group, 2016; Nelson et al., 2010; Whitehead & Perry, 2017). The effect on a demographic which lies at the convergence of these opposing moral views within a theoretical framework that highlights moral approval as the primary independent variable leading to pornography related distress is of particular interest, and thus the focus of the current research.

**Purpose of Study**

As young Christian men experience these two diametrically opposed realities and moral frameworks, it is critical to explore the convergence of these factors to determine how they interact to influence their views, attitudes, and the effects of pornography. Questions naturally arise from these trends and correlations, specifically regarding how religious values and beliefs within the Western Church will influence moral incongruence among this unique demographic that sits between two opposing cultural frameworks. Do religious values and beliefs within the Western Church, built upon Biblical views of morality and sexuality, foster a strong enough moral conviction to produce an amplified moral incongruence among this demographic, similar to what has been observed in the broader Christian context? Or does the cultural influence, and the generally higher levels of moral acceptance of pornography among younger generations, lessen the influence of religion on moral views and convictions surrounding pornography and, therefore, decrease the likelihood for moral incongruence?

A potential third hybrid option is that the growing gap between moral values among Christians and Western culture may create an increased level of cognitive dissonance and, therefore, amplified internal moral incongruence among young Christian men. As the PPMI model suggests, when moral incongruence is heightened, so are perceived problems and associated intrapersonal distress (Grubbs, Perry, et al., 2019). How will this phenomenon affect a demographic in the Church that research indicates is using pornography at greater rates than ever before, and during their formative developmental years? As cognitive theorists have indicated, with the increase of cognitive dissonance, or tension between one’s values, beliefs, and actions, individuals naturally move towards the reduction of dissonance in some way (Festinger, 1957). For young Christian men, this could potentially entail moving away from traditional Christian values and more fully embracing the cultural norms and narratives or attempting to push further away from the generational and cultural influences, potentially strengthening the foundations of their Christian faith.

The upcoming study aims to address these questions through a quantitative survey of 300 young Christian men, in exploration of the broader research question, “What effect does religiosity have on moral incongruence, and subsequent perceptions of problems due to pornography use, among young men in the Western Church?” This question will be explored using moral incongruence theory and the PPMI model as a framework to analyze the correlations between religiosity, moral incongruence, pornography use, and both actual and perceived problems due to pornography use, among this demographic. Bivariate Pearson correlations, along with a path analysis, will be used for statistical analyses to examine the potential relevance and applicability of the PPMI model.

**Significance of Study**

The Western Church is currently facing an ongoing crisis in terms of its reach and impact among younger generations, with reports indicating up to 59% of Millennials leaving the Church (Barna Group, 2014). While the factors underlying this exodus are far-reaching and beyond the scope of this work, it is critical to recognize the potential of at least some level of connection between this phenomenon and the decline of traditional Christian values, including views of sexuality, in society at large and among younger generations. Research indicates a growing number of Christians are engaging in pornography, which has been linked to decreased religious involvement, withdrawal from faith communities, and withdrawal from relational engagement with parents, spouses, peers, and children (Baltazar et al., 2010; Barna Group, 2014; Doran & Price, 2014; Perry, 2015; Perry, 2016). Facing these urgent cultural and generational challenges, it is critical for the 21st century Western Church to gain a holistic understanding of the impact of pornography among younger generations and begin developing a framework for strategies accordingly.

As pornography impacts young people in the Western Church relationally, socially, psychologically, and spiritually at even greater levels than those from non-religious contexts, the Church must avoid the temptation to look the other way and instead face the reality that pornography has invaded the church walls and its impacts are significant. For those working in churches or ministries, understanding the root issues and the impact of moral incongruence is of utmost importance, as these young men are the leaders of the future who are currently in critical years of faith and identity development, and will soon be carrying the baton of faith in churches, ministries, workplaces, and families. Only when the underlying root issues are understood can appropriate interventions be developed, as ministering to one experiencing dysregulated pornography use and one primarily experiencing distress due to moral incongruence would significantly differ.

While the amplification of the negative impacts of pornography among young men in the Church is alarming, Christian parents and leaders should look to the tenets of the Christian faith for encouragement and direction in the path forward. While the impact of moral incongruence and the potential cycles of guilt and shame surrounding pornography use may be greater than originally thought, the Church must stand on the belief that so too is the potential for healing, reconciliation, and redemption through the life and work of Jesus Christ. By understanding the correlation between moral incongruence and pornography, the Church can advance forward in this fight by developing strategies rooted in the redemptive work of Jesus aimed at bridging the moral chasm and pointing to truth that leads to the healing of shame, guilt, and underlying distress from pornography, a phenomenon which may prove to be one of the most pressing challenges for today’s culture and the next generation of young men, not only in the Church but in Western society at large.

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