AN EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO SELF-PERCEIVED PORNOGRAPHY ADDICTION

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Statement of authorship

This dissertation, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Doctorate in Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy by Professional Studies *(DCPsych)*, has been written by Olga Pacholec, who declares no conflicts of interest and is solely responsible for its content. The dissertation is the result of her own research and has not been published elsewhere.

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Abstract

Despite scientific and clinical interest in problematic pornography use as a type of behavioural addiction, little is known about the qualitative characteristics of self-perceived pornography addiction. The goal of this study is to enhance the understanding of pornography addiction from the perspective of users who consider themselves addicted. To this end, semi-structured interviews were carried out with ten male participants in therapy for pornography addiction. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was applied to data gathered from the interviews to capture the essential features of their experiences. The findings demonstrate that self-perceived pornography addiction is a multi-faceted phenomenon, involving physical, psychological, behavioural, relational and ethical difficulties. Despite physical pain and instrumental treatment of one's own body, pornography consumption is perceived as a highly valued form of intimacy-free sexual conduct. The study shows that self-perceived addiction entails an alienated way of being with the focus on the self and intensely negative emotionality in the form of self-directed hostility and adverse self-perceptions. Conceptualising the experience in terms of addiction provides the self-perceived pornography addicts with a set of explanations and justifications for their behaviour. This understanding, however, raises a number of concerns, including a deep fear of stigma, the belief that addiction to pornography is particularly difficult to overcome and the assumption that their problems are perceived by others as a form of self-indulgence rather than genuine difficulty. The study adds to the knowledge of the phenomenon, which is predominantly explanatory in nature, by revealing new qualitative characteristics and offering insights rooted in the lived experience. In the absence of evidence-based recommendations and guidance for practitioners, it has the potential to inform clinical practice of clinical psychologists working with clients who experience problems with pornography consumption.

Key words

Addiction, behavioural addiction, pornography, problematic/excessive/compulsive/high pornography consumption, pornography dependence, (self-perceived) pornography addiction

Tables

1. Introduction

1.1. Statement of problem

Self-perceived pornography addiction refers to the experience of those pornography users who self-identify as addicts because they feel unable to control their pornography consumption, which interferes with their lives (Sniewski et al., 2018). Consideration of problematic pornography consumption as a type of behavioural addiction received much scientific and clinical interest. However, there continue to be significant gaps in understanding the difficulties involved and the way in which they may be addressed therapeutically (Kraus et al., 2014; Duffy et al., 2016; Sniewski et al., 2018).

The present study explores the experiential dimensions of self-perceived pornography addiction in order to identify the key features of the phenomenon, which would inform clinical practice of counselling psychologists working with clients who experience problems with pornography consumption. This is done by looking at the phenomenon from the perspective of those users who conceptualise their experience in terms of addiction, along with applying the existential-phenomenological approach, with the focus on subjective human experience from a descriptive-interpretative viewpoint (Cooper, 2003).

1.2. Research aims

The primary aim is to enhance the understanding of self-perceived pornography addiction by generating insights grounded in the lived experience. In this way, the study will add to the existing body of knowledge, which is predominantly explanatory and quantitative in nature, by providing a qualitative perspective.

The secondary aim is to generate knowledge informing clinical practice of psychologists who work with clients experiencing problems with pornography consumption to help them better understand the difficulties to be addressed in therapy.

The central research question is: *How is self-perceived addiction to pornography experienced?* More specifically, the study aims to investigate the various dimensions of the experience and the types of concerns it entails, with attention to the factors that influence one's perception of their experience in terms of addiction.

The research is expected to contribute to the on-going academic debate on problematic pornography use and its potential overlap with addiction. With its focus on the user's experience and perception, its findings are also of relevance to counselling psychology.

1.3.   Contextual rationale

Research reports increasing consumption of pornography over recent years in the form of sexually explicit movies, animations, photography, text and audio material (Gmeiner et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2016). Although prevalence of pornography consumption varies across populations, it is estimated that on average between 46% to 69% of men and 16% to 33% of women consume pornography (Binnie & Reavey, 2019). Although most users do not experience problems related to pornography use, some encounter psychological, somatic or sexual difficulties, which they associate with pornography consumption (Rosser at al., 2014; Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2017). It is estimated that 10% to 28% of users might be adversely affected (Kraus et al., 2016).

Various explanations were proposed to understand the mechanisms underlying problematic consumption. In this context, a concept of pornography addiction emerged suggesting that pornography use characterised by escalation of behaviour, poor psychosocial and psychosexual functioning, as well as failed attempts to cease consumption is a type of behavioural addiction (Young, 2001; Skinner, 2005; Hall, 2019). Neurobiological research in particular provides arguments based on common mechanisms underpinning addictive behaviours in support of the addiction-based explanations of problematic pornography consumption (Voon et al., 2014; Kuhn et al., 2014; Love et al., 2015). However, to date, there are no criteria for diagnosing pornography addiction and the condition is not listed as an addictive disorder in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) or the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (Willliams et al., 2020).

So far, research has focused on determining whether pornography addiction is a genuine addiction (Ley et al., 2014; Sniewski et al., 2018) by investigating the similarities with other types of addictions, behavioural manifestations, causal explanations and the impact on psycho-sexual health and behaviour (Bridges, 2010; Voon et al., 2014; Parker et al., 2016). Qualitative aspects that could help understand the reality of self-perceived pornography addiction remain under-explored (Safron, 2013; McCormac & Wignall, 2017).

1.4. Personal rationale

It is acknowledged that qualitative researchers should make their personal experience with the object of inquiry explicit because it affects the way in which the topic is explored (McLeod, 2015). When looking back at the points of connection between the subject matter of this research and my personal experience, I realised that my interest grew over time and a range of factors contributed to the attitudes I had formed around pornography and its consumption.

My own views of pornography have been impacted by growing up in liberal Western society. The internet has been part of my life since early childhood and I was aware that many use it to consume pornography. This was considered a common pastime amongst my peers. I saw it as a harmless activity that did not raise any personal or ethical concerns. In my view, there were no health issues associated with pornography use, as may be the case with sexual behaviour involving other people, such as contracting sexually transmitted diseases. Essentially, I did not consider pornography consumption problematic.

During my undergraduate studies, I taught sexual education classes to secondary school students. Through this experience, I learned that pornography was the main source of information about sexuality for adolescents, influencing their attitudes towards sex and shaping their expectations about intimate relationships. Five years later, when undertaking a clinical placement as part of a school counselling service, I realised that all these issues were also of relevance to the adolescents with whom I was working.

A talk at the Faculty of Psychology at my University given by a former pornography performer was a marking event. I remember her speaking about the physical pain and distress she had experienced while performing in pornographic media and the resulting physical and mental health problems that followed. This was perhaps the first time I considered the moral implications of pornography and the industry behind it.

During my Master's degree studies in forensic mental health, I had an opportunity to approach the topic of pornography use from a theoretical and therapeutic angle. I carried out research on sexual offending, which examined the impact of pornography consumption on sexual aggressiveness, whereas my placement as part of the NHS IAPT service involved therapeutic work with male prisoners, among whom pornography use was widespread. During the therapeutic process, I learned that many engaged with what they considered violent

pornography. Some of those who had committed crimes of a sexual nature revealed high levels of pornography use, which prompted me to consider whether frequent viewing of certain types of pornographic content may produce effects in attitudes towards sexual violence, perhaps normalising it. I began considering pornography consumption as having a potentially negative impact on certain individuals. At the same time, I wondered whether the sensitivity surrounding the subject matter would make it difficult for individuals to know whether their use was *'normal'* or *'abnormal', 'problematic'* or *'unproblematic'*. While it would be somewhat acceptable to discuss substance use, gambling, internet or food consumption and debate whether their use was excessive or problematic, I wondered whether pornography consumption would be met with the same level of openness.

I felt rather unprepared to work with clients presenting problems related to pornography use. In order to learn how to help them, I attended a training on the use of CBT interventions when dealing with addictive sexual behaviours. However, following this training, I had some reservations about conceptualising problems related to pornography use through the sexual addiction lens or narrowing their understanding to cognitive distortions. Having consulted professional literature, I realised that clinical guidance for therapists was scarce. For instance, the guidelines issued by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2016) exist only with regard to children and young people experiencing problems with high pornography use. Furthermore, the recommended therapeutic line-to-take is rather vague and offers little practical direction. The key recommendation is to structure interventions in a flexible way, while taking the developmental needs of the young client into account. No further suggestion for clinical practice is made.

After starting my doctorate in counselling psychology, I decided to focus my research on problematic pornography use, specifically on its overlap with addiction, since I found the topic interesting and believed that there is a lot to learn about it. Given that I wanted to understand what it is like to be addicted to pornography, I decided to conduct a qualitative investigation, which, in addition to being an inquiry into the subject matter that I wanted to learn more about, requires the researcher to develop reflexive awareness (McLeod, 2015). Thus, this study was also a quest for personal and professional growth, requiring an active engagement in reflective practice. To this end, I strived to develop my self-awareness and engaged in reflective and critical explorations of my standpoints, their evolution throughout the research, as well as their

impact on the research findings. I believed that engaging into qualitative research has the potential to enhance my professional development as a counselling psychologist, for instance in terms of ethical standpoints and relationships with clients. My approach to reflexivity is outlined in section 3.4, while reflective considerations concerning the research process and its findings are presented in section 8.3.

1.5. Relevance to counselling psychology

According to McLeod (2015), research in the field of counselling psychology should generate practical knowledge that would make a difference in people's ability to learn, heal and grow. Cooper (2008) and Bager-Charleson (2014) assert that by increasing the understanding of the phenomena, research into counselling psychology has the potential to inform practitioners how to work more effectively. This is precisely what this research attempts to accomplish.

With the rise in pornography consumption, concomitant with a surge in the internet use, mental health professionals have been confronted with clients seeking therapy for issues they believe are linked to their engagement with pornography, such as sexual dysfunctions or psycho-social difficulties, which require a wide range of knowledge and therapeutic skills (Cooper, 2000; Manning, 2010). However, many therapists do not feel competent to work with clients presenting problems with pornography consumption and lack a thorough understanding of the difficulties involved, as professional training in this area is scare (Hinman, 2013; Short et al., 2016; Sniewski et al., 2018). Furthermore, there is no specific therapy or clinical recommendations for practitioners, while the therapeutic approaches applied in clinical practice have received little empirical support (Minarcik 2016; Sniewski et al., 2018; Blaszczynski, 2019; Lotfi et al., 2021).

Given its objective to enhance the understanding of the difficulties experienced by individuals who perceive themselves addicted to pornography, this study is of theoretical and practical relevance to the field of counselling psychology, as knowledge rooted in real-life experience can increase the understanding of the phenomenon and find practical applications in therapy. Experiential insights can sensitise practitioners to the complexities of their clients' realities and help them address their concerns in therapy. In this way, this study has the potential to make a positive contribution to clinical practice.

1.6.   Overview of key concepts

Pornography

The term '*pornography*' originates from the Greek word *'porne'*, which means *'prostitution'*. Originally, it was used to depict the life of prostitutes in drawings, paintings or narratives (Fradd, 2014). In research, despite an intuitive understanding of the concept, there is no agreed definition of pornography (Kuhn et al., 2007; D'Orlando, 2011; McKee et al., 2020). In most studies, the term is not defined, and when it is, there is a lack of conceptual consistency across research (Short et al., 2011).

According to Knill et al. (2015), the explicit representation of sexual behaviour with the intention of increasing sexual arousal is the defining feature of pornography. Thus, pornography is essentially a type of content depicting sexually overt behaviour that was created for sexual stimulation. This is consistent with Kraus and Rosenberg (2014) who define pornography as *' ... written or pictorial material describing or showing explicit images of sexual acts that is read or viewed with the intention of increasing sexual arousal'* (p. 3). Kuhn et al. (2007) add to this definition a solitary and intimacy-free nature of pornography as its intrinsic characteristic. In their view, for an object to be pornographic it must also be devoid of intimacy. Accordingly, '… *pornography is any communication material provided for the purpose of sexually arousing or gratifying a user in isolation from others'* (p. 167). Thus, pornography differs from erotica in that it is not intimate in nature. While erotica is intended for sexual stimulation in company, pornography is typically used alone (Kuhn et al., 2007).

However, the aforementioned criteria are not without criticism and are not consistently used in research. For instance, Grubbs at al. (2019) found that sexual arousal is not always the sole or the primary incentive for pornography use, as people engage with it for various reasons, such as distraction, desire to establish personal connections or out of curiosity. Furthermore, some studies include also non-visual forms of pornography such as audio recordings of people engaged in sexual activities or online chat rooms (Short et al., 2011), while others broaden its definition by including imagery of nudity as well as sexual activity (McKee et al., 2020).

The difficulty in providing a defined understanding of pornography is often attributed to socio-cultural factors (Ley et al., 2014; McKee et al., 2020). Research holds that definitions of pornography are influenced by evolving socio-cultural contexts and norms (Knill et al., 2015).

For instance, throughout history, some forms of artistic expression portrayed nudity and erotic scenes. The demarcation between erotic art and pornography, which is affected by aesthetic and moral values, is not precise and the criteria used to differentiate between the two, such as *'prurience'* or *'obscenity'* versus *'beauty'* or '*artistic value'* are subjective (Fradd, 2014). Furthermore, pornography can have different meanings in different cultures and over time (D'Orlando, 2011). For instance, some forms of visual arts representing nudity or sexual behaviour, which are not objectionable in liberal societies, may be considered pornographic in conservative ones. Similarly, material, which might have been considered pornographic some time ago, may no longer be regarded as such today (D'Orlando, 2011). Moreover, the perception of whether content is pornographic may be grounded in one's moral or religious values. As a result, different members of the same society may have various understandings of pornography (Fradd, 2014).

Taking into account these conceptual difficulties, no specific definition of pornography was chosen for the purpose of this research. Imposing a pre-determined definition of pornography on the study participants was deemed counter-intuitive to the research objectives, as its focus is not on the consumed content, but on the experiential understanding of self-perceived addiction. Given the study's inductive approach, it was up to the participants to define the concept of pornography. For her part, the researcher undertook to examine the consistency of the participants' definitions and reflect on the implications of not having a defined understanding of pornography on the research findings while evaluating her study. The outcome of these reflections is presented in section 8.2.

Addiction

The term *'addiction'* originates from the Latin verb '*addicere*' meaning *'to enslave'* (Blanchard & Corazza, 2018). According to Moss and Dyer (2010), a straightforward definition of addiction does not exist, as the concept encompasses a wide range of biological, psychological and social determinants, the relevance of which to this study is presented is the literature review. The matter is further complicated by the fact that other terms such as '*dependence*' are associated with the concept of addiction and used interchangeably in research (Room et al., 2018). In a broad sense, the notion of addiction entails an idea of an urge to repeat certain behaviour that is beyond one's control and interferes with a personal way of life (Heather, 2018).

The concept of addiction has changed over time. Originally, it was used with regard to drugs and alcohol (Maté, 2018). The first scientific papers were published in 19th century by Dr Benjamin Rush who referred to addiction as a *'disease of the mind'* in the context of alcoholism (Hayward, 2018, p. 18). In recent years, the concept has been extended to *'behavioural addictions'*, also called '*process addictions',* and applied to a range of problematic engagements, such as gaming or gambling. According to Kardefelt-Wintheret et al. (2017), behavioural addiction denotes '*a repeated behaviour persisting over a significant period of time that leads to significant harm or distress, which is of a functionally impairing nature'* (p. 1710). A subtype of '*natural addictions'* was identified within behavioural addictions, referring to behaviour patterns linked to the evolutionary drives for food and sex (Comings & Blum, 2000).

Behavioural and substance-related types of addiction were found to share a range of fundamental characteristics: both produce short-term rewards promoting persistence of behaviour and result in acquired tolerance, craving and relapsing (Young, 2001). However, some authors consider that it is not the substance or the behaviour that are markers of addiction, but the type of response they elicit (Munder, 2017). According to Maté (2018), addiction may involve any behaviour, whether it is substance-related or not, where an individual craves, finds temporary pleasure or relief and continues the problematic behaviour despite facing negative consequences. Peele and Brodsky (1977) go a step further by asserting that addiction has little to do with the type of behaviour or a substance, but is a state of being that derives from the process of self-definition as an addict. Thus, self-perception is crucial in experience of addiction.

The latter approach is of relevance to the present study's aims, given that it examines the experience of those individuals who subjectively believe to be addicted. For this reason, no specific definition or model of addiction was imposed on the participants. It was for them to reveal their perceptions and reflect on what makes them self-identify as pornography addicts. This was also consistent with the researcher's approach to the investigated phenomenon, which was to explore pornography addiction with an open mind through an existential-phenomenological lens rather than testing an explanatory framework.

The concept of pornography addiction is based upon the parallels with substance and behavioural types of addiction such as gambling and gaming, which were recognised as mental health disorders (Hilton, 2013). Broadly constructed, the notion refers to repeated consumption of pornographic material despite experiencing substantial harm by the user (Sniewski et al., 2018; Blaszczynski, 2019). However, research has not produced an agreed definition of pornography addiction (Duffy et al., 2016). The definitions vary depending on whether the focus is on objective behaviour or subjective experience. For instance, according to Ley et al. (2014), '*high frequency use of visual sexual stimuli*' (p. 94) is the defining characteristic, while according to Griffiths (2001), excessiveness and a lack of control over consumption are the primary features.

The matter is further complicated by the fact that various alternative terminology is used within research when referring to repeated interaction with pornography causing significant harm to the user. Terms such as *'pornography dependence'*, *'compulsive'* or *'impulsive'* viewing, as well as *'high'* or *'excessive'* pornography consumption are used in addition to *'pornography addiction'* (Binnie & Reavey, 2020). These terminological inconsistencies and a lack of established diagnostic criteria contribute to confusion around the notion of pornography addiction, indicating significant gaps in the understandings of the concept (Kraus et al., 2014; Duffy et al., 2016; De Alarcon et al., 2019; Taylor, 2020).

Furthermore, conceptualising problematic consumption of pornography as a type of addiction is controversial within research, as it is in clinical practice, raising concerns about socio-cultural biases linked to the concept of addiction in particular (Voros, 2009; Williams, 2017).

Given the controversy surrounding the topic, the researcher would like to reiterate that her objective was not to determine whether problematic pornography consumption is or is not a type of addiction. She also had no intention of examining self-perceived pornography addiction against the background of a specific theory of addiction or advocating for the classification of pornography addiction as a mental health disorder. The researcher's starting point was that the presence of problems in relation to the phenomenon, which is referred to as self-perceived pornography addiction, needs further attention, regardless of the theoretical underpinnings, conceptualisations or assumptions.

1.7.   Legal forms of pornography in the United Kingdom

The study employed the legal definition of pornography used in the United Kingdom as a selection criterion for participants and as a criterion for publications to be included in the literature review. According to this definition, pornographic content is legal, unless it falls into one of the following categories prohibited by law: child pornography and extreme pornography (Government Equalities Office, 2020).

The Protection of Children Act (1978) and the Criminal Justice Act (1988) make it illegal to take, let to be taken, make, distribute, show, have in possession, publish or cause to be published any obscene photograph or pseudo-photograph of someone under the age of 18. In addition, the Coroners and Justice Act (2009) makes it illegal to possess a prohibited image of a child (Miller, 2021). Furthermore, the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act (2008) makes it illegal to possess an '*extreme pornographic image*' that is also referred to as an *'indecent image'* depicting sexual interference with a human corpse (necrophilia), an animal (bestiality) or grossly offensive, explicit and realistic acts involving non-consensual penetration (Spicerzeb, 2021).

In law, the notion of *'image'* covers photographs, movies, animations, video photography and pseudo-photography, which consists of digitally transformed decent images into indecent ones. The definition excludes sketches, paintings and other hand-drawn graphics (Spicerzeb, 2021).

Under the law, the *'possession'* and the *'making'* are illegal. Viewing would be illegal when it amounts to the possession or the making (Miller, 2021). For instance, when an image is downloaded and a file is created, viewing may be equated with the making and the possession, thus illegal. However, drawing clear lines is difficult in law and often, there is no clarity until the matter is decided by a court of law (Miller, 2021).

This legal definition of pornography was presented to the study participants, who all confirmed that they were not using any of the unlawful types of pornographic content. In the researcher's view, none of the participants revealed such use in the course of the interviews. However, since the researcher lacks the necessary legal expertise, she must acknowledge that this assessment was made to the best of her knowledge. While, in terms of unlawfulness, consumption of pornography depicting necrophilia or bestiality appears unambiguous, admitting to consuming, for instance, indecent pornography would have been more problematic due to the subjective

nature of the notion of indecency. The researcher critically reflects on her concerns in this area in section 8.3.

1.8.   Overview of the thesis

This study commences with the literature review synthesising the current state of knowledge in relation to pornography addiction. Theoretical frameworks applied to problematic pornography consumption are presented and discussed, as well as relevant addiction theories. The conclusions resulting from the literature review highlight the gap in the state of knowledge, which this study attempts to fill.

Next, the ontological and epistemological positions are clarified, followed by the rationale for using qualitative research methods in the form of interpretative phenomenological analysis. The overall consistency of the research paradigm is explained.

Further, the study design is outlined and its consecutive steps are explained, with attention to the choice of the participants and the ethical aspects. Each analytical step is illustrated by a relevant appendix.

The findings of the study consisting of five master themes, which capture the essential experiential features of self-perceived pornography addiction and reveal a range of factors that affect participants' understanding of their experience in terms of addiction are presented and discussed. The discussion shows how the findings complement prior knowledge. Implications for the practice of counselling psychology are discussed and recommendations for further research are made.

Finally, the research is reflectively evaluated by the researcher, including the considerations of her personal standpoints, which might have influenced the research process and its findings.

Schedule of changes

The present thesis addresses the conditions and recommendations made following the oral examination on 30 November 2021. The schedule of changes is presented in Appendix 1.

2. Literature review

This literature review presents a synthesised body of knowledge relevant to the research topic and its objectives. It begins with outlining the conceptual frameworks applied to problematic pornography consumption, followed by a discussion of the addiction paradigm against the background of biological, psychological, socio-cultural and existential theories of addiction. Looking at the distinct themes that run through research, the review demonstrates that previous literature has not effectively addressed the questions the present study intends to answer.

2.1. Literature searches

The following databases were searched between January 2018 and January 2022 for qualitative and quantitative publications in English: Google Scholar, PsycInfo, Web of Science, PubMed, PsychSource, ScienceDirect, Directory of Open Access Journals, Access to Research, Open Psychology Data, Taylor and Francis Online, as well as the electronic library of Middlesex University.

A list of search terms derived from a review of search strategies in the preliminary literature on problematic pornography consumption consulted by the researcher, as well as an examination of the publications referenced in that literature. The following terms and their derivatives were entered into the search engines in multiple combinations: *'problematic pornography', 'high/excessive/compulsive/impulsive pornography', 'pornography addiction/dependence', 'cybersex addiction/dependence', 'sex addiction' and 'behavioural addiction'.* These search terms were used to identify literature on pornography addiction or a variant of the concept of addiction and related problems.

Publications were screened by title and abstract. Where they appeared relevant, the full versions were accessed. Only literature on the legal forms of pornography as defined in the United Kingdom and explained in section 1.7 was taken into account. Publications on the illegal forms of pornography were excluded, as criminal aspects of pornography consumption are outside the scope of the present research. Only literature on pornography users was included in the study. The literature addressing experiences of pornography users' partners, for example, was excluded.

Forty-four publications addressing pornography use conceptualised as addiction were included, among them five systematic reviews. The identified papers were published between 2008 and 2021. Twenty-three publications on problematic pornography use, including four meta-analyses and seven systematic and non-systematic reviews, as well as thirty-four publications concerning different forms of compulsive sexual behaviour involving pornography use were taken into account. These papers were published between 2001 and 2022. The inclusion of this literature was due to the fact that research on pornography addiction occurs within the context of addiction research, in particular its behavioural forms such as internet, sex or cybersex addictions. However, literature that had only a marginal link with pornography was excluded. In addition, backward reference searching resulted in identifying thirty-two relevant publications issued between 1998 and 2019.

Literature on pornography addiction is ample. However, little qualitative research exists. Most publications are quantitative and explanatory in nature. Much attention is given to various conceptualisations of problematic pornography consumption, neurobiological mechanisms playing a role in the development and maintenance of addiction, as well as the implications for sexual and psychosocial well-being. Studies exploring pornography users' subjective experiences are scarce.

2.2. Problematic pornography use: theoretical frameworks

A growing body of research associates high exposure to pornography with impaired psychosocial functioning and sexual problems (Duffy et al., 2016), but struggles with terminology and conceptual difficulties. Alongside the addiction framework, other conceptualisations were proposed based on the impulse control, hyper-sexuality and paraphilia models, exposing diverse mechanisms underlying problematic involvement with pornography and defying easy categorisations of problematic consumption.

The impulse-control model places the emphasis on one's inability to withstand an impulse or temptation to carry out an act, which is accompanied by tension or thrill-seeking excitement felt in anticipation of carrying out the act, followed by the experience of pleasure, gratification and relief (Wery et al., 2018; Neves, 2021). Based on this model, compulsive sexual behaviour disorder (CSBD) characterised by continuing failure to control strong sexual impulses resulting in a recurrent pattern of sexual behaviour over a prolonged period, causing marked distress and

impairment in personal, social, educational, occupational or other areas of life was included in the ICD-11 in the category of impulse control disorders (WTO, 2021). The disorder covers a range of sexual behaviours, including masturbation and pornography consumption (Gola et al., 2020).

CSBD is referred to as *'compulsive'* and has been classified in the category of impulse-control disorders, which suggests that compulsivity and failure to control impulses are its key features. The key difference between compulsive and impulsive behaviours is the motivation that drives the behaviour (Giugliano, 2013). The goal of impulsive behaviour is to experience pleasure, whereas the purpose of compulsive behaviour is to reduce unpleasant emotions (Neves, 2021). According to the WHO (2021), sexual behaviour in CSBD is not considered a compulsion that is similar to those in obsessive-compulsive disorder, which are prompted by intrusive, undesired and anxiety-provoking thoughts and are usually not pleasurable (Gaebel et al., 2017). This view is supported by empirical research, which found that people with OCD experience a decrease in sexual arousal during negative mood states (Bancroft, 2013). Thus, pornography consumption in CSBD would not appear to be a manifestation of anxiety or other unpleasant emotions, but rather be a pleasure-driven or thrill-seeking activity (Gaebel et al., 2021). This distinction is important in understanding one's motivation for engaging in pornography consumption. Knowledge of what drives people to consume pornography can help gain a better understanding of their experiences.

As far as the validity of the impulse-control model is concerned, research produced inconsistent results. Some studies report that high pornography consumption is significantly correlated with impaired impulse control (Egan & Parmar, 2013; Wery et al., 2018), whereas others conclude that impulsivity is not a maintaining factor (Minarcik, 2016). This would suggest that problematic pornography consumption might have complex motivations that cannot be fully explained by a single underlying mechanism.

An alternative model to explain problems with pornography consumption is based on the concept of hyper-sexuality, which is associated with increased expressions of sexual arousal and desires, for instance, through sexual preoccupations (Kafka, 2010). The model emphasises the importance of sexual drive in pornography consumption (Gola et al., 2020). However, some authors argue that high pornography consumption is not always sex-driven and can have different motivations. For instance, Grubbs et al. (2019) found that high pornography

consumption could be driven by factors such as risk-taking, anxiety or low-mood. This is a valid argument, as emotional states are likely to play part in one's problematic engagement with pornography, influencing their perceptions and attitudes.

Framing problematic pornography consumption as a paraphilia-related sexual disorder (PRSD) characterised by recurrent impairment and negative psychosocial consequences was proposed by Kafka (2001). PRSD covers a range of sexual disorders, including compulsive masturbation and pornography consumption. When it comes to pornography, PRSD is defined broadly as *'a persistent, repetitive pattern of dependence on pornographic materials'* (Kafka, 2001, p. 233), which is associated with personal distress. In Kafka's view, dependence is not socially deviant, but is a result of excessive sexual appetitive dysregulation and disinhibited sexual desires. Although the model captures important aspects of some users' difficulties, it was criticised for framing excessive consumption of pornography as a mental health disorder and pathologising certain erotic interests (Kleinplatz, 2013). The latter criticism is surprising, given Kafka's insistence on dependence's non-deviant nature. Despite these criticisms, the model's interest for this study resides in its emphasis on sexual dysregulation and disinhibition as key factors underlying high pornography consumption.

2.3. Application of the addiction framework to problematic pornography consumption

Based on his therapeutic work with sex addicts, Carnes (1983) was among the first authors to conceptualise problematic pornography consumption as addiction (Voros, 2009). He regarded pornography addiction as a subset of sexual addiction, which refers to a broad range of problematic sexual behaviours (Orzack & Roos, 2000). However, some authors, for instance, Duffy et al. (2016), Short et al. (2016), Katehakis (2016) and Hall (2019) consider it a distinct condition. This is because pornography addiction does not involve a direct human contact and encompasses specific symptoms, such as excessive masturbation to pornography (Blum et al., 2015), dysfunctions in sexual arousal and achieving orgasm (Schneider, 2000), loss of libido and lack of sexual interest in partners (Harper & Hodgins, 2015). Pornography addiction is sometimes considered a subset of internet sex addiction or cyber-sex addiction, which is not synonymous with sexual addiction. This is due to the differences between engaging in interpersonal and online sexual activities, where individuals may act out in a way they would not do in real life (Griffiths, 2012). This links to the *'online disinhibition effect',* which refers

to the relaxing of psychological boundaries resulting from a sense of anonymity offered by the internet (Thomas, 2016). This could imply that individuals who consume online pornography might feel less restrained in their behaviour, for instance, view sexual acts that they would not normally engage in. However, the line between sex addiction, internet sex addiction and cyber-sex addiction appears thin and the terms are often used interchangeably.

The conceptualisation of problematic pornography consumption as addiction is based on the similarities with other types of addictive behaviour (Ford et al., 2012; Snagowski et al., 2015; Brand et al., 2016; Williams et al. 2020). Symptoms common to addictive behaviours, such as users' subjective feeling of being unable to control consumption, interference with daily life, escalation of behaviour despite negative consequences, tolerance and withdrawal are among the defining characteristics reported in literature (Darshan et al., 2014; Sniewski et al., 2018). When it comes to withdrawal, however, opinions differ. Ley et al. (2014) and Williams et al. (2020) question it presence because of a lack of physiological reactions. Conversely, Ford et al. (2012) identify the presenting features of withdrawal that are psychological in nature and include depression, irritability, anxiety, obsessive thinking and an extreme desire for pornography. Yet, it could be argued that these symptoms occur throughout the addictive experience and are not withdrawal-specific. Thus, it remains unclear how withdrawal, which in the case of substance addiction involves the combination of physical and psychological effects (Brown, 1993), presents itself in addiction to pornography or whether it truly exists.

Literature reports a range of factors influencing the development and maintenance of addiction such as exposure to pornography at a young age, childhood adverse experiences, growing-up in a highly religious family or a family with a history of addiction, feeling lonely and isolated, having low self-esteem or body image dysfunction (Young, 2001; Skinner, 2005). Single men who were exposed to pornography in childhood were found to be the most at risk (Harper & Hodgins, 2016). However, there is little empirical evidence of a link between these factors and the risk of becoming addicted to pornography. Furthermore, even if these factors were to increase a person's susceptibility to pornography consumption, there is no indication that they would cause addition. Nonetheless, being aware of their potential link with pornography addiction can be helpful when exploring the context within which problems with pornography consumption may arise.

Pornography addiction is described as a progressive phenomenon, where viewing becomes more frequent and results in desensitisation to pornographic content (Hall, 2019). According to Skinner (2005), it is also extremely difficult to stop pornography viewing on one's own, which reinforces the feeling of being out of control. Thus, relapse is the norm and the emotional aspects of withdrawal are difficult to endure. These features of pornography addiction derived from clinical reports bear a close resemblance to those of substance addictions (O'Connor, 2016), lending support to the application of the addiction framework because of the similarities with other types of addiction.

According to Young (2001), when compulsive patterns of behaviour take hold, negative consequences affect mental health. This view appears to be supported by empirical research. Numerous studies found a link between high exposure to pornography and a variety of mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, ADHD, stress, impaired motivation, emotional avoidance, substance use, social isolation, reduced self-esteem and body image dissatisfaction (Weinstein, 2013; Rosenberg et al., 2014; Harper & Hodgins, 2015; Doornwaard et al., 2016; Laier & Brand, 2017; Perry, 2017; Wery et al., 2018). However, a key problem with this research is that the causal direction remains undetermined, as it is unclear whether individuals suffering from psychological difficulties sought out to pornography in order to use it as a coping mechanism or whether high pornography consumption contributed to their mental health problems.

Furthermore, Perry (2017) argues that understanding the link between pornography consumption and psychological difficulties may be hampered by data limitations that fail to account for factors such as moral beliefs and ethical values. For instance, Grubbs et al. (2015) found that religious norms depicting extramarital sexual activity as morally reprehensible have negative consequences on users' mental health and that religiosity mediates an association between pornography exposure and psychological difficulties. However, in the case of non-religious pornography consumers, this argument would be irrelevant. Nonetheless, the importance of this research is that it draws attention to the role of one's ethical and moral beliefs, which may help understand their attitudes towards pornography consumption and the perception of being addicted.

A remarkable diversity of viewpoints emerges from literature on the demarcation between non-addictive and addictive pornography consumption. A range of measures was proposed to

determine whether problematic consumption is an addiction, such as the volume and the frequency of engagement with pornography, for instance the number of hours per day or week, as well as self-declared indicators of distress and sexual arousal (Harpen & Hodgins, 2016; Sniewski et al., 2018). However, there is a great deal of debate surrounding the validity of these measures. For instance, Cooper et al. (2000) calculated that a user's addiction begins when they spend at least 11 hours per week viewing pornography, whereas Harper and Hodgins (2016) who examined the relationship between the frequency of pornography consumption and its harmful effects suggested that addiction emerges when pornography is used once a day or more. Conversely, Grubbs et al. (2015) found no relationship between the average daily pornography use and psychological distress. Park et al. (2016) plausibly argue that the amount of time spent consuming pornography, although highly relevant, may not be the sole measure in determining whether someone is addicted. What emerges from this area of research is that while the frequency or volume of consumption may be indicative of problematic behaviour, their usefulness to differentiate between addicted and non-addicted pornography users remains uncertain.

Given the difficulties in establishing quantifiable measures, it was suggested that qualitative factors might be better suited to determine whether pornography consumption is an addiction. However, there is considerable uncertainty about what these factors would be. For instance, Skinner (2005) proposes that the most significant difference between addictive and non-addictive pornography consumption lies in the degree of compulsivity and the presence of negative consequences, but these are undetermined. According to Laier et al. (2013), subjective measures of sexual arousal to pornographic cues allow distinguishing between addictive and non-addictive behaviour patterns. It could be argued, however, that individuals who do not believe themselves to be addicted can also be aroused by pornographic stimuli, which casts doubt on the validity of this criterion. What becomes apparent from the reviewed literature is that the criteria and measures proposed to differentiate between addictive and non-addictive consumption remain uncertain.

Literature also reveals that conceptualising problematic pornography consumption as addiction is highly controversial, with some scholars disapproving the addiction framework in this context altogether. For instance, Sniewski et al. (2018) argue that there is no empirical evidence that the phenomenon actually exists, whereas Ley et al. (2014) and Williams (2017)

assert that high libido, sexual desire or sensation seeking are sufficient to explain problematic pornography consumption. Nonetheless, these explanations fail to address the presence of other than sexual difficulties associated with problematic pornography consumption reported by some users, for instance emotional ones. Thus, they may not be sufficient to understand the multifaceted nature of the difficulties involved.

The addiction framework has also been criticised on socio-cultural grounds. For instance, Lee and Mysk (2004), Williams (2017) and Williams et al. (2020) draw attention to socio-cultural perceptions, biases and assumptions of pathology linked to the concept of addiction. In their view, framing problematic pornography use as addiction can be stigmatising and bears a risk of turning it into an anomaly subject to an increased interference of medical professionals. These are valid concerns that can have an impact on one's perception of their difficulties and recovery.

In sum, the examined literature demonstrates that the on-going academic debate revolves around the appropriateness of the addiction framework. Research concerns itself with the similarities between pornography addiction and other types of addictive behaviour, its aetiology, behavioural manifestations, links with mental health difficulties, as well as the demarcation between addictive and non-addictive consumption. What can be inferred from literature with regard to the present research's questions is that self-perceived addiction is a progressive phenomenon, marked by an increase in the frequency and volume with which pornography is consumed. However, it remains unclear which frequency of exposure or volume of consumption would be indicative of addiction (Cooper et al., 2000; Harper & Hodgins, 2016; Grubbs et al., 2015). Engagement with pornography might be motivated by a variety of factors. In the case of failure to control sexual impulses, consumption is driven by a desire to experience pleasure or thrill seeking (Gaevel et al., 2017). When engagement is driven by compulsion, its purpose is to reduce unpleasant emotions (Neves, 2021). When engagement is sexually motivated, it is associated with increased expression of sexual arousal and desires (Kafka, 2010; Laier et al., 2013). The experience is characterised by an inability to control consumption and the presence of negative consequences, including mental health problems (Skinner, 2005). However, it is unclear whether these are the cause or the result of high pornography consumption (Rosenberg et al., 2014). Despite these uncertainties, the key

concepts explored in literature are relevant to the study's objectives, as they point to a variety of behaviours, concerns and characteristics that can inform qualitative inquiry.

2.4. Pornography addiction in the context of neurobiological explanations of addiction

The strongest support for the application of the addiction model to problematic pornography consumption stems from neurobiological research, which suggests that the brain's reward system, in combination with changing levels of dopamine, cause specific neurochemical reactions that underpin addiction (Hilton, 2010). The notion of *'neuroplasticity'* refers to the brain's ability to react to the changes by forming new neuronal connections (Doidge, 2008). Research holds that the frequent dopamine release into the brain's reward system in response to pornography consumption stimulates neuro-plastic changes reinforcing brain maps for sexual excitement (Blanchard & Corazza, 2018). However, chronic overstimulation of the brain causes dopamine receptors to shrink, which affects the neurochemical balance and gradually results in numbness to pleasure (Doidge, 2008). This implies that frequent exposure to pornography may produce desensitisation and increase the need for more intense stimuli to produce the same level of satisfaction, similarly to what occurs in substance addictions (Wilson, 2014).

Empirical research generally corroborates these explanations. For instance, Voon et al. (2014), Kuhn and Gallinat (2014) and Love et al. (2015) established that the neurobiological mechanisms and motivational processes occurring in response to pornographic stimuli were the same as in other types of addiction, suggesting that addiction is about the effects on the brain rather than the nature of the substance or behaviour. This would be a strong argument in favour of applying the addiction framework to problematic pornography consumption.

Furthermore, neurobiological research provides noteworthy findings on users' reactivity to pornographic stimuli, revealing the effects of high exposure on their behaviour. For instance, Kuhn and Gallinat (2014) found the following correlation: the higher the number of hours spent viewing pornography per week, the lower the volume of grey matter, leading to a downregulation of the neural response to sexual stimuli. According to Love et al. (2015), this may result in users normalising content that elicited negative reactions at first. For instance, men in their study who consumed pornography for several hours a day were willing to view content, which they had originally considered disturbing, such as bestiality or genital torture.

These findings would suggest that the type of pornography that originally elicited excitement ceases to remain equally alluring over time and creates a need for new, possibly more explicit or hard-core content.

However, regardless of how compelling the neurobiological explanations are, it has yet to be demonstrated that neurobiological processes cause addiction. Lewis (2015) convincingly argues that while repetition of specific behaviour affects synaptic networks, producing a feedback cycle between behaviour and brain alterations, these changes do not fully explain addiction. He calls addiction *'a house with many doors'* (Lewis, 2015, p. 174) and points to the role of psychological, developmental and environmental factors in addition to neurological ones. Also according to Safron (2013), many aspects of pornography addiction could be better explained by atypical cognitions, hyperactive impulsivity or self-regulation. This shows that a variety of factors is likely to play a role in the development and maintenance of pornography addiction, which should be taken into account when analysing the lived experience.

In summary, the reviewed literature suggests that neurobiological mechanisms triggered by pornographic stimuli are strikingly similar to those induced by substances, in particular, in terms of the effects of frequent exposure on one's behaviour. What can be deduced from research in this field in terms of the current study's objectives is that high pornography consumption may produce desensitisation and a need for more intense stimuli, indicating how pornography addiction could be experienced. However, while neurobiological analysis is certainly informative, neurobiological make-up is unlikely to be the only determinant of addiction. Even if the dopamine-driven changes were a required condition for addiction to pornography to develop, other factors also play a role. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon requires neurobiological explanations to be supplemented by other types of analysis.

2.5.   Pornography addiction in the context of psychological theories of addiction

Research attempts to understand the psychological factors underpinning pornography addiction. To this end, pornography addiction was explored through the lens of behavioural, cognitive, attachment-based, trauma-induced and personality theories of addiction.

Behavioural theories

Behavioural models of addiction focus on directly observable behaviour (Teeson & Degenhardt, 2002). Based on classical and operant conditioning, they assert that addiction is the result of habitual patterns, which operate outside conscious awareness (Horvath et al., 2015). Classical conditioning theories explain addictive behaviour by the stimulus-response concept, while operant-learning theories by associations between cues and responses, as well as positive or negative reinforcements (Moss & Dyer, 2010). Positive reinforcement may be associated with excitement or physiological arousal, while negative reinforcement with relief of anxiety. Conditioning leads to the development of cue-reactivity and craving reactions to addiction-related cues and is associated with relapse (Robbins & Clark, 2015).

Pornography addiction was studied behaviourally using the Robinson and Berridge's (2008) Incentive Salience Theory of Addiction, which holds that in susceptible individuals and under particular circumstances, an interaction between incentive salience mechanisms and associative learning results in an increased focus on the specific behaviour causing addiction. The theory identifies two fundamental components of addictive behaviour: *'wanting'* and *'liking'*. The *'wanting'* is related to the expected value of the reward, while the *'liking'* is linked to the experienced value. The fundamental feature of addiction is the shift from engaging in behaviour for pleasure to engaging in behaviour because of a need. In other words, addiction is characterised by the increased '*wanting'* and decreased *'liking'* (Ley et al., 2014). This would suggest that conditioning and learned associations drive motivation, which shifts from pleasure associated with consuming pornography to relief of cravings, similarly to what occurs in substance addictions (Robbins & Clark, 2015.

Empirical research supports this theory. For instance, Gola et al. (2017) found that heightened anticipatory *'wanting'* in high pornography users was separated from experienced *'liking'*, whereas according to Voon et al. (2014), the increased striatal reactivity observed in high pornography users was associated with higher motivation to view pornography. However, this motivation was linked to the expectation of the rewarding properties of pornographic stimuli and subjective sexual desire but not *'liking'*. Importantly, Brand et al. (2016) found that the increased ventral striatum activity was positively correlated with the number of hours spent viewing pornography. These findings would suggest that over time, individuals engaging in

high pornography consumption might do so even if they do not find enjoyment in the behaviour any more.

However, this research raises some questions about those users for whom pleasure was not their main motivation for engaging in pornography consumption in the first place (Grubbs et al., 2019), but who nonetheless persisted in their behaviour. It is also unclear whether the shift from the pleasure-oriented behaviour towards relief of cravings is stable or whether it can change over time, for instance when a person becomes exposed to different types of pornographic stimuli that could be sexually exciting and pleasurable. Despite these uncertainties, behavioural explanations, with their focus on learned and observable behaviour, shed light on the way in which addiction may develop and be experienced. The information they provide is relevant to inquiry into the lived experience, which takes the behavioural context into account.

Cognitive explanations

According to cognitive models, addiction is accompanied by certain expectations, beliefs and thoughts that have an impact on one's feelings and behaviour (Horvath et al., 2020). Thus, cognitions and information processing play a key role in the activation and escalation of addictive behaviour (Allen et al., 2017).

According to the metacognitive model of desire thinking and cravings, positive and negative cognitive processes that are involved in the appraisal, monitoring and control of pornography consumption explain problematic engagement (Allen et al., 2017). Positive metacognitions encompass the usefulness of distraction from negative thoughts or emotions, whereas negative metacognitions involve the loss of control over behaviour. Both result in the shifting of attention towards pornography, with a direct effect on cravings and uncontrollability of behaviour (Allen et al., 2017).

Empirical research supports the view that high pornography consumption is linked to cognitive impairments, notably attentional bias, inhibitory control, working memory and decision-making (Castro-Calvo et al., 2021). For instance, studies found that the severity of addiction expressed as cravings for masturbation to pornography was linked to attentional bias toward sexual stimuli (Castro-Calvo et al., 2021). Moreover, when exposed to pornography, individuals with a high proclivity for sexual arousal and low inhibitory control engaged in out-

of-control behaviour (Bancroft, 2013). This was consistent with the Dual Control Model (Janssen & Bancroft, 2006) asserting that individual sexual responses are the result of a balance of excitatory and inhibitory mechanisms. High pornography users were also shown to have impulsive decision-making and to prefer short-term small gains to long-term ones, which was correlated with the frequency of consumption (Castro-Calvo et al., 2021). This links to choice-based psychological explanations of addiction holding that addicts make decisions that prioritise immediate benefits over long-term costs (West & Brown, 2013) and could explain why pornography addicts struggle to control their consumption despite being aware of harmful consequences.

According to Casto-Calvo et al. (2021), the degree of cognitive impairments in attentional bias, inhibitory control, working memory and decision-making allows distinguishing pornography addicts from non-addicts. However, it is unclear whether these impairments would have to be lasting or occur only during exposure to pornography, which would make it difficult to assess pornography addiction in the absence of sexual stimuli. Nonetheless, understanding cognitive processes may be useful for phenomenological inquiry, which explores not only what people experience, but also what and how they think about their experiences.

Attachment-based explanations

Bowlby's (1958) attachment theory provides psychodynamic explanations of the impact of early infant attachment on the physical, emotional, mental and social development, as well as its long-term consequences (Davis et al., 2018). According to attachment-based explanations, addiction is caused by a lack of secure attachment, which leads to affective dysregulation and the development of a shame-based personality. An individual without secure attachment engages in auto-regulatory externalised behaviour, which is a maladaptive coping habit to regulate feelings (Katehakis, 2016).

The attachment-based theory of addiction was used to explain why some people become addicted to pornography and how they behave. A range of explanations was proposed linking certain aspects of pornography addiction to a lack of secure attachment. According to Hall (2019), individuals without secure attachment rely on pornography to experience sexual excitement because insecure attachment disrupts the orbitofrontal regulatory system, preventing it from producing enough dopamine. According to Katehakis (2016), when sexual

behaviour is used for emotional auto-regulation, it expresses itself in shame-based sexuality, in which masturbation to pornography becomes a self-soothing behaviour used to relieve shame and anxiety rather than to bring pleasure. According to Birchard and Benfield (2018), individuals without secure attachment seek relief from negative emotional states by engaging in sexual behaviour that involves no affection such as pornography consumption. What all these explanations have in common is that they point to a connection between negative emotions and pornography consumption, which is used as a coping mechanism. This is relevant to inquiry into the lived experience.

However, a well-known weakness of attachment-based explanations is their failure to acknowledge that attachment patterns do not have to be fixed, as factors such as personality development or healing attachments created later in life can be as important as the quality of the early attachment (Crittenden & Dallos, 2009). This is also the case of attachment-based explanations of pornography addiction, which fail to address the role of these factors.

Trauma-induced explanations

There is a well-established link between psychological trauma and addiction in literature (Van der Kolk, 1989; Maté, 2018). Several hypotheses were proposed to explain this relationship. The high-risk hypothesis asserts a causal relationship where addiction causes a person to engage in high-risk behaviours, which increases the risk of trauma exposure (Hien et al., 2005). The self-medication hypothesis suggests a reverse relationship by asserting that addiction soothes traumatic memories (Bakker et al., 2004). According to the susceptibility hypothesis, failure to develop effective coping mechanisms for handling psychological distress following a traumatic event makes a person vulnerable to addiction (Davis et al., 2018). It could be argued, however, that the mechanisms described in these hypotheses are not mutually exclusive, as someone with a history of trauma may become susceptible to addiction, which would be used to numb traumatic memories and entail a risk of engaging in risky behaviours, increasing the level of trauma exposure.

Research also suggests that sex can be used to cope with trauma-related emotions (Gartner, 2001; Griffiths, 2012; Laier & Brand, 2014; Katehakis, 2016; Hall, 2019; Birchard & Benfield, 2018; Lew-Starowicz et al., 2020). Pornography may also be used to this end. According to Hall (2019), engagement with pornography in trauma-induced addiction is not a pleasure-

seeking activity, but a survival strategy, allowing the user to numb painful feelings, whereas masturbation reinforces the behaviour as a form of self-soothing (Carnes et al., 2007). Consumption of pornography may involve a re-enactment of the original trauma (Gartner, 2001). For instance, someone who was subjected to physical abuse may become aroused by content depicting dominatrix sex (Birchard & Benfield, 2018). According to Schwartz (1996), such re-enactments are an attempt to establish mastery over traumatic experience. However, the feeling of mastery is transient and gradually gives way to chronic feelings of helplessness and being out-of-control (Van der Kolk, 1989). These considerations point to a complex interplay between trauma, sexual behaviour involving consumption of specific pornographic content and a desire to reclaim control over the painful experience.

However, empirical evidence that pornography is used as a coping mechanism for trauma-related distress is uncertain. According to Williams et al., (2020), quantitative research has not established that trauma was a statistically significant factor. However, since many studies in this field were conducted with the objective of exploring sexual difficulties rather than trauma (Wery & Billieux, 2017) their findings should be interpreted with caution. Therefore, the theoretical premise, according to which pornography is used to cope with negative emotions, remains unconfirmed. Despite this limitation, trauma-based explanations of addiction point to a wide range of complex experiences and concerns rooted in painful experiences that may be important for understanding one's self-perceived addiction to pornography.

Personality theories

Personality theories examine the link between personality traits and vulnerability to addiction (Lewis, 2015). Eysenck (1997) frames it within a psychological resource model holding that addictive behaviour develops because it serves a useful function for the individual, whereas the nature of this function is related to the addict's personality profile. Nonetheless, the relationship between addiction and personality profile is not straightforward.

On the one hand, research found that certain personality traits such as moodiness, irritability, anxiety, impulsivity or aggression increase the risk of addiction (Teeson & Degenhardt, 2002). Furthermore, individuals with behavioural addictions were found to have high levels of impulsivity, compulsivity, sensation seeking and low levels of harm avoidance (Grant et al., 2010). On the other hand, research produced no evidence that these personality features predict

addiction (Teeson & Degenhardt, 2002). Thus, while it can be concluded that some personality traits may be correlated with addictive behaviour, there is no proof of a causal relationship.

When it comes to pornography addiction, literature reports a link between certain personality traits and higher receptivity to pornographic stimuli. For instance, individuals displaying high levels of neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness and obsessional checking were found to be more prone to become dependent on pornography (Edgar & Parmar, 2014; Sniewski, 2018). Narcissism, in particular, was associated with sexual and pornography addictions (Kathehakis, 2016), analogous to what was reported in the field of substance addictions (Jauk & Dietrich, 2019). For instance, Kasper et al. (2015) found that the amount of time spent consuming pornography was positively related with high levels of narcissism. According to Jauk and Dietrich (2019), self-regulatory mechanisms, notably the regulation of chronically low self-esteem, play a key role in the relationship between narcissism and addictive behaviour. Birchard and Benfield (2018) suggest that addictive sexual behaviour is carried out to alleviate the effects of '*narcissistic damage*' where the addicted individuals experience themselves as unacceptable and feel constant anger, shame and negative self-affect. This might well be the case, however, the authors provide no empirical data to back up their claims.

The association between narcissism and pornography consumption is contested by Daniels and Farley (2022). In their view, pornography consumption is associated with narcissism because the activity appears egoistic and has little regard for the welfare of those who are depicted in it. This association reflects social disapproval of pornography rather than the actual prevalence of narcissistic traits. Nonetheless, these claims are only conjectures.

What can be deduced from the reviewed literature is that research findings concerning the relationship between personality traits and pornography addiction are scarce and inconclusive. Despite this limitation, research in this area points to the link between certain personality traits and one's behaviour and feelings, which would be of interest to inquiry into the lived experience.

Relevance of psychological explanations

Psychological theories applied to pornography addiction illustrate the complexity of the phenomenon and highlight the multitude of issues that play a role in addictive behaviour. What can be inferred from the reviewed literature in relation to the present research's aims is that

different psychological mechanisms may be involved in the development and maintenance of pornography addiction. As a conditioned behaviour, addiction is characterised by a shift from seeking pleasure to needing to consume pornography owing to cravings (Gola et al., 2017). When addiction is caused by affective dysregulation, pornography consumption becomes a coping mechanism to regulate difficult feelings such as shame and anxiety, providing the user with transient relief (Katehakis, 2016). In the case of trauma-based addiction, the type of pornography that is consumed may be thematically related to the trauma and involve its re-enactment (Gartner, 2001). From a cognitive perspective, addiction affects information processing in several ways, including attentional bias toward sexual stimuli, impulsive decision-making and low inhibitory control (Castro-Calvo et al., 2020). Certain personality traits such as narcissism may be common in pornography addicts and be related to a need to stabilise self-esteem (Sniewski et al., 2018). Overall, with their focus on the aetiology and factors that maintain problematic engagement with pornography, psychological explanations provide various types of analysis where the same addictive behaviour can be explained by different psychological processes that can inform qualitative inquiry.

2.6.   Socio-cultural aspects

The growing availability of pornography attracted academic attention to the socio-cultural aspects of its consumption, such as the impact of new technologies. For instance, Cooper at al. (2000) theorised that the *'Triple A Engine'* effect of the internet enabling unprecedented accessibility, affordability and anonymity of pornography intensifies online sexual activity, which may cause issues for pornography users. However, the model does not explain why only some users experience problems with consumption of internet pornography. The increased availability of pornography also became a subject of moral, political and legal discussions, encapsulating a wide range of concerns about the risks of pornography and questions about regulatory control, civil liberties and sexual emancipation (Paul, 2010).

With the exception of imagery deemed unlawful, pornography can be freely consumed in the United Kingdom (Paasonen, 2014). In 2020, 50% of the adult population viewed internet pornography (Ofcom, 2021), with 6.7 % consuming it four to six times a week (Statista Research Department, 2021). Data shows that the United Kingdom ranks fourth in the world in terms of pornographic internet searches and is the third largest pornography producer (Ropelato, 2006). Pornography's cultural position also changed, with partial nudity and

sexually suggestive images becoming more prominent in popular culture (Paasonen, 2014). According to Clarkson and Kopaczynski (2013), these cultural changes explain the rise of pornography consumption, though their views are only conjectures.

Scholarly discussions about the socio-cultural aspects of high pornography consumption of particular relevance to this study's aims concern the effects on users' attitudes and public perceptions of pornography addiction.

Effects of pornography on users' attitudes

The impact of pornography consumption on users' attitudes is a contentious topic that has been extensively researched, primarily using theories of social learning and sexual scripting (Wright et al. 2016). According to Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, behaviours may be learned through observation and imitation. People can interpret observed acts as appropriate and subsequently replicate them. According to Gagnon and Simon's (1973) sexual scripting theory, sexual scripts are rooted in social and cultural factors more than biological drives. By combining both theories, Hogben and Byrne (1998) proposed that through social learning, pornographic scripts become a framework for users' sexual expectations and real-life sexual interactions. Building on this view, Bridges et al. (2010) and Wright et al. (2016) argue that pornography has a significant impact on the formation of negative attitudes toward sexuality and relationships. However, this view is not consistently supported in research.

On the one hand, high exposure to pornography was linked with acceptance of interpersonal violence (Egan & Parmar, 2013) and rape myth acceptance reducing pornography users' empathy for rape victims or blaming them for being raped (Foubert et al., 2011). Violent pornography in particular may be influential in producing dominating and sexually imposing attitudes, in particular toward women. A study by Bridges et al. (2010) found that most pornographic material contains acts of verbal or physical aggression, where men are the perpetrators, whereas women are the targets of violent sexual behaviour, to which they react neutrally or positively. Consistent with social learning theory, the authors suggest that the portrayal of aggressive and degrading practices against women in pornography increases the acceptance of sexual violence in real life. This hypothesis was examined in several meta-analyses generating various degrees of support.

A positive association between high pornography consumption and sexual violence was found by Oddone Paolucci et al. (2000) and Wright et al. (2016). High exposure to pornography emerged as an important factor in engaging in socially unacceptable activities such as sexual assault. However, several studies included in these meta-analyses involved sexual offenders, thus their results may not be indicative of other populations. More nuanced results emerged from the review of studies by Malamuth et al. (2000) who found that high pornography consumption was not necessarily indicative of sexual violence in the low-risk population, but it was in men with a high risk of sexually aggressive behaviour.

However, a link between high exposure to pornography and sexual violence was contested on the ground that sexually aggressive men would rape with or without pornographic stimuli (Fradd, 2014). Actually, pornography may aid in the reduction of rape. This is supported by data showing that sexual offenses are lower in the areas where pornography is more readily available (Ley, 2016). Furthermore, pornography users were not found to be more misogynistic than the general population (Neves, 2021). However, these findings are correlational in nature, with no evidence of causation.

Overall, despite the fact that research on the impact of high pornography consumption is inconsistent its findings are relevant to experiential inquiry because they indicate certain attitudes and concerns that may influence pornography users' perceptions of sexuality and relationships.

Public perceptions of addiction to pornography

Socio-cultural research explores the impact of public attitudes to addiction. It shows that public perception of addictive behaviour, which is influenced by factors such as values, moral order or policy, can take different forms and result in a variety of reactions ranging from stigma to acceptance (Lang & Rosenberg, 2017). Public perceptions of pornography addiction received limited interest in research. Furthermore, the few studies that looked into the stigma surrounding sexual and pornography addictions generated inconsistent findings.

While Lang and Rosenberg (2017) found that negative attitudes stigmatising pornography addicts are common, according to Lindsay et al. (2021) public has little awareness of sexual addictions, which are not generally viewed as serious problems, although they receive less

sympathy than other types of addiction. It can be argued, however, that since the public has little awareness of sexual addictions their attitudes may be distorted.

Research shows that stigmatising attitudes do not affect men and women in the same way. Surprisingly, women with sexual addiction were found to receive less stigma than men do (Klein et al., 2019; Lindsay et al.., 2021). According to Lindsay et al. (2021), this can be attributed to the *MeToo* movement, which advocates for public condemnation of men engaging in inappropriate sexual behaviour. However, this is a highly speculative argument, which is not backed up by research.   Women were also found to be significantly less willing to associate with a man addicted to pornography in comparison to a man with another addiction (Lang & Rosenber, 2017), which may suggest that male pornography addicts could be stigmatised more than other addicts. Nonetheless, given the scarcity of research involving women samples, generalisations should be taken with caution.

According to Clarkson and Kopaczewski (2013), the stigma surrounding pornography addiction maintains traditional moralist beliefs about pornography, which has strong cultural connotations of being deviant, distasteful and harmful. By exacerbating the dangers of pornography, the stigma drives public policy with the objective to regulate consumption and restrict free speech and academic freedom. However, given a considerable body of research on pornography, as well as widespread pornography consumption, the latter argument appears unconvincing.

In sum, even if the socio-cultural findings are debatable, they are relevant to qualitative inquiry because they show that societal attitudes can have a major impact on pornography addicts' behaviour and perceptions of their experience.

2.7.   Existential perspectives on addiction

Despite the fact that there is no existential literature specifically addressing pornography addiction, existential perspectives on addiction are important for qualitative inquiry because of their comprehensive approach and underlying philosophy, which are profoundly distinct from mainstream biological, psychological and social theories. From the existential viewpoint, addiction is about the complexity of each person's experience that is grounded in the fragility

of human existence (O'Connor, 2016). According to Längle (2014), *'the cause of addiction is humanity'*[1].

Occasional references to addiction are found in the writings of the early existential authors. For instance, Heidegger (2010) refers to addiction in *'Being & Time'*. He posits the idea that addiction enables the addict to understand the world within a particular ambit by providing a set of symbolic understandings, which make *'dasein'* blind and in denial. Similarly, Straus (1966) wrote about addiction when exploring one's capacity to be open to the world. In his view, addiction involves the shift in focus from the world to the body itself leading to alienation.

Existential authors have ambivalent views about the concept of addiction. On the one end of the spectrum, there are those who refute it altogether. On the other end, there are those who explore the role of existential constructs to understand addiction and promote recovery.

The dominant bio-psycho-social models of addiction are generally considered inadequate due to their failure to address the fundamental existential dilemmas underlying all human struggles (Guignon, 1998). The concept of addiction was criticised for reducing complex human experiences to simple models and perpetuating deterministic views, assigning rigid definitions and alienating labels that might serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Wurum, 2003). The latter criticism links to the concept of self-construct, which refers to beliefs, values or aspirations that can open or limit one's perceptions of themselves and their problems (Du Plock & Fisher, 2005). There is a risk that the *'addict label'* can shape self-beliefs and self-perceptions. Similarly, those who define others as addicts may anticipate certain behaviours, which points to the limitations of exploring phenomena through the prism of a given theoretical model.

Existential themes in addiction

The few contemporary authors who write about addiction highlight the significance of existential concepts in understanding the phenomenon.

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[1] oral citation

O'Connor (2016) emphasises the role of existential frustration. She convincingly argues that emptiness and despair characteristic of someone who has trouble in identifying life goals may result in insecurity and a loss of values. In her view, engaging in addictive behaviour is an attempt to create a substitute for painful reality. However, addiction entails denial of truth and responsibility for the events that led to addiction and the consequences that follow. In this way, addiction obstructs self-knowledge and prevents self-understanding. These explanations link to the concept of meaning, defined by Yalom (1980) as a sense of consistency and purpose in life that has a positive impact on one's mental and emotional well-being. Conversely, the absence of meaning, referred to by Frankl (2004) as '*existential vacum'*, has a negative impact and lies at the basis of addiction (Wong et al., 2012). Meaning-centred approaches in addiction therapy promote conscious reflection on the lived experience and learning to live with life ambiguities (Wilklund, 2008).

Kemp (2011) makes a persuasive case for addiction as a form of *'being-in-the world'* characterised by withdrawal and narrow world-relations, where an addict becomes alienated from others. This view links to socio-cultural research pointing to addicts' sense of isolation and a need to belong in addiction. Similar to Miller and Carroll (2006) and Alexander (2011), Kemp (2011) holds that those who engage in addictive behaviour do so because they seek to avoid the world, whereas addiction becomes a replacement for relations with others. The author considers that in order to recover, one needs to hit a *'rock bottom'*, which he explains in existential terms as *'an event of truth'*, where an individual cannot negate the nature of their unauthentic existence any longer (p. 47). Building on this view, Kemp and Butler (2014) highlight the mutual rejection of addicts and society, with addicts appropriating this rejection as violence to the self. The authors argue that society's negative perceptions of addiction implying deviation or sickness are not simply prejudicial, but are its inherent feature. In this way, the authors extend the concept of addiction to include social attitudes.

Längle (2014) points to the key role of freedom to make choices. He makes the challenging claim that addiction is always a volitional and autonomous act involving personal consent and responsibility. He posits that addicts have control over addictive cravings and must accept the full weight of their choice to respond to them. This view contrasts sharply with the assertion that addiction is a compulsion beyond conscious control associated with powerlessness and loss of control (Heather, 2018).

A strong argument for addiction being a life affirming opportunity enabling an individual to take responsibility for their life is made by O'Connor (2016) and Kemp (2018). For this to occur, a shift in attitude from a commitment to refrain from engaging in addictive behaviour to taking control and becoming accountable is needed. Therefore, recovery should not focus on willpower or a commitment not to engage in behaviour. Instead, individuals struggling with addiction require something that Nietzsche (2019) describes as *'will to power'* and which involves self-fulfilment and living in accordance with values. It is not about removing or subduing symptoms, but confronting life and the way of '*being-in-the world'* (Kemp, 2018).

In sum, existential approaches foster broader reflections on life's ambiguities within the context of subjective experience. They explore addiction within the entirety of a person's experience, inviting self-reflection. Their focus is not on addiction as such, but on the whole person, their reality and singularity. It is not a particular substance or behaviour, which is at the crux of inquiry, but the meaningful interaction between the person, the object and the context. Existential views have the potential to guide the current study's line of inquiry, which ought to transcend beyond the bio-psycho-social aspects of addiction to a multi-dimensional phenomenological exploration.

2.8. Subjective-perception of being addicted to pornography

Within mental health research, a distinction is made between an actual behaviour pattern and the impact of the subjective perception of being addicted on one's behaviour and feelings. The notion of self-perceived addiction refers to one's own interpretation of their experience as addiction (Grubbs et al., 2015). Research explored subjective perception of addiction primarily in the context of substance use. An association was found between subjective perception of being addicted and negative thoughts about the self, experience of guilt and diminished self-efficiency in stopping problematic behaviour (Grubbs et al., 2015). This suggests that subjective perception of being addicted may exacerbate the existing problems.

Although self-diagnosis as a pornography addict is well documented in literature (Taylor, 2020), the subjective experience of being addicted to pornography in a potentially pathological manner and the clinical importance of such perception were rarely explored. Few studies concluded that it was the pathological self-image associated with addiction, rather than pornography consumption, which caused psychological distress (Grubbs et al., 2015; Harper

& Hodgins, 2016). According to Grubbs et al., (2015), the root of the problem is a person's own perception of being addicted to pornography, which is grounded in moral incongruence. Although research in this area is limited, the importance of its findings in relation to the literature on pornography addiction as a whole lies in the shift in focus from high pornography consumption as a key problem to self-identification as an addict.

It was also suggested that personal attitudes towards sexuality rather than high pornography consumption cause some users to label themselves as addicts. For instance, a study by Leonhardt et al. (2017) found that people who self-identified as pornography addicts exaggerated the negative effects of pornography and that their relationships were harmed because of their perception of being addicted rather than pornography consumption. According to the authors, these misrepresentations were due to the feelings of guilt and shame accompanying sexual expression. However, a key limitation of this finding is that it appears to be inadequately supported. Although the study did not include measures of shame and guilt, these feelings were identified as key problems with self-perception as a pornography addict. Nonetheless, the difficulties around self-definition, self-image and self-perception in addiction are highly pertinent to this study's aims.

2.9.   Sexuality and relationships

There is a great deal of debate surrounding the impact of high exposure to pornography on sexuality and relationships. Literature reports a range of negative outcomes including reduced satisfaction in sex with real partners (Zimbardo & Duncan, 2012; Voon et al. 2014; Wilson, 2014) and sexual dysfunctions such as diminished libido or problems with ejaculation (Zillman & Bryant, 2006; Albright, 2008; Voon et al., 2014; Wilson, 2014). According to Park et al. (2016), the amount of time of exposure to pornography is correlated with the rise of sexual dysfunctions in men, whereas ceasing pornography consumption may be sufficient to reverse them. Nonetheless, the authors could not establish a causal relationship between high pornography consumption and sexual dysfunctions.

High pornography consumption was also linked with difficulties in intimate relationships, such as avoidance of sexual intimacy (Zilmann & Bryant, 2006), desire for sex without emotional involvement (Doidge, 2007), problems in establishing sexual boundaries, unrealistic expectations and pushing partners beyond their comfort zones (Bridges, 2010; Weinstein et al.,

2015; Ward, 2016). Although it is possible that such attitudes could be a direct result of internalising pornographic scripts, as proposed by Hogben and Byrne (1998), it cannot be ruled out that problems in intimate relationships existed before or perhaps even motivated the concerned individuals to engage with pornography consumption in the first place, which the studies fail to address.

The unconscious effects of high pornography consumption on sexual behaviour received much attention in literature. Research holds that people condition their sexual interests based on the stimuli providing the highest sexual excitement (Oddone Paolucci et al., 2000). It was suggested that high exposure to pornography leads to a greater need for extreme stimuli (Park et al., 2016) and an increased *'appetite for more deviant and bizarre type of pornography'* (D'Orlando, 2009, p. 57). This links to Tinbergen's (1953) research on *'supernormal stimuli'* demonstrating their ability to overcome an evolutionarily developed response. This view is supported by studies showing that high pornography users migrated towards content that was at odds with their sexual identity or were aroused to imagery, which was not typically sexually salient (Layden, 2010; Love et al., 2015; Park et al., 2016). This led to speculation that pornography may be particularly prone to generate addiction (Sniewski et al., 2018). Nonetheless, this assertion is not backed up by evidence.

A link was also suggested between high exposure to pornography and risky sexual behaviour, without generating conclusive findings. On the one hand, several studies revealed a range of risky sexual activities such as multiple sexual partners, a younger age of sexual initiation or unprotected sex with casual partners, which were associated with pornography consumption (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009; Owens et al., 2012; Harkness et al., 2015; Lim et al., 2017). On the other hand, other studies rejected this association by demonstrating that pornography users delayed sexual initiation or consumed it instead of having sex (McCormack & Wignall, 2017). However, a key problem with these studies is that they were primarily conducted in adolescent or student populations. Therefore, it is unclear whether the findings are indicative of other populations and what the long-term implications of high consumption of pornography for sexual activity would be.

Research also explored the relationship between high exposure to pornography and sexual self-efficacy, which refers to people's perceptions of their sexual competence (Kheswa & Notole, 2014). Evidence across multiple studies indicates that high pornography consumption

contributes to dissatisfaction with sexual performance by generating harmful sexual comparisons (Wright et al., 2021), penis size dissatisfaction (Cranney, 2015) and performance-related cognitive distraction during sexual engagement (Goldsmith et al., 2017). Interestingly, the results of a recent large-scale longitudinal study on pornography consumption, sexual self-competence and sexual functioning by Sommet and Berrent (2022) parallel these findings, but only with regard to men. While male pornography users were found to be more likely to experience sexual performance issues and doubt their sexual competence, women's sexual self-competence and the quality of sex improved. The authors attribute this to men and women internalising, interpreting and applying different sexual scripts from pornography because of differences in sexual preferences and gender roles. This is plausible, given that men start consuming pornography earlier than women and watch content that is more hard core (Wright et al., 2016), which can lead to different comparisons and outcomes in terms of sexual competence. This could be explained on the grounds of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) holding that the feeling of satisfaction is influenced by comparisons between one's own and others' situations. However, these findings could also be explained on methodological grounds, as the female sample was much smaller than that of men, limiting their generalisability with regard to women. It is also possible that issues related to sexual self-efficacy may have existed prior to engagement with pornography and could have even prompted the concerned individuals to consume pornography in the first place, which the study does not account for.

In sum, what can be deduced from the reviewed literature in relation to this study's objectives is that the experience of pornography addiction may involve numerous sexual difficulties. High exposure to pornography was linked to sexual dysfunctions (Park et al., 2016), reduced satisfaction with sex (Wilson, 2014), greater need for extreme sexual stimuli (Love et al., 2015) and difficulties in intimate relationships, such as avoidance of sex, problems with establishing sexual boundaries (Bridges, 2010) or engagement in risky behaviours (Lim et al., 2017), as well as dissatisfaction with sexual self-efficacy (Sommet & Berrent, 2022). Despite some inconsistencies, research in this area is relevant to the present study, as it identifies a variety of concerns about sexuality, intimacy and relationships that are likely to be part of qualitative inquiry into the lived experience.

2.10. Qualitative research into pornography addiction

Qualitative research into pornography addiction is scarce and focuses on the impact of addiction on users' partners, which does not contribute to understanding the self-perceived addicts' perspective. Only four qualitative studies were identified investigating users' experiences. The characteristics of these studies are summarised in Table 1.

The data for these studies was generated from various contexts involving the general population, student members of a self-help group for cyber-dependent pornography users and religious participants of various denominations in pornography addiction recovery programmes. Online surveys and messages, as well as in-person interviews were used to gather the data. In total, the studies report the experience of 602 individuals, out of which only 16 were women. Thematic analysis was used in three studies and narrative analysis in one. Both methods use language as their analytic object with the focus on the content and meaning (Shukla et al., 2014).

The studies focused on various dimensions of problems with pornography consumption and had different aims. Cavaglion (2008) and Palazzolo (2020) investigated the presentation and the impact of pornography consumption on the users. Taylor (2020) explored self-perceived pornography addicts' explanations of their behaviour with the objective to establish a diagnosis of pornography addiction. Burke and Haltom (2020) investigated the beliefs about sex, gender and sexuality. Despite different aims and contexts within which the studies were situated, their findings reveal a number of interconnected themes, even if their interpretations vary across the studies.

Table 1

Summary of Qualitative Studies

Author	Year of publication	Country	Aim	Sample	Data collection	Method	Main findings
Cavaglion	2008	Italy	To map the common symptoms	Male (n=287) and female (n=15) members of a self-help group for cyber-dependent pornography users (total n=302): average age: 32	Messages posted online	Narrative analysis	Pornography dependence '…*is a real mental disorder that can have destructive implications for personal well-being, social adaptation, work, sex life and family relations*' (p. 295).
Taylor	2020	New Zealand	To arrive at diagnostic criteria	Male pornography users (n=213); age: 15-83	Qualitative survey (n=213) and semi-structured interviews (n=30)	Thematic analysis	Numerous inconsistencies and contrasting meanings attached to the concept of pornography addiction. The most frequently used explanations are based on the neurological model of addiction and the construct of addictive personality.
Burke Halton	2020	USA	To examine the beliefs about sex, gender and sexuality	Male religious participants of various denominations in pornography addiction recovery programmes (n=35); age: 19-50+	Interviews	Thematic analysis	'*Participants use distinct cultural schemas related to religion and science to explain how men are created by God to be biologically 'hard-wired' for pornography addiction.*' (p. 233).
Palazzolo	2020	Australia	To examine the effects of on the user	Male (n=52) and female (n=1) pornography users; age: 18-61	Online survey	Thematic analysis based on grounded theory	Pornography addiction involves a range of '*...comorbid mental health dysfunctions such as depression, anxiety or mood disturbances*' (p. 18), as well as symptoms of dependency with effects on well-being and relationships.

Emotional distress as a key characteristic of pornography addiction emerges from the studies by Cavaglion (2008) and Palazollo (2020). Their findings reveal low self-esteem, shame, guilt and low mood, as well as comorbid *'psychopathological conditions or mental disorders'* (Cavaglion, 2008, p. 308). Palozzolo (2020), in particular, points to the symptoms of comorbid mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, ADHD and cognitive impairments in problematic pornography consumption, which fits *'...into an addiction framework and should be considered a similar disorder'* (p. 18) in its own right. She supports the correlation between daily pornography consumption and high scores on measures of psychological distress, although it remains unclear how this conclusion was reached given the qualitative nature of her research. Both studies support the suitability of the addiction framework to problematic pornography consumption, although they do not specify which theoretical model of addiction would be best suited.

A biological propensity to consume pornography is another consistent finding emerging from the studies by Taylor (2020) and Burke and Haltom (2020). Both studies reveal pornography addicts' understanding of biological processes underlying addictive behaviour. They show that the users appropriate the neurological understanding of addiction, which provides them with explanations for their indulgence in pornography. In the users' eyes, pornography addiction is the result of a certain neurological state that develops in the pursuit of pleasure. A common belief among pornography addicts is that their brains are *'wired'* in such a way that they are sexually aroused to pornography. This belief bears a similarity to the view about addicts' brains being '*hijacked'* by the substance they use (Doidge, 2008).

A belief in one's susceptibility to addiction is another common theme. However, susceptibility is explained differently in the studies. Burke and Haltom (2020) reveal claims about the *'naturalness'* of men's pornography consumption, asserting that their masculinity, which manifests itself in *'biologically and divinely crated sexual drives'* (p. 252) explains their proclivity to pornography. For men, pornography consumption is part of *'natural impulses'* (Burke & Haltom, 2020, p. 246). Thus, it is normal for men, but not for women, to consume pornography. In the study by Taylor (2020), the construct of addictive personality is used as explanation for one's vulnerability to become addicted. The study reveals that being a pornography addict is thought to be the result of

having an addictive personality, which removes blame and responsibility for one's problems. Both studies highlight a deterministic understanding of addiction.

The demonization of pornography consumption is another recurrent theme. The research by Cavaglion (2008) demonstrates that pornography addiction is perceived as *'sickness'*, *'insanity'* and *'deviance'* (p. 303). However, this demonization is based on social grounds rather than moral ones, as it is the case in the Burke and Haltom's (2020) study. The Italian pornography addicts feel socially alienated, but do not experience any sense of sin. In contrast, although religious pornography addicts in the study by Burke and Haltom (2020) find it natural to view pornography, they consider it a sin comparable to adultery, since they lust for a sexual partner to whom they are not married. This is not a surprising finding, given the religious nature of the sample.

Sexual expression is another interconnected theme, which is approached from different perspectives. In the study by Cavaglion (2008), pornography consumption originates in sexual compulsions experienced by the users who are essentially sexual addicts for whom pornography became an outlet to express their sexual needs. In Palazzolo's (2020) study, sexuality is approached primarily through relational lenses, with an emphasis on a lack of intimacy with one's partner and viewing women as sex objects. Both perspectives are pertinent to understanding the lived experience.

Finally, each study reveals certain features of pornography addiction that are not identified in the other studies or are given only limited attention. For instance, Cavaglion (2008) demonstrates that pornography addiction is characterised by a lack of confidence in one's ability to handle their life. Palazzolo (2020) points to an escalating nature of addiction. Burke and Haltom (2020) offer insights into gender-related beliefs perpetuating inequalities between the sexes and stigmatising female sexuality. Taylor (2020) demonstrates the connection between metaphor and nosology of pornography addiction. The four qualitative studies reveal a range of unique insights and perspectives. Certain commonalities in psychological and behavioural manifestations can be observed, in particular in the studies by Cavaglion (2008) and Palazzolo (2020). A high degree of

vagueness, numerous inconsistencies and contrasting meanings attached to the concept of pornography addiction are revealed by Taylor (2020). A range of religion-related beliefs emerge from the study by Burke and Haltom (2020) demonstrating important differences in the assumptions about male and female sexual autonomy. All these features add to the knowledge of the phenomenon.

Despite the fact that the studies are related in terms of their interest in pornography addiction, given their limited number and distinct goals, even when the findings are interconnected, they exhibit a high degree of variability and a limited recurrence of themes. Although they shed light on the reality of self-perceived pornography addiction from the users' perspective, their authors acknowledge that their findings are only preliminary and the topic requires further research. The lived experience in particular remains under-explored. The studies by Cavaglion (2008) and Palazzolo (2020) that looked into the lived experience focus on the psychological aspects. Given the vast spectrum of concerns involved in self-perceived pornography addiction, they ought to be complemented by research exploring a broader range of experiential dimensions.

2.11. Therapeutic approaches

Pharmacological and psychological therapies have been applied to issues related to high pornography consumption.

Pharmacological interventions were researched on a limited scale (Miller, 2015). Medication used for treatment of depression (citalopram), substance use disorders (naltrexone) and testosterone-lowering drugs were found effective in reducing pornography consumption and associated masturbatory habits (Miller, 2015; Sniewski et al., 2018; Briken, 2020). However, due to adverse side effects such as anhedonia, metabolic syndrome, osteoporosis or engagement in risky sexual behaviour that was not present prior to treatment, no therapeutic recommendations were made for their use with clients experiencing problems with high pornography consumption (Hinam, 2013; Miller, 2015). Therefore, psychological interventions remain the first-line treatment (Sniewski et al., 2018).

However, literature reveals that when it comes to working with clients who struggle with pornography consumption, practitioners may face numerous challenges, including their own limited understanding of the difficulties involved (Hinman, 2013; Sniewski et al., 2018). What emerges from research in this area is that despite clients frequently bringing up pornography consumption in therapy, practitioners feel unprepared, lack the necessary training and skills, whereas some do not feel comfortable discussing the topic at all (Schneider, 2000; Minarcik, 2016; Short et al., 2016).

There is also little research and evidence supporting specific psychological interventions for problems with pornography consumption (Minarcik, 2016; Durante Bergue Alves & Cavalhieri, 2020). Studies looking into the effectiveness of therapeutic approaches differ considerably in terms of methodology and lack statistical power, as they employ small and homogeneous samples (Wery & Billieux, 2017; Sniewski et al., 2018). Randomized controls trials are rare (Bőthe et al., 2021; Ogier-Bloomer, 2021). Little is also known about the long-term effectiveness of therapies (Blaszczynski, 2019).

The main goal of therapies in this area is to cease or reduce pornography consumption, while preventing relapse (Crosby & Twohig, 2016; Sniewski et al., 2018). As a result, the primary measures used to evaluate their effectiveness are reductions in the frequency of pornography consumption and experience of cravings, as well as increased self-efficacy in avoiding pornography (Blaszczynski, 2019). In terms of specific modalities, there is limited evidence for acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) and CBT-based approaches.

ACT was applied to improve one's responses to cravings and impulses rather than control consumption (Sniewski et al., 2018). Significant reductions in pornography consumption were reported immediately after the end of therapy and three months later (Crosby & Twohig, 2016). However, research produced little evidence for ACT enhancing the overall sense of well-being of problematic pornography users (Crosy & Twohig, 2016). Nevertheless, subject to further research, ACT could be a potential path forward.

The effectiveness of CBT and CBT-based integrative approaches incorporating motivational interviewing and mindfulness were investigated in single studies that reported reductions in pornography consumption, sexual cognitions, sexual compulsivity and cravings (Minarcik, 2016; Sniewski et al., 2018; Bőthe et al., 2021; Lotfi et al., 2021). A meta-analysis by Goslar et al. (2020) found that CBT-based approaches strengthen self-control mechanisms, leading to a reduction in the number of hours spent watching pornography. Similar to ACT, further research is needed to make recommendations concerning the use of CBT-based approaches for problems with pornography consumption.

Given the paucity of evidence, it was suggested that empirically supported interventions used for sexual problems be extended to pornography addiction. For instance, Neves (2021) argues that because of a link between high pornography consumption and emotional dysregulation that is common in people who engage in compulsive sexual behaviours (Lew-Starowicz et al., 2019), therapy for problems related to pornography consumption should be treated using evidence-based approaches for sexual compulsivity and impulsivity. The focus of such therapy should be on unpleasant emotions underlying compulsive behaviour or pleasure seeking that underpins impulsivity (Giugliano, 2013). Instead of reducing pornography consumption and preventing relapse, the approaches targeting sexual compulsivity and impulsivity do not aim at avoiding sexual cues but assist individuals in developing alternative coping mechanisms that could be used in place of pornography consumption (Neves, 2021). However, compulsive sexual behaviour is an umbrella term covering a variety of sexual behaviours and aetiologies (Briken, 2020). A review of therapeutic approaches to compulsive sexual behaviour by Von Franké et al. (2015) concluded that diverse aetiologies and symptoms of compulsive sexual behaviour should be addressed using different psychosexual approaches, without specifying, however, which approach would be best suited to address particular aetiologies and symptoms.

It appears from the reviewed literature that despite psychological interventions being the main form of therapy for problems with pornography consumption, research on their effectiveness is still at an early stage and numerous questions remain unanswered. Behavioural change understood

as decreased pornography consumption, as well as reductions in compulsions and urges are the key measures used to assess the effectiveness of therapeutic approaches. However, reducing pornography consumption, although important, may not always be the primary therapeutic objective for some users, which research in this area does not appear to account for.

2.12. Rationale for the present research in the context of the reviewed literature

The aim of the present research is to improve the understanding of self-perceived pornography addiction by providing lived-experience-based insights from the perspective of individuals who self-identify as pornography addicts. To this end, the research intends to examine various dimensions of the experience and the types of concerns it entails, with the focus on the factors that influence one's perception of their experience in terms of addiction.

The reviewed literature shows that problematic pornography consumption and its potential overlap with addiction sparked scientific interest, with research focussing on the appropriateness of the addiction paradigm, commonalities with other types of addictive behaviour, causal explanations, as well as behavioural, psychosocial and psychosexual manifestations. The evaluation of prior research indicates that the questions that the current study aims to answer have not been fully addressed. A summary of findings along the four basic dimensions of existence proposed by Van Deurzen (2012) allowing for different angles of inquiry into phenomena: the physical, the psychological, the social and the spiritual presented below demonstrates that the knowledge of pornography addiction is fragmentary, with key aspects of the phenomenon remaining poorly understood or not dealt with in depth.

The physical dimension was explored only to a limited extent. Previous research addressed neurological mechanisms underpinning pornography addiction (Kuhn & Gallinat, 2014; Voon et al., 2014; Love et al., 2015), sexual dysfunctions in men (Park et al, 2016), changes in sexual practices (Layden, 2010) and, to a lesser extent, sexual behaviour accompanying pornography consumption (Laier et al., 2014; Blum et al., 2015), generating few undisputed findings. Other aspects of the physical realm are yet to be investigated.

Research into psychological aspects of pornography addiction had several goals. It attempted to understand the underlying mechanisms and motivations leading to the development and maintenance of addiction by looking into impulse-control (Wery et al., 2018), compulsivity (Neves, 2021), conditioning (Gola et al., 2017), cognitive impairments (Castro-Calvo et al., 2021), as well as affective dysregulation resulting from insecure attachment and trauma (Katehakis, 2016; Hall, 2019). It was proposed that pornography addiction is not a pleasure seeking activity, but a coping mechanism used to deal with difficult emotions providing a short-term relief (Birchard & Benfield, 2018; Hall, 2019). Psychological research also looked into personality traits of those users who experience issues with pornography consumption, demonstrating correlational relationships with the traits such as narcissism, neuroticism and conscientiousness, which may be related to a need to stabilise self-esteem (Edgar & Parmar, 2014; Kasper et al., 2015). Mental health and emotional aspects were also researched revealing the presence of psychiatric comorbidities such as anxiety, depression or substance use (Rosenberg et al., 2014; Perry, 2017) and negative self-perception manifesting itself in the feeing of shame (Hall, 2019) and a sense of diminished sexual self-competence (Sommet & Berrent, 2022). However, with the exception of two studies by Cavaglion (2008) and Palazzolo (2020), emotional aspects were not explored qualitatively. Thus, to understand the psychological dimension better, not only should the scope of psychological difficulties be expanded, but also qualitative knowledge developed.

Research into the social dimension explored the impact of high pornography consumption on users' beliefs and attitudes. It suggests increased acceptance of sexual violence (Oddone Paolucci et al., 2000), relational difficulties in the area of sex (Bridges et al., 2010), indicating decreasing sexual satisfaction in physical relationships (Zilmann & Bryant, 2006) or problems with establishing sexual boundaries (Weinstein et al., 2015), as well as engagement in risky sexual behaviour (Lim et al., 2017). However, the findings emerging from this area of research are contentious, supported by scant empirical evidence and lacking experiential insights.

The spiritual dimension remains under-explored. Few studies investigated the impact of religious beliefs on pornography consumption (Grubbs et al., 2015; Burke & Haltom, 2020). However, the

generalisability of the findings deriving from religious samples remains uncertain. Other aspects of the spiritual realm are yet to be investigated.

There is also surprisingly little attention in literature to the factors that influence one's perception of their experience in terms of addiction. Moral incongruence was investigated only with regard to religious pornography users (Grubbs et al., 2015; Burke and Haltom, 2020). The measures of arousal to pornographic stimuli (Laier et al., 2013), compulsion (Skinner, 2005) or frequency of exposure to pornography consumption (Cooper et al., 2000) that may be predictive of addiction are unlikely to be its sole determinants (Park et al., 2016). The presence of negative consequences as a criterion for distinguishing addictive from non-addictive pornography consumption (Skinner, 2005) may encompass a wide range of concerns that remain under-explored.

Furthermore, the reviewed literature highlights a significant imbalance between quantitative and qualitative approaches to the phenomenon. Given a wide range of addiction theories and models, which attempt to define and explain problematic pornography consumption, the review shows that there is a need for a more open-ended investigation, without pre-established theoretical assumptions, which would be anchored in the users' reflective accounts. The practice of counselling psychology, which struggles with numerous challenges when working with this client group, including therapists' limited understanding of the difficulties involved (Hinman, 2013; Sniewski et al., 2018), would benefit in particular from qualitative inquiry.

Few researchers addressed the problem from a qualitative perspective, in particular from the self-perceived pornography addicts' standpoint. The studies that investigated the users' experience had very different and rather one-dimensional goals, such as arriving at diagnostic criteria of pornography addiction (Taylor, 2000) or exploring the psychological impact (Palazzolo, 2000). Therefore, the common features of self-perceived pornography addiction emerging from qualitative studies are rare. Furthermore, their findings reveal high levels of ambiguity and multiple meanings attached to the concept of pornography addiction. It appears that a broader, multi-dimensional exploration of the phenomenon has not received sufficient attention in research

thus far and that one of the main issues in the knowledge of the phenomenon is the lack of its comprehensive experiential understanding.

Calls for a more thorough exploration of self-perceived pornography addiction, which would be based on the lived experience, were made by several authors such as Griffiths (2012), Safron (2013) or McCormac and Wignall (2017) suggesting that phenomenological investigation can provide a clearer understanding of what pornography addiction entails and how it is experienced. The reviewed literature indicates that until now, comprehensive study of the lived experience from the perspective of users who consider themselves addicted to pornography received limited attention, which indicates a gap to fill. Therefore, this study is based on a well-documented need.

3. Research paradigm

This chapter begins with a discussion of the philosophical underpinnings of the research. It explains the principles underlying the researcher's understanding of reality and knowledge construction, as well as the study's methodological approach.

3.1. Ontological and epistemological positions

Ontology, as a branch of philosophy, is interested in the nature of reality (Scotland, 2012). There are two opposite approaches to reality: realism and relativism. The former assumes the existence of reality that is independent of our perceptions, whereas the latter implies that nothing exists outside of our consciousness (Bager-Charleson, 2014). Between these two schools of thought, there exist viewpoints accepting reality but maintaining that its understanding is founded on subjective perspective (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012).

Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge and the ways it is constructed (Scotland, 2012). There are two fundamentally different perspectives on the nature of knowledge. One assumes that there is objective knowledge that can be discovered through unbiased investigation. The other holds that there is no pre-existing knowledge because knowledge is essentially a social

construction (Madill et al., 2000). Aside from these two viewpoints, there are epistemological positions asserting that knowledge can be created in a variety of ways (Bager-Charleson, 2014).

This study is situated within the phenomenological tradition, which is based on subjective ontological assumptions. It is consistent with the epistemological positions holding that knowledge is based on one's experience and meaning making, as opposed to positivist positions, according to which knowledge is objective (Biggerstaff, 2012).

As a theory of knowledge, phenomenology has its roots in the philosophical work of Husserl (2017) who advocated the study of subjective experience to identify the essential features of phenomena that should be investigated in their natural environment and in the manner in which they appear. He believed that by transcending unique circumstances, knowledge of the essence of the investigated experiences could help understand similar situations (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

Husserl was also interested in understanding the process of knowledge construction. To this end, he used the concept of *'intentionality'* to explore mental processes taking place in one's consciousness to represent phenomena and their properties (Smith et al., 2012). To capture the relationship between mental processes and their objects, he used the notions of *'noema'* and *'noesis'*. The former refers to the object of apprehension, the latter to the act of apprehending (Husserl, 2017). In this way, he postulated conscious returning to the things themselves (Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, he posited that phenomenological researchers should be aware of and suspend their preconceptions about the phenomenon under study in order to understand its essential features. He called this process of phenomenological reduction *'bracketing'* or *'epoche'* and believed that in this way, the researcher can concentrate on the intrinsic qualities of the phenomenon, which determine its character (Husserl, 2017).

However, hermeneutic and existential philosophers questioned the possibility of constructing knowledge without interpretation and argued that it is not possible to investigate phenomena in a neutral or entirely bracketed way (Churchill, 2022). Heidegger (2010) used the concept of *'being-*

in-the-world' with people, objects, language and culture that preclude objectivity as one's understanding and knowledge of reality are always influenced by their situational context. To explore reality he coined the concept of *'hermeneutic circle',* which implies that comprehending the whole is possible through the understanding of its parts. However, the context of the whole must be understood in order to comprehend any of the parts (Holland & Montague, 2017). Furthermore, he posited that an in-depth inquiry into the phenomena must be informed by fundamental questions of existence such as relatedness and meanings through which the world becomes significant (Smith et al., 2012).

Researcher's perspective on ontology and epistemology

In agreement with Cooper and McLeod (2011), the researcher's epistemological stance, grounded in subjectivist ontology, was based on the premise that universal *'truth'* that could be revealed by objective examination of reality that is experienced in the same way by everyone does not exist. Instead, she assumed that knowledge could be generated from the exploration and interpretation of the lived experience. However, as suggested by Madill et al. (2000), the researcher recognised that the phenomenon she intended to explore could be experienced and understood in many ways, depending on the participants' unique perspectives. As a result, the findings and the knowledge generated by her research would be person and context dependent.

The researcher did not aim at producing objective, transcendent or abstract knowledge. She makes no claim to giving a *'true'* account of self-perceived pornography addiction, which is consistent with her ontological and epistemological positions. She was interested in the participants' unique experiences, their insights and subjective understandings. Her goal was to explore multiple realities and perceptions of the phenomenon, while taking into account the contexts within which they occurred.

The researcher also acknowledges that she played a role in the process of knowledge construction. In agreement with Cooper (2008), she believes that her subjectivity was integral to the research process. She is of the opinion that complete *'epoche'* postulated by Husserl (2017) is not possible.

As argued by Heidegger (2010), she does not believe that researchers can separate their prior knowledge, experiences or preconceptions from the object of study. Thus, the researcher was always embedded in her research. Despite her best efforts to identify her assumptions, she was not detached from her research, especially since her goal was not only to restore the participants' stories and meaning making but also to provide her perspective on their experiences. However, she understood the challenges involved in these processes and the need for engaging in reflective practice and critical awareness of her perspectives when conducting her research.

3.2. Methodology: qualitative approach

This study's methodology is based on qualitative research methods, which were contrasted with quantitative ones. The latter consist of an empirical and systematic investigation of observable phenomena, with the focus on measurable characteristics to produce replicable data that can be generalised from a sample to the population of interest (McLeod, 2015). Quantitative methods are used to explain investigated phenomena, classify their characteristics or test specific hypotheses by identifying occurrences, volumes, sizes or correlations between entities (Biggerstaff, 2012). Qualitative research gives a different perspective. Its focus is on the quality of the investigated experience (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Qualitative methods allow for an in-depth understanding of phenomena by examining experiential insights, subjective perceptions and personal meanings associated with the experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In the field of psychology, they enable an idiographic understanding, capturing the complexities of phenomena (Bryman, 2008).

The fundamental difference between quantitative and qualitative methods consists in the approach to knowledge construction (Biggerstaff, 2012). Quantitative methods are grounded within the positivist tradition, which posits that there is objective knowledge that can be accessed and explained, while qualitative methods are generally rooted in the humanistic position (Bager-Charleson, 2014). Qualitative methods do not attempt to construct objective knowledge or provide explanations, but to understand phenomena by examining experiences and the ways people make sense of them (Willig, 2008). In contrast to quantitative methods, they do not seek to test theories

or pre-formulated hypotheses, as they are concerned with the subjective understanding of reality, rather than objective statements of phenomena (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Furthermore, the researcher's role is significantly different in both methods. While in quantitative research, the researcher should remain neutral to avoid influencing the results (Sciara, 1999) qualitative methods recognise that researchers are an important part of the process in terms of their prior knowledge and personal judgements, which influences the findings (Alase, 2017).

Given that this study looks into the qualitative dimensions of self-perceived pornography addiction, qualitative methodologies were the most appropriate. They were considered better suited for the purpose of this study, which aims to generate insights into the lived experience. Quantitative methods, with their focus on explanations, causality, measurability or hypothesis testing would not be appropriate to answer the research question because they are not designed to explore the complexity of human experiences (Bryman, 1988). Interpretation of personal experiences is always subjective and by definition, quantitative methods with their focus on the objectivity and the impartiality would not be appropriate. Given that the present study is not approached with a predetermined hypothesis, an inductive data-driven approach will be better suited to answer the research questions than a deductive theory-driven method characteristic of quantitative research (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Therefore, the choice of qualitative methods is justified because of their consistency with the study's aims, as well as its ontological and epistemological positions.

3.3. Methods: Interpretative phenomenological analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was chosen because it was considered particularly well suited to explore the research questions.

Theoretical underpinnings of IPA

IPA has its roots in phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography (Smith et al., 2012). As a phenomenological approach, IPA is concerned with personal perception of life experiences

(Larkin & Thompson, 2012). The method is used to explore contextual accounts of experience with the objective to capture in-depth insights, subjective interpretations and meanings (Holland & Montague, 2017). IPA is concerned with processes and meanings rather than with causal explanations (Alase, 2017). Its primary aim is to investigate how people experience phenomena and how they make sense of them (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). The meaning making is at the level of an individual and is context-oriented. IPA assumes that the meaning attached to the lived-experience of those who experience similar events can enhance the understanding of the investigated phenomenon (Smith et al., 2012).

The IPA's phenomenological orientation is reflected in the way data is analysed. To analyse the data provided by the participants, the researcher should identify their own pre-conceptions (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The reason for doing so is to limit possible interferences with participants' understandings. The analytical process involves a *'textural description'* of what the participants said and a *'structural description'*, which takes into account the context within which the phenomenon occurs (Alase, 2017). IPA is also idiographic, as before moving on to a cross-case examination, each case has to be closely analysed on its own merits. This approach should be followed throughout the analytic process, which makes it possible to identify convergences and divergences across the study group (Tuffour, 2017).

IPA aims not only to describe but also to interpret the meaning of the experience (Tuffour, 2017). The IPA interpretative framework involves the interaction between the participants and the researcher (Holland & Montague, 2017). Through a two-stage interpretation process called a *'double hermeneutic'*, the researcher reinterprets participants' interpretations of their experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). In this way, the researcher attempts to understand the experience from the participants' perspective, yet at the same time, the researcher adopts a critical attitude towards their interpretations (Alase, 2017).

Because of its emphasis on the meaning making, IPA can be linked to cognitive psychology (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Similar to cognitive psychology, IPA seeks to understand what

people think about their experiences. It assumes a chain of connections between individuals' accounts, their thinking and emotional states (Smith & Osborn, 2003). However, unlike cognitive psychology, IPA uses samples representing a perspective, rather than a population (Smith et al., 2012). Instead of random or representative samples, IPA employs purposive groups for whom the research question is personally significant. Thus, participants of an IPA study are selected from a group of people experiencing the phenomenon under investigation (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Moreover, while cognitive psychology employs quantitative and experimental methods, IPA makes use of an in-depth qualitative analysis, as the focus is on the quality of the investigated experience and meanings rather than on measurable characteristics (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Limitations of IPA

A number of criticisms have been levelled at IPA. The method was criticised for being overtly descriptive and relying too heavily on language as a means of understanding individual experiences. For instance, Willig (2008) argues that the method works best with well-spoken participants who are able to describe appropriately their experiences. Also according to Noon (2018), the method may not be suitable to investigate the lived experience of less articulate individuals, for instance, those with speech or language difficulties, as the inability to express complex thoughts or feelings could affect the validity of research. However, Smith et al. (2012) argue that there is a link between how people articulate their experiences, thoughts and feelings. Thus, by examining the way in which participants communicate their experiences, the researcher can learn how they make sense of them.

IPA was also criticised for not being sufficiently *'scientific'*. For instance, Giorgi (2010) considers that the method is incompatible with sound scientific practices because its approach to data analysis is excessively flexible. Furthermore, the method was critiqued for lacking replicability, since researchers working with the same set of data may arrive at different conclusions, which raises questions about validity and reliability (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). However, Smith (2010) argues that procedures in qualitative research are less rigorous than in quantitative research due to

the methodological differences. Although IPA does not seek objectivity, it does not mean that the method is not scientific. IPA-based research should be considered in terms of theoretical rather than empirical generalisability, allowing the reader to make connections between the study findings, existing literature and their own personal and professional experiences (Smith, 2010). Thus, IPA has a lot to offer in terms of understanding phenomena and knowledge construction. For instance, it can supplement knowledge generated from quantitative studies by revealing qualitative aspects and contribute in this way to theory (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011; Pringle et al., 2011).

Validity and quality

The validity and reliability of a qualitative study requires a suitable method of evaluation, which should be appropriate to the research paradigm. For instance, quantitative methods of evaluation would not be appropriate, as they do not have the required properties to demonstrate value and merits of a qualitative study (Mandal, 2018). According to Smith et al. (2012), an IPA study can be evaluated using the following four criteria proposed by Yardley (2000): sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; transparency and coherence; impact and importance.

Sensitivity to context requires proper contextualisation of the setting within which the research is placed. This requires the researcher to have prior knowledge relevant to the topic under study, including related theories and socio-cultural contexts, as well as a co-operating relationship with the study participants (Yardley, 2000).

The criterion of commitment is used to assess the researcher's involvement with the research topic and the appropriate ability to apply the research method. Rigour requires sufficient amount of data to be gathered and their completeness to allow an in-depth interpretation (Yardley, 2000).

Transparency and coherence concern the persuasiveness of the study. Transparency can be demonstrated through thorough documentation of data collection and analysis, as well as through

researcher's reflexivity about the research process and the underlying assumptions. The criterion of coherence is used to assess the consistency of the research paradigm (Yardley, 2000).

The impact and importance of the research are the key factors to determine its value. They are used to demonstrate its wider implications, for example, the theoretical value or the potential for practical application (Yardley, 2000).

Consideration of alternative methods and rationale for choosing IPA

Grounded theory (GT) was considered as a possible alternative to answer the research questions. GT is a method of constructing a theory from the study of the elements of experience and their relationships through an organised process of data collection and analysis with the view to explain the researched phenomenon (Thomson et al., 2014). There are several variations of GT. For instance, constructivist grounded theory (CGT) draws from the positivist tradition and puts emphasis on neutrality and generality of research. It assumes that reality can be revealed through an impartial examination of concepts grounded in qualitative data (Mills et al., 2006). This approach contrasts with IPA's subjective approach to reality and knowledge construction.

There are also significant differences with regard to the goals of both methods. While IPA research addresses '*the what'* and '*the how'* of the researched phenomenon, CGT is concerned with the development of an explanatory theory based on causal explanations derived from participants' perspectives (Thomson et al., 2014). Thus, contrary to IPA, which focuses on individual experiences, CGT aims at understanding a phenomenon as a concept (Frost et al., 2010). Therefore, its findings would be appropriate for a study seeking to explain a phenomenon, rather than explore its experiential dimensions and attached meanings.

IPA was considered appropriate for the study due to the consistency of its epistemological position with the aim of the research, which is concerned with the existential-phenomenological understanding of self-perceived pornography addiction. Because of its strong focus on causation (Mills et al., 2006), CGT would not be suitable to explore the experiential dimensions of the

phenomenon that involves complex personal issues. Moreover, there is already a plethora of addiction theories (Moss & Dyer, 2010). Instead of creating another conceptual account of addiction based on CGT, IPA was chosen because it allows for the understanding of self-perceived pornography addiction through the exploration of individual experiences, which is what the current research investigates. Furthermore, IPA's usefulness for this study lies in its capacity to reveal the complexities of human experiences, which, in the researcher's opinion, is especially significant when examining complex and under-explored phenomena such as self-perceived pornography addiction.

3.4. Reflexivity

The concept of reflexivity refers to the examination of the researcher's views and attitudes to see how they may have influenced the research (Bager-Charleson, 2014). It implies that *'truth'* and *'reality'* are subjective and depend on personal perspectives (McLeod, 2015). Reflexivity requires the researcher to be aware of their personal positions and underlying beliefs about the phenomenon under study, including prior experiences with the phenomenon, as well as the researcher's background and assumptions about knowledge because they affect the direction of the investigation, methods, questions, findings and conclusions (Malterud, 2001).

To confront researchers' implicit and explicit beliefs, Finlay and Gough (2003) proposed a range of reflective attitudes such as introspection, inter-subjectivity, mutual collaboration, social critique or ironic deconstruction. To foster reflective exploration of her viewpoints, the researcher used in particular reflective introspection involving self-dialogue and inter-subjectivity by engaging in reflecting dialogue with her supervisors. The researcher kept a written record of her reflections, following as much as possible a cyclical model of reflection proposed by Gibbs (1998), which includes the following stages: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusions and action plan. The researcher's reflective considerations are presented in section 8.3. Appendix 2 presents excerpts from her reflective journal.

4. Research design

This chapter describes the research design and its subsequent steps, followed by a discussion of ethical considerations, including issues of particular concern.

4.1. Sampling

Adult pornography consumers who subjectively perceived their pornography consumption as addiction were eligible for inclusion. In line with the explanations provided in section 1.7, only users of those forms of pornography that are considered legal in the United Kingdom were qualified to take part in the study.

The sample consisted of ten participants in psychotherapy for problems related to pornography addiction. All participants were adult and heterosexual men. Half were married or in a relationship. Five participants were in their twenties, two in their thirties, two in their forties and one was in his fifties. Eight participants had higher education, two had vocational or secondary school level of education. All were White-British or White-Other.

The participants saw pornographic content for the first time and continued to be exposed when they were between the ages of six to fifteen. At the time of the interviews, the volume of consumed pornography varied across the participants. Six participants consumed pornography on a weekly basis, ranging from two to six times each week, for up to four hours each time. Two participants consumed pornographic content on a daily basis, several times a day for various amounts of time. One participant consumed pornography irregularly. One stopped engaging with pornography four weeks prior to the interview.

The length of time during which the participants considered their pornography consumption being problematic ranged from two to 31 years. The duration of being in therapy for problems related to pornography use varied. Eight participants were in therapy for a period of between two to four months, one participant for one and half years and one for 20 years.

Overall, the researcher considers that the sample was suitable for the study purpose. It was homogenous in terms of participants' experience, as it consisted of individuals who subjectively perceived their problems with pornography use to be addiction for a significant period. A summary of demographic information is presented in Table 2. The participants' profiles are presented in Appendix 3.

Table 2

Summary of Participants' Demographic Information

ID code	Age	Gender	Education	Profession	Sexual Orientation	Relationship Status	Duration of Therapy
P1	43	M	higher education	web designer	heterosexual	in relationship	20 years
P2	52	M	higher education	doctor	heterosexual	married	2 months
P3	23	M	higher education	IT specialist	heterosexual	in relationship	3 months
P4	26	M	higher education	graphic designer	heterosexual	in relationship	3 months
P5	25	M	higher education	financial analyst	heterosexual	single	3,5 months
P6	26	M	higher education	customer-service agent	heterosexual	single	1,5 years
P7	40	M	higher education	civil servant	heterosexual	married	4 months
P8	34	M	vocational qualifications	financial controller	heterosexual	single	4 months
P9	37	M	higher education	accountant	heterosexual	single	4 months
P10	26	M	secondary education	soldier	heterosexual	single	3 months

The possibility of using a comparison group was initially considered, in particular with the view to identify potential divergences in the perception of the experiences. Ultimately, the researcher decided not to use a comparison group because the aim of the research is not to compare the experiences of those who consider themselves addicted to pornography with those who do not consider their problems with pornography use to be addiction. The objective of the study is to investigate the lived experience of self-perceived pornography addiction to get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, since the research sample is rather large for an IPA study, the researcher considered that it would be possible to identify convergences and divergences within the study group.

4.2. Recruitment

Recruitment started in June 2019 when the pilot interview took place and continued until February 2020. Information pamphlets about the study were displayed at the clinic. Moreover, possibility to take part in the research was communicated to the clients by their therapists.

4.3. Data collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Participants were invited to take part in an approximately one-hour-long anonymous interview consisting of open-ended questions concerning their experience of self-perceived pornography addiction. The questions, which are presented in Appendix 4, served as prompts. Additional questions were asked in response to the statements made by the participants and the interview dynamics. The interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researcher.

The interview questions intended to enable the participants to reflect on various aspects of their experience in order to generate data, which would be relevant to address the research questions. To this end, data needed to be gathered reflecting the reality of self-perceived pornography addiction, the main concerns related to the experience and the factors that affect the participants' perception of their experiences in terms of addiction. The questions were of an exploratory nature.

They were developed around the four basic dimensions of human existence proposed by Van Deurzen (2012): the physical, the psychological, the social and the spiritual, which allows exploring different ways of relating to the world. The questions intended to investigate each dimension of the participants' reality with the view to understand the overall context of their experiences. They aimed to engage the participants in the process of description and reflection with the view to understand the reality of self-perceived pornography addiction. The formulation of certain questions was inspired by the reviewed literature. For instance, some questions aimed at exploring how the self- perception of being addicted to pornography conforms to the views identified in literature with regard to the concepts such as self-efficiency, choice, control, responsibility and values. In terms of content, the questions were divided as follows:

- questions exploring the context of their experiences;
- questions exploring the range of experiences associated with self-perceived pornography addiction;
- questions exploring the participants' understandings of their experiences as addiction and their perceptions of being pornography addicts.

4.4. Ethical considerations

The research was approved by the NSPC Ethics Board by Chair's action on 24 April 2019. Ethical permission is presented in Appendix 5. The researcher worked in line with the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018) and the Code of Human Research Ethics (2021). The following ethical issues were taken in consideration throughout the research process:

Informed consent

Informed consent was requested from the participants to take part in the research and process their data. In order to obtain their consent, the participants were provided with oral and written explanations of the study's purpose and the procedures involved. The participants were informed

how the study would be carried out, how their confidentiality would be protected, what kind of data would be collected and how it would be processed. The participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study. Explanations were provided how the withdrawal process would be handled. Benefits and risks related to their participation were outlined, including the consequences of revealing potentially illegal activities. The question of pornography's legality and illegality was discussed. The participants were provided with replies to questions concerning their participation in the study. A written consent was signed by each participant before the interview started.

Confidentiality and data protection

Data was collected, stored and handled in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2016), Data Protection Act (2018) and the Middlesex University and NSPC guidance. Only data necessary for the research was collected and used exclusively for the purpose of the study.

Given the sensitive nature of the investigated topic, specific measures were implemented to ensure participants' anonymity and protect their privacy. Firstly, the participants were advised not to give any identifying details while being interviewed. Furthermore, an ID code was allocated to each participant, which was used throughout the research process and under which all material is stored. Any details, which could potentially identify the participants, were changed at the time of transcription. Any personal information, which could be associated with information they had provided was removed. The research data is stored in a password-protected file saved on the researcher's computer. The consent forms are kept separately from the research data.

Non-maleficence

The researcher monitored the well-being of the participants and was attentive to any form of adverse reaction they may have had. After the interview, a full debriefing was provided to make sure that the participants could access emotional support if needed. The participants were informed

how to contact the researcher or her supervisor in the event of concerns arising from taking part in the study. To the researcher's knowledge, no participant expressed any concern regarding his participation in the study.

Deception

The study did not require concealment or deception that might have encroached on the participants' privacy.

Autonomy

Participation in the research was voluntary. The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason. They were also told that they could refuse to reply to the questions without having to justify their refusal. In the end, all the questions were answered by the participants and no participant decided to withdraw.

Issues of particular concern

Research exploring pornography consumption can pose complex ethical dilemmas. In particular, ethical questions can arise for the researcher when a participant admits to possessing or making illegal pornography.

According to the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2021), unless otherwise agreed in advance, '… *participants in psychological research have a right to expect that information they provide will be treated confidentially'* (p. 21). However, the duty of confidentiality is not absolute, as there might be circumstances under which the researcher must disclose confidential information to a third party (BPS, 2021). In exceptional circumstances, the duty of confidentiality may be overruled by duties of greater significance, such as the duty to protect others from foreseeable harm. In some cases, disclosure can be justified in the public interest, for instance in order to prevent the commission of a future criminal offence (BPS, 2021). Moreover, there may be circumstances involving children or vulnerable adults where revealing confidential information to an appropriate

authority is justified. For instance, the BPS Position Paper on Safeguarding and Promoting the Welfare of Children (2014) states that confidentiality issues should be respected as long as they do not put children at risk of harm.

Balancing these duties and responsibilities might put the researcher in complex positions, as they may be required to breach participants' confidentiality with or without their consent. According to professional guidance, any decision to breach confidentiality must be carefully considered (BPS, 2018). The BPS recommends that breaches of confidentiality be limited to those instances where there is sufficient evidence to raise severe concerns about the safety of clients, other people who may be threatened by the client's actions, or health, welfare, or safety of children or vulnerable adults (BPS, 2014).

According to the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2021), when it comes to psychological research with human participants involving high risks, specific procedures should be put in place. The present research falls under this category. Therefore, a course of action was approved by the NSPC Ethics Board in the event of illegal activities being revealed by the study participants.

The participants were informed orally and in writing that the study would include only those users who view pornography that is considered legal in the United Kingdom. The legal aspects of pornography consumption were discussed with the study participants before the interviews. Moreover, the researcher explained that any participant revealing potentially illegal activity, would be excluded from the study and relevant information may have to be disclosed to a third party. This would be done in consultation with the research supervisor. This approach would also apply to participants who would decide to withdraw from the study at a later stage. The participants were asked to confirm that they understood this aspect of their participation by signing the informed consent form.

The researcher was committed to protect and preserve participants' confidentiality. However, she was also aware that there are legal and ethical limits to the duty of confidentiality and

circumstances under which she would have to disclose confidential information to a third party. The researcher reflects on the ethical issues and concerns related to pornography use in her research in section 8.3.

5. Data analysis and interpretation

IPA does not prescribe a single method of data analysis. For the purposes of the present research, a set of analytical steps proposed by Smith et al. (2012) were followed allowing the data to be traced throughout the research process and demonstrating how the findings were arrived at.

5.1. Analyses of individual cases

Firstly, each transcript was read several times to immerse fully in the data. An active engagement with the data was facilitated by the fact that the researcher transcribed the recordings on her own and became familiar with their content. Subsequently, each transcript was formatted into a landscape table, with margins on both sides for annotations. The texts were broken into numbered lines.

Secondly, descriptive comments were made about the content of participants' statements in a given line. The researcher's focus was on capturing explicit claims and their interpretations. The second level of annotation focused on the language used. Key words and the frequency at which they were used were noted. This level of annotation also included the non-verbal elements such as pauses or laughter, which were taken into account in the third level of annotation, where the researcher's initial understandings of the experience were recorded.

Thirdly, emergent themes were identified in each transcript and noted on the right side of the table. This stage required a shift in focus from the explicit and descriptive comments towards a more overarching understanding. The identification of the emergent themes was based on the exploratory comments made by the researcher in the precedent step. However, systematic

crosschecks with the transcripts were made in order to ensure that the emergent themes were rooted in each participant's account.

The next step consisted of clustering the emergent themes into subordinate themes. To this end, the researcher used the mind-mapping technique, which helped her to detect the connections among the emergent themes. Computer searches based on the key terms were also performed, which helped the researcher assign the emergent themes into the relevant clusters. Both approaches facilitated grouping the emergent themes according to their conceptual similarities. Each cluster was given a descriptive label. Since the researcher's goal is to generate knowledge that could be used in clinical practice, an effort was made to avoid abstract formulations in the development of the descriptive labels to facilitate their understanding. Finally, a table was developed presenting the subordinate themes, the emergent themes relevant for each subordinate theme and the line number in the transcript where the emergent themes originated. An example of the above analytical steps performed with regard to the interview with P1 is presented in Appendix 6, which shows how the data was coded and grouped.

The above analytical steps were applied to each participant's account. Attention was paid to analyse the transcripts individually. Intervals were kept between the analyses to minimise the risk of the researcher being influenced by the outcome of the earlier analyses. Three to four subordinate themes were identified with regard to each participant. Altogether 37 subordinate themes were identified across the study group. A summary of the subordinate and the emergent themes identified with regard to all the participants is presented in Appendix 7.

5.2. Interpretation of individual subordinate themes

The identified subordinated themes were individually interpreted by the researcher. A narrative was developed for each participant presenting the key issues related to his experience. An example of the outcome of this step with regard to P1 is presented in Appendix 8.

At this stage, the researcher also examined the consistency of the participants' definitions of pornography. The representations of *'nakedness'* and *'sexualised behaviour'*, which they found sexually exciting, were central to their understandings of pornography. Although small variations were noted, overall the researcher considers that the participants' definitions of pornography were similar. In her opinion, the identified nuances in the definitions were without bearing on the participants' perceptions of their experiences.

5.3. Identification of the master themes

The subordinate themes were used as a basis to identify the key themes for the study group. This was done in three steps. Firstly, subordinate themes relevant to each participant were compared across the study group with the objective to identify conceptual similarities. To this end, varieties of descriptive labels were taken into account, as well as the relevant parts of the individual narratives developed for each participant. As a result, five master themes pertinent for the study group were identified. Secondly, within each master theme, two to three thematic sub-groups were identified reflecting various facets of the experience captured by the given master theme. Thirteen sub-themes emerged from this step. The last step consisted of assigning descriptive labels to the identified master themes and related sub-themes. An overview of the identified master themes and the sub-themes is presented in Table 3. The occurrence of the master themes and the sub-themes across the study group is presented in Appendix 9.

Table 3

Overview of Identified Master Themes and Sub-Themes

Master Theme	Sub-Themes
1. Attempt to cope with pain and affliction	1.1. Responding to pain and suffering
	1.2. Seeking relief and comfort
	1.3. Deeper immersion in pain and suffering
2. Expression of constricted relatedness	2.1. Solitary pleasure
	2.2. Living an alienated existence
3. Expression of a fragile sense of self	3.1. Negative self-perception
	3.2. Feeling powerless
4. Expression of inauthentic existence	4.1. Engaging in behaviour in spite of fearing its consequences
	4.2. Living in confusion and self-deception
	4.3. Seeking a new way of being
5. Appropriating the addiction narrative	5.1. Finding understanding in the addiction discourse
	5.2. Feeling misunderstood
	5.3. Fearing stigma

6. Findings

6.1. Function of the master themes

The function of the master themes is to facilitate the understanding of self-perceived pornography addiction. The master themes do not reflect everything that was said by the participants. They depict a range of shared experiential features and understandings of the phenomenon that are of relevance to the research questions. Each of the master themes gives an account of a particular dimension of self-perceived pornography addiction, including considerations of the factors affecting participants' interpretations of their experiences, while taking into account the nuances and variations in the perceptions. However, the master themes should not be read in isolation, as certain aspects of the experience netted in a given master theme are related to other facets captured in the other themes. A holistic reading of the master-themes will help comprehend the experience of self-perceived pornography addiction in its entirety.

6.2. Narrative account of the findings

The narrative account of the findings presents the researcher's interpretation of the key issues captured in each master theme and the related sub-themes. Throughout the narrative account, the relevance of the key features of the experience across the study group is noted. A range of meanings construed by the participants, as well as shared and distinct aspects within a specific facet of the experience are highlighted. References to the participants' statements and the line numbers in the transcripts are made. The quotations support the claims made by the participants and their interpretations. In order to demonstrate the full spectrum of the experiences explored in the study, the quotes from all the participants were included.

Master theme 1: Attempt to cope with pain and affliction

The sense of suffering and affliction is central to understanding the reality of self-perceived pornography addiction. The significance of this aspect of the experience is reflected in the fact that considerations of various facets of pain and suffering are present in the narratives of all the ten

participants, which makes this master theme relevant for the entire study group. The experience of pain and affliction in the phenomenology of self-perceived pornography addiction is presented around three sub-themes: responding to pain and suffering, seeking relief and comfort and deeper immersion in pain and suffering.

Responding to pain and suffering

This sub-theme captures the importance of life struggles and emotional difficulties experienced by the participants in the context of which their pornography consumption perceived as addiction takes place. When exploring their experiences, some participants critically reflect on certain distressing life events and situations, which in their opinion, may have contributed to their pornography consumption that turned into addiction. Participants' understandings of their self-perceived pornography addiction are influenced by the perspectives that they take on these events and situations.

Three participants (P1, P6, P9) reflect on their perceived addiction to pornography by referring to traumatic or stressful situations from the past, which affected their emotions and attitudes. For instance, P1 evokes difficult family circumstances, in the context of which his pornography use began. He describes them in L17 as follows:

> *'I've got lots of background stuff going on in my life (laughs) so my dad's an alcoholic (…). His dad was passing away. My mum's dad was quite ill as well, (…) home life… home was not a nice place to be…'*

P6 situates his initial interest in pornography in the context of loneliness, emotional abuse and humiliation that he experienced as a youth. He describes the difficulty of the familial context and the extent of emotional distress he was enduring as a child when he started watching pornography in L21 as follows:

'I didn't really get on with my mum (…). I remember being quite lonely at home. I wasn't close to my brother either (…). I felt quite insecure. My brother would be quite nasty to me… He'd tease me a lot, and the one thing he'd always call me is gay. I didn't really know what gay was for a lot of the time, so I thought it was just an insult, a bad word. Even when I knew, he'd call me that all the time, especially in front of his friends…'

P9 explores his pornography use against the background of sexual abuse, when he was forced to watch pornographic material by his abuser. He says in L19: *'... I was abused as a child and was shown porn by the person who abused me… I must have been seven the first time I saw porn.'*

Several participants place their perceived addiction in the context of life difficulties, which they have been facing for a substantial period of their adult life, alongside their pornography consumption. For instance, three participants (P1, P5, P10) refer to work-related stress. P5 in particular, links his pornography use with excessive pressure and demand at work, which he describes in L7: *'It's really to do with work stress (…) there's a lot going on at work and I'm working long hours…'* P5 considers that his pornography consumption is correlated with the degree of distress that he experiences. He says in L7: *'The more stressed I am (…), the more I want to watch porn…'*

Similarly, P1 and P10 see a link between their pornography use and stress caused by their under-performance at work, which results in various problems and worries. P1 is concerned about the financial implications, which he describes in L114: *'...I've missed jobs, cancelled jobs and I'm self-employed so that's (laughs) that's my money, I don't get paid for not being there…'* P10 is worried about the concerns raised by his superiors about his poor performance at work, which he finds distressing. He says in L88*: 'I don't think I am performing very well (…). My manager says I'm not, and I wish I could disagree (…). I don't really know how to snap out of it.'*

It is quite common within the study group to experience other types of problematic behaviour in addition to problems with pornography consumption. Some participants reveal using drugs (P1,

P3 and P5), drinking too much alcohol (P2, P5, and P10), gambling (P5) or engaging in other activities, which P2 calls *'excessive'*. P5 experiences many of these problematic types of behaviour in addition to his pornography usage. He describes them in L25: *'...I started smoking (...). I started drinking too and did quite a lot of drugs (...). I was seeing hookers quite regularly too (...)... and I gambled a lot too.'*

Furthermore, emotional problems are widely experienced by the participants. Nearly half of them have been diagnosed with mental health disorders including PTSD (P3 and P10), depression (P1 and P6) and anxiety (P3 and P6). Some participants have been experiencing long lasting emotional difficulties. For instance, P4, since the early years of his life, has been feeling worthless, unimportant and invaluable, which he describes in L32 as follows: '*…pretty worthless. Pretty (uh) worthless… (umm)… ashamed of myself (umm)… the main one is worthless, like, not, I didn't feel like I was important or valuable in any way.*' Similarly, P7 has been feeling lonely, insecure, shy and inadequate ever since his childhood, which he describes in L16: *'Loneliness… I was a shy, like painfully shy child... I also felt inadequate in a lot of ways.*'

Some participants express a general sense of dissatisfaction with their lives and themselves. For instance, P8 feels unhappy about his life (L110). P9 feels drained by the difficulties he has to handle (L23). P10 is regretful about the quality of his life and the fact that he does not feel well about himself. He says, in L111: '*Maybe if I had therapy before, things would be different for me. Maybe I would feel better about myself and my life?*'

The participants have various understandings of the context within which their involvement with pornography perceived as addiction occurs. Some tend to think that a causal relation exists between their pornography consumption and other life problems, which they consider the underlying conditions of their self-perceived addiction. Other participants struggle to identify a clear link or explanation of their behaviour. Whichever of the two is the case, understanding the reasons behind their self-perceived pornography addiction seems to be of the utmost importance for the study participants, who feel that greater awareness of the underlying issues would facilitate recovery.

Three participants (P2, P3, P6) think that there is a direct causal relation between their self-perceived pornography addiction and other life problems. For instance, P2 thinks there is a direct link between him feeling sexually rejected by his wife and his use of pornography. He sees his engagement with pornography as an opportunity to '... *please (himself) instead of ... pester (his) wife'* (L15). If he wants sex, he can get it from pornography quite easily, without being unfaithful, hurting her or feeling rejected.

P3 is also certain about a causal relation. He leaves no possibility of a doubt that there is a link between his various mental health issues and his self-perceived pornography addiction. When asked whether he makes a connection between his numerous mental health problems and his perceived addiction to pornography, he says without hesitating: '*Well yeah! (laughs) Yeah, I know, without a doubt, man, without a doubt!'* (L33).

In a similar way, P6 considers that his self-perceived addiction to pornography has something to do with him feeling anxious and depressed, as well as lacking emotional connection since the early years of his life. In his view, watching pornography provides him with a sense of comfort and closeness that he has been missing. He says in L62:

> '*I've struggled with social anxiety for years... It really peaked when I was at university. I was super depressed, in my room all the time. My girlfriend and me lived in different cities, so I didn't have anybody close to me. Porn was quite comforting at the time. It was like... it sounds weird, but it... was like a level of closeness I was missing in life most of the time.'*

The other participants are unsure about the nature of the relation between their perceived addiction to pornography and other problems. For instance, P8 feels lonely. However, he is uncertain whether his loneliness results from spending too much time watching pornography or whether he consumes a lot of pornographic material because he feels lonely. He describes his incertitude around the causal aspect of this relation in L61:

'In a way, I think my porn addiction has something to do with me being rather lonely. And I don't know if I am lonely cause (...) I'm so hooked on porn or maybe that I'm hooked on porn cause I am lonely.'

In the case of P9, who was forced to watch pornography when he was sexually abused as a child, understanding the reasons behind his pornography use is a complex task. He struggles to comprehend why he watches pornography out of his own will, despite being aware that doing so evokes painful memories. He strives to understand whether and to what extent his engagement with pornography is influenced by the earlier life events. He feels confused by the complexity of the context. He says in L26: *'I think all this is related, but I don't yet understand all of this. It's complicated…'*

What all the accounts of the experiences have in common, is that they reveal a high degree of pain and distress in the participants' lives. The participants see their self-perceived pornography addiction being entrenched in their life difficulties, be there specific situations or a general sense of dissatisfaction about their lives. Some participants are able to find explanations or clear reasons behind their self-perceived addiction to pornography by linking it to specific events or situations. Others seek to understand or are confused by the complexity of the context within which they experiences occur. However, all the participants are aware that their self-perceived pornography addiction is not an isolated phenomenon. They place it in the context of the life struggles that they have been facing and see their addiction to pornography to be connected to emotional distress they have been experiencing.

Seeking relief and comfort

Several participants convey the message that pornography use provides them with a sense of relief from difficult feelings. For the vast majority, the experience of release from distress and emotional difficulties is among the most marking features of their self-perceived addiction.

P5, in particular, interprets his experience as a pursuit of relief from tension, especially work-related pressure. The fact that he uses the word '*stress*' or its paronyms about 30 times while reflecting on his self-perceived pornography addiction demonstrates the importance of the stress element in his experience. He claims that pornography viewing became for him a means to alleviate emotional strain and tension. It distracts him, relaxes and ultimately enables him to carry on when he feels overwhelmed by work. He describes how pornography helps him to alleviate tension. in L35 as follows: '*(...) watching porn and masturbating during the day and maybe after became my way to de-stress when things were overwhelming at work.*'

Stress and anxiety reduction rather than sex are the main drives behind P5's pornography use. He explains it in L16: '*... I don't do it because I feel like sex, feel like (...) masturbating or something like that. I do it because I'm stressed and sometimes anxious...*' He reiterates this message in L49: '*I'm not even doing this because I'm even remotely turned on. I'm not. I'm just (...) stressed.*' Relief from stress is one of the reasons P5 interprets his experience in terms of addiction. He considers himself addicted because he uses pornography as '*a crutch*' to deal with stress and difficult feelings (L16). Certainly, he would not call his experience an addiction if he were watching pornography for sexual purposes, which he explains in L77 as follows:

> '*...I know I need to give it up using it (...) for stress. I'm addicted in that way. So yeah. If I could watch porn sometimes, just because I'm horny and feel like it, and there isn't a girl around I could have sex with... that would be what I'd do...*'

In a similar way, P2 uses pornography in order to relax and de-stress, which happens mostly in the evenings. In his case, alcohol is also involved. Watching pornography '*takes the edge off*' and helps him to release his frustration and tension, which he considers work-related. In this way, he can '*wind down*' (L15). Actually, he finds the mere idea of watching pornography comforting, in particular when he feels tired and tense at work. He expects it to be '*a reward*' at the end of a difficult day, which he awaits eagerly. He describes his anxious yearning for using pornography and expectation of relief from work-related pressure in L63 as follows:

'... At times when I'm at work, and of course, you know, I'm exhausted and frustrated… I know that watching pornography and having that release will help (uh) you know, take the edge off. So I'm just impatiently, impatiently waiting and waiting (....). I'm rewarding myself after a long day, or distracting myself after (uh) difficulty…'

In a similar way, P8 experiences a sense of comfort when simply thinking about using pornography, which he does frequently. He experiences a sense of pleasure as he imagines or anticipates seeing pornographic content. This sense of pleasure is not limited to the sexual dimension of the experience. P8 finds it overall comforting. He says in L92: *'... I (…) think a lot about watching porn (…). It's pleasant and not just sexually pleasant, but it makes me feel nice…'* He considers pornography consumption to be an effective way to alleviate emotional distress when he feels low or anxious, which he describes in L63 as follows: *'And when I feel bad (…), when I feel anxious, I turn to porn and it usually works fine for me.'*

Some participants manage to forget or at least stop thinking about their difficulties when they watch pornography. This is the case of P10 who says in L57: *'I don't think much about anything else…'* and continues in L106: '*When I really feel down, it helps me to forget.'* He affirms his dependence on pornography for emotional well-being in L37, where he says: *'... When I'm feeling stressed or on edge, porn keeps me going. And I know that's not healthy to rely on it to cheer me up.'* He believes that pornography use enables him to manage his emotions by keeping him busy and allowing him to keep his distress under control, which he describes in L42 as follows:

'... it felt a bit like (…) I had control. I don't know if that makes sense. (…) It kept me busy and I felt able to have it under control. I didn't feel that with anything else, at least not to the same extent as with porn.'

In the case of P7, pornography viewing makes his life not *'really pleasant, but (…) easier'* (L12). For a while, he stops paying attention to his problems, feels indifferent and out of touch with reality. He describes feeling zoned out when watching pornography in L35 as follows: *'I feel really*

spaced out. Whatever problems I've been thinking about, whatever has been going on that day or that week, none of it matters.' P7's consumption of pornography provides him also with a sense of elude from long-enduring and unpleasant feelings he has been struggling with. When he watches pornography, he either forgets about them or thinks that they do not bother him as much because they seem to be less serious. He says in L17: *'That sense of inadequacy completely disappears when I watch porn. Not that I feel completely adequate… but it's just not important. I don't feel it as much… It doesn't bother me like it does usually.'*

This is also the case of P6, for whom his long-standing emotional difficulties seem less relevant when he watches pornography. He describes how he stops feeling insecure and uncomfortable in L27: *'… But also, when I watch porn, I don't feel uncomfortable. Mostly with myself, I guess. I don't feel insecure (…).* When he engages in pornography viewing, he becomes so absorbed that he is under the impression that nothing else is important to him. He says it in L10: *'… Once I'm watching, I'm completely in (…). It's like nothing else really matters (…).'*

Three participants emphasise the numbing effect of their pornography use, which makes them feel less sensitive or distressed. They experience a sense of disconnection from reality. In the case of P2, pornography enables him to distance himself and withdraw from the everyday life. He believes his feelings become desensitised as a result of viewing pornography. He feels distant and detached from his family and their problems. He describes how he experiences the numbing effects of pornography consumption on a relational and an emotional level in L63 as follows:

> *'…I'd find myself (uh) quite distant afterwards, removed. I wouldn't find much patience for like (uh) home stuff, you know, listening to what goes on with my children and my wife. It's a bit like (…) like, killing my emotions… disconnected!'*

P3 experiences a numbing effect of pornography consumption on his numerous mental health problems. He considers pornography to be *'an anaesthetic'* for emotional pain (L82). When he engages in pornography viewing, he becomes so focused on it and so immersed in it that he forgets

about his problems. He says in L24: *'...Pornography (...) is very numbing. It's very (...) tunnel vision. You don't think about anything else, you're just fixated on...'*

P4 experiences the numbing effect and disconnection from his feelings not only when he watches pornography, but also directly afterwards. He describes the extent of this numbness in L80 as follows: *'...so immediately after I've watched porn (...) I feel like a zombie. I feel like dead inside.'* He considers that watching pornography has a soothing effect. He believes that his emotions have been calmed and that he is no longer anxious. Watching pornography takes his mind off problems, alleviates worries and negative emotions. He feels better for a while after experiencing a sense of appeasement. He says in L36: *'...This is (umm) a way to take my mind off things and (...) help myself to feel better...'*

Three participants (P1, P5, P8) claim that the relief they experience when using pornography is emotional as well as sexual. The former is achieved through the latter. This is the case of P5, who experiences release when he ejaculates. At this point, the tension he was feeling disappears. He says in L11: *'...as long as I (uh) I cum. Then it's like it never happened. I'm more relaxed...'* This also applies to P8, who achieves relief through masturbation and has the feeling of being *'totally in the moment'* (L28). In the case of P1, sexual gratification provides him with a sense of release and disconnection, which he describes in L80 as follows: *'...The hit is very, very high. ... that just knocks everything else out of the park. I don't think about anything else. It's like literally stop the world.'*

Some participants rely on their pornography use for emotional comfort so much that they believe to be unable to function without it. This is the case of P9, who says in L51: *'... I used porn for so many things for such a long time... In a way, I couldn't really function without it.'* This perceived emotional dependence on pornography is for him the main reason for interpreting his experience in terms of addiction. Reliance is for P9 at the core of his understanding of what any addiction is, which he explains in L57 as follows: *'... to be addicted means to rely on something too much. It's when you're not able to function well without it, or even at all...'* He compares himself to other

types of addicts being dependent on various substances, without which they cannot function and sees some similarities. He says it in L59: *'... I couldn't function without using porn. So I consider myself addicted, just like some people are addicted to alcohol or drugs.'*

In the case of P4, his reliance on pornography to sooth negative emotions and ultimately find relief and comfort is the essence of his experience. However, it is not pornography as such that is at the crux of the experience, but the distracting effect it has on him. P4 admits in L99 that if it were not pornography, he would likely be dependent on something else, which would help him to cope with the negative feelings: *'...I wish the internet didn't come about (...). It would be easier to manage it maybe... I don't know though, maybe I would've found something else.'*

P10 thinks that it is not realistic for him not to consume pornography at all and it is not among his therapeutic goals. What is important for him is to break free from relying on pornography for emotional well-being, which is for him an indication of being addicted. He says in L112: *'... Most guys here, in therapy (...) don't want to watch porn at all. That's not realistic for me. I just don't want to rely on it for my emotions (...).'*

Their reliance on pornography consumption for emotional comfort is for some participants *'the proof'* that they are addicted. The participants make a difference between a *'normal'* use of pornography, meaning for sexual purposes or amusement and its consumption for emotional comfort. When pornography is used for coping with negative feelings to the extent that the participants feel dependant on it to feel better, it is in their view addiction. This is one of the most important markers of their perceived addiction for several participants. They would not find it problematic to watch pornography when feeling *'horny', 'turned on', 'wanting to have fun'* or *'feeling like having sex and there isn't a girl around'*. However, they consider it a problem, which they label addiction, when they rely on pornography use for emotional relief.

Deeper immersion in pain and suffering

Comfort and relief, which the participants seek to achieve is of a temporary nature, as engaging into pornography consumption is a source of distress in itself that further reinforces pain and suffering experienced by the participants in the first place.

Several participants experience pain on a physical level, which they directly link to their pornography use. This happens when they watch pornography and when they attempt to quit. Extreme fatigue, sleep problems and various forms of physical pain are part of the experience of five participants (P1, P2, P3, P9, P10).

The most powerful account of extremely uncomfortable physical sensations accompanying his pornography consumption is provided by P3. He describes how after watching pornography for many hours, for instance 12 hours straight, he feels physically exhausted. He compares his fatigue to the worst alcohol hangover one can have. He experiences sleep problems and feels like a *'completely wracked man'* (L89). He scratches himself all over his body and finds it difficult to control himself. He gives a powerful testimony of different forms of physical pain, which he experiences after watching pornography in L88: *'... I'll literally tear myself to pieces, (...) have eczema all over myself and I get really bad headaches after I've used porn.'*

Also in the case of P1, pornography viewing is a source of deep physical discomfort characterised by extreme tiredness and sleep problems. He describes them in L114 as follows: *'When I've been using for like three days and getting four hours of sleep (...) I'm exhausted'*. In addition, frequent masturbation to pornography makes his genitals swollen causing pain, which can last for several days. P1 considers this aspect of his pornography use to be a risk to his health. He says in L137: *'I've literally, physically harmed myself through excess masturbation. I've been swollen for days.'*

Similarly, P2 experiences sleep problems and physical tiredness amounting to exhaustion because of him staying up late at night to watch pornography. He says in L55: *'...I deliberately, I guess (uh) was trying to find deliberate excuses to stay up late at night, so I'd be tired as a result...*

exhausted even.' P4 too, in the periods of intensive use, which he calls *'pornography binging'*, has problems with sleeping and feels *'like fucking hell'* (L66). He compares pornography watching with running a race where adrenaline, arousal and anxiety are so high that the experience becomes distressing, which he describes in L20 as follows: *'I can describe it probably pretty accurately (ummm)… like… like I'm running a race. So the adrenaline's there, the like (um)… obviously aroused (umm), anxiety or they say anxiousness …'*

Physical distress is also experienced when the participants attempt to cease watching pornography. This is the case of P9, who felt restless and could not sleep whenever he tried to stop watching pornography (L83). Similarly, P3 experienced a high level of physical pain every time he tried to give up pornography consumption. He reports very uncomfortable and enduring physical sensations such as soreness and aching, as well as tiredness, lethargy and exhaustion. He describes the following range of unpleasant physical reactions that he experienced in L83:

> *'And when I stop it, (…) everything else is put under a microscope, exacerbated so it hurts like, my whole legs, my crotch area, it all hurts when I quit porn (…) when I quit I get aches in my legs and stuff for ages afterwards and, and I feel very tired all the time and lethargic and just completely exhausted all the time.'*

Alongside physical pain, several participants experience emotional anguish in direct response to their pornography consumption, which aggravates the original pain with which they have been struggling. The dynamics described across the accounts of P1, P2, P8 and P10 are quite alike.

P1 considers that when he watches pornography, he in in the process of denying and suppressing his feelings. However, the feelings that he wants to shut down continue '*bubbling over*', which ultimately overwhelms him and results in shame, distress and exhaustion (L60). The experience of these negative feelings in direct response to pornography use makes him want to re-engage with pornography viewing to alleviate distress. He describes the interactions between his feelings and re-engagement with pornography use in L108 as follows: *'…The shame kicks in and then the*

solution to the shame and exhaustion and the feeling of being overwhelmed is to use more porn.' As a result, P1 cries, feels depressed, angry and mentally exhausted, which has a negative impact on the way he functions in life. He says in L121: *'... I get depressed when using (...), so I'll be angry or crying (...) and I'll be exhausted, which means I can't really do as much or engage as much'.*

P8 experiences a similar pattern. Although pornography helps him cope with anxiety for a while, uncomfortable emotions return once he finishes watching it. This makes him want to use pornography again to supress the distressing feelings. He calls it *'a vicious circle'* (L65). These dynamics are described by him in L64 as follows: *'When I feel anxious, I turn to porn and it usually works fine for me... Later, all these feelings return again and I'd want to watch porn again.'*

Also in the case of P10, pornography is not effective in alleviating pain. In the end, it actually aggravates the negative feelings he holds about himself. He testifies to that in L101 where he says: *'... I wish I could function like everyone else (...). That I didn't feel completely low and in the end porn didn't make me feel even lower.'*

P2 becomes anxious after watching pornography. He cannot sleep, as he warries that other people will find out about his pornography consumption. The emotional impact of this experience is for him a great source of suffering. He compares his anxiety and fear surrounding his pornography use to running on a hamster wheel (L63). He expresses a high degree of emotional and physical distress in L74 where he says:

> *'Nothing I ever did brought me as much (...) suffering really, as this. I know it sounds dramatic, but when I, after I finish on the computer, and I'm in bed next to my wife, thinking about how it would be for people to find out I do this and I can't stop... (sighs) and then I'm even more exhausted. Not just from going to bed late after watching porn, but from staying up worrying about it. It's all a hamster wheel, you know? All of it.'*

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Some participants experience intensely negative feelings directed towards themselves when they watch pornography or immediately afterwards. They feel abhorred with themselves, which further enhances their distress. They choose value-laden words to describe the feeling of resentment towards themselves experienced in direct response to their pornography usage. They use terms such as *'repulsed'*, *'disgusted'*, *'gross'* or *'sick'*. This is the case of P1, P6, P7 and P9.

P1 gets *'a kind of sick feeling'* when watching pornography, which he describes in L47 as follows:

> *'... I get a kind of sick feeling when I'm doing it as well (...) and I'll just be there looking (clicks fingers) through (clicks) the next (clicks) one (clicks), looking (clicks) through (clicks) the next (clicks) one (clicks). And (umm) that is a kind of a sick feeling, like a needing, kind of wanting (umm) that's just relentless, it never kind of ends.'*

P6 wants to be physically distant from his computer once he finished using pornography due to the feelings of disgust and repulsion. He considers the whole experience of pornography viewing to be wrong, although he cannot understand why he thinks so. He says in L10:

> *'... As soon as I'm (uh)... I'm done, I just like... I don't know, I'm quite repulsed by it. I close the tab really quickly and I don't even want to be on my laptop anymore. I just want to get as far away from it as I can. It feels quite wrong. I don't know why.'*

P7 experiences a similar reaction. The moment he finishes watching pornography, he wants to close his computer or phone as quickly as possible because he has *'this gross feeling'* (L37). He experiences negative emotions toward himself, becomes disgusted with himself and questions his behaviour, which he describes in L38 as follows: *'I feel that sense of disgust in myself and ...then the really low feelings set in. Like why am I so... so low to do this so much? Why am I addicted to this shit? It's not great.'* He feels an intense dislike of himself after using pornography and blames himself for ruining his marriage. He says in L68: *'I really hate myself after using porn. I feel guilty for being so reliant on it, for what's doing to my marriage.'*

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P9 too experiences repulsion toward himself, exacerbated by the lack of understanding why he uses pornography, given the fact that he was forced to watch it when he was abused. The memories of abuse evoked by his pornography use make him feel ashamed and sickened with himself after he finishes watching it, which he describes in L41 as follows: *'But after that… when I was done…I felt somehow ashamed of myself and given my story… I also felt sort of … disgusted with myself. And I couldn't understand why I was doing that.'*

Three participants (P3, P8, P9) draw attention to a high degree of emotional distress, which they experienced when they attempted to cease using pornography. P8 felt anxious when he deliberately deprived himself of pornography. He felt agitated and was under the impression that he needed to use pornography again to feel calmer. He says in L68: *'I just felt too anxious of being deprived of porn. I missed it and needed it to feel calmer again.'* This was also the case of P9, who in addition to being anxious, could not sleep and felt deprived of emotional support, which he was used to get from pornography consumption. He gives an account of a high degree of distress experienced when he was trying to cease watching pornography in L83: *'…I couldn't sleep. I felt really anxious and restless. It's like my world collapsed ….'*

Similarly, P3 experienced emotional pain accompanying his numerous attempts to quit. He was becoming stressed, angry and found it difficult to adjust to *'normal living'*. He considers that his other mental health problems intensified and worsened when he was trying to stop using pornography. He describes the extent of the emotional difficulties he was confronted with when trying to cease using pornography in L84 as follows:

> *'And I find it difficult to work and function and I'm very angry and my stress tolerance is like zero (…), like any sort of thing stresses me out a lot when I stop, and it takes a while for my brain to process all of that, readjust to normal living. So I've been trying to quit porn for three years, so yeah, probably speaks for itself a little bit (laughs).'*

A profound sense of suffering emerges from the participants' accounts when they look back at their experiences. They do not consider these experiences hedonistic. On the contrary, several participants point to despair, distress and pain as the predominant features of their self-perceived pornography addiction. This is particularly noticeable in the P1's account, for whom physical and emotional pain is the key characteristic of his self-perceived pornography addiction. In his case, a deep sense of suffering is further exacerbated by the belief that he deserves to suffer, which he expresses in L82: *'...I kind of felt that I deserved to suffer...'* Similarly, in the case of P3, pain is the core element of his experience, which overshadows everything else. He reflects on this aspect of his experience in L135:

> *'... It's just pain, man. It's all I see. It's just pain and hurt (...) in all the memories. Yeah, I was using it 'cause I (...) wanted excitement and escapism, but really in the back of my head I was just completely distraught and upset, man. When I look back at it, that's all I feel.'*

The present sub-theme demonstrates that self-perceived pornography addiction is characterised by high levels of physical and emotional distress. On a physical level, the participants experience a range of unpleasant sensations such as exhaustion, tiredness, sleep problems, headaches, eczemas, aches or swollenness of their genitals. On an affective level, they endure difficult emotions and a range of strong negative feelings towards themselves, which worsen their emotional well-being. Participants' attempts to cease using pornography are also accompanied by intense emotional and physical distress. They became increasingly anxious about being deprived of the mental relief that they had become accustomed to receiving through the consumption of pornography in order to feel temporarily better.

Master theme 2: Expression of constricted relatedness

This master theme captures the narrowness of the participants' relatedness. Two sub-themes help to understand the extent of the constricted way of being in the experience of self-perceived pornography addiction: solitary pleasure and living an alienated existence. The first sub-theme

deals with the sexual and relational aspects of the experience. The second one focuses on the participants' social way of being.

Solitary pleasure

The significance of the sexual dimension in the experience of self-perceived addiction to pornography emerges from the narratives of seven participants (P1, P2, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10), who bring attention to those features of their reality, which they find particularly noteworthy. Some participants accentuate the role of sexual excitement behind their attachment to pornography consumption, whilst others focus on the way they relate sexually and its impact on their intimate relationships, which extends beyond the sexual sphere.

The accounts by P1, P2, P8 and P10 reveal high appreciation of sexual sensations experienced when watching pornography. P1 points to pleasure resulting from feeling aroused when watching naked people having sex (L46). He also shows a strong appreciation of his own bodily sensations, which he finds to be '... *the best thing in the world (...), such a turn on...*' (L160). Similarly, P10 acknowledges that his pornography consumption brings him sexual satisfaction. He says in L56: '*There is of course the sex part in it too (...). It feels good when I do it, physically good. And I get the excitement.*'

P1, P2 and P8 remember vividly sexual excitement, which they felt when they were initially exposed to pornographic material. They consider that the feeling of excitement brought about by pornography has not decreased throughout the years they have been watching it. P1 evokes in L22 the thrill he felt when he first saw pornographic images at the age of 12, which he continues to enjoy:

> '...*It was like burnt on my retina (laughs). I remember literally skipping down the road, it was ridiculous, afterwards, just from the excitement and the thrill of having seen this image. So yeah, that kind of... that definitely stuck with me.*'

Similarly, P2 has a vivid a recollection of enjoyment and fascination he felt when he saw pornographic magazines for the first time when he was a seven-year old child and its powerful impact on his emotions and senses, which he describes in L23 as follows:

> *'I remember being very excited (...), the excitement of it all, it was like something I could taste. Like... like a fog, all around me... (...) intoxicating (...). I would go home in a complete ... haze after what I had just experienced...'.*

P8 too recalls the excitement he felt the first time he saw pornographic magazines at the age of eight in L27: *'When I saw it, it was really new to me (mmm), exciting (mmm) I didn't masturbate then. I didn't know what it was, but I definitely felt excited (...). That's stayed with me to this day.'* He affirms being continuously fascinated and aroused by female nudity featured in pornography (L30).

Although sexual arousal and gratification experienced by the study participants through masturbation to pornographic content occurs in a solitary and intimacy-free way, several participants claim that they prefer this form of sexual conduct to sex with a real person. The participants provide various reasons for their greater liking of pornography over sex with partners.

Some consider sexual arousal experienced when watching pornography to be more exciting and rewarding than sex with a partner. This is the case of P7, who believes that pornography provides him with a sexual variety, which he lacks in real life. Throughout his account, he reiterates several times that contrary to sex with the same partner, which he find unappealing, he finds pornography to be more enticing. For instance, he says in L44:

> *'It's difficult to sustain the feeling that I am stuck, sexually stuck with one person, and I shouldn't even look at anybody else. I don't think it's even possible. And porn is just full of temptation, even just knowing that it's there...'*

Although P7 considers that his frequent masturbation to pornography enhances his addictive behaviour, he chooses it over sex with his wife. He says in L45:

> *'And I know masturbating is a big part of my problem. Never do one without the other. And again, my wife could do something that would probably feel even better, but I prefer to just do it myself, to porn.'*

P10 too considers a solitary form of sexual conduct involving pornography to be more thrilling and is not prepared to engage in sexual relations with another person. He says in L82: *'… I still don't feel like I'm ready to get back out there… even for casual sex.'*

P5's preference for sexual sensations accompanying his pornography consumption over sex with a real person is due to him being dissatisfied with the quality of his real life sexual relations, which he finds boring and disappointing. However, despite finding pornography very exciting, he blames it for his lack of satisfaction in real physical relations, as he sees a link between the two, which he explains in L43 as follows:

> *'I thought it might be the girl I'm having sex with, as I get bored quite easily. I can have sex with the same girl three, maybe four times and I just get bored with her. (…) And I know it's because of porn…'*

P3 too prefers masturbating to pornography over sex with his girlfriend, despite finding her attractive and sexually appealing. He is deeply convinced that his preference of pornography over sexual relations with her can only be explained in terms of addiction. His understanding of the experience is influenced by the neurobiological explanations of addictive behaviour, notably brain changes occurring in response to pornographic stimuli. In his view, only addiction-induced changes can explain why he chooses to masturbate to pornography rather than to have sex with his girlfriend, which he describes in L56 as follows:

> '... and to have my girlfriend, who's very pretty, naked in front of me, telling me to have sex with her, and me just thinking about sort of, wanting to masturbate over girls less pretty than her on the internet more than wanting to have sex with her. Like, that can only be some sort of change in my brain that's addiction centred (...). There's no way that can be anything else. I mean, how could I want to use porn over having sex with my girlfriend if it is anything but an addiction? I mean, there's s no way like, it just wouldn't' work, like, it has to be.'

Some participants prefer sexual self-gratification to pornography because they consider it more convenient and easier to achieve, as it does not require taking their partner's needs or expectations into account. This message emerges from the accounts by P6 and P10.

P6 considers that sexual satisfaction through pornography requires less effort. Pornography enables him to satisfy his sexual needs without having to take his girlfriend's feelings or expectations in consideration. With pornography, he does not have to think about what she wants. He can simply choose material, which pleases him. He recognises that there is a high degree of selfishness in his behaviour, which he admits in L39:

> 'This is going to sound very selfish... I just didn't want to put in the effort, to be honest. You know with a real girl, you have to try hard because she has expectations. (...) With porn...(uh).. you don't need to do any of that. (...). You can choose a clip where they're doing exactly what you want. You don't need to care about feelings, about wants or anything like that. They do what you want...'

This view also emerges from P10's account. He considers that sexual satisfaction through pornography use is easier attainable, as it does not require taking the desires of the other person into account. In L59, he presents the following arguments in favour of solitary sex involving pornography use: *'Porn is just more convenient for me that way (...). I don't have to think about what the girl wants or needs from me. I get what I want.'*

Some participants feel reluctant to engage in sex with a real partner due to perceived sexual inability or lack of interest in sex. For some, problems in the area of sex are an indicator for being addicted to pornography.

Three participants (P5, P6, P8) experience sexual problems in real physical relations, but not when they masturbate to pornography. P5 has problems with getting erection or maintaining sexual activity with a partner for a satisfactory length of time, which he describes in L42: *'... I've been having on and off ED for a while now. I can get an erection but sex lasts for like… a few minutes at most.'*

P6, who experiences persisting sexual problems, explains them in behavioural terms. He considers that his regular use of pornography conditioned him to respond to pornographic stimuli rather than to a real person. He reiterates this view several times throughout his account. His perception of being aroused only to pornographic material makes him feel self-conscious and anxious when having sex with his girlfriend, which he tries to avoid altogether. He says in L36:

> *'Watching porn made me only… respond sexually (…) to porn. (…) I had trouble keeping an erection or even getting one at one point. And I was so afraid of that, that I just started avoiding sex with my girlfriend. At one point I didn't even want to have sex with her.'*

P8 too has problems with getting erection, which makes him feel reluctant to engage sexually with partners. He does not enjoy inter-personal sexual activities with anyone. Actually, he considers being attracted sexually only to actors featured in pornographic material and feels indifferent to people in real life, which he explains in L72:

> *'… I'm not excited by women, not sexually excited (…). And I can't get erection when I want to have sex, so that isn't an encouragement to get involved either. Actually, I'm not able to feel anything for anyone sexually. Not just women. And I'm not gay, so it's not that. I think … I'm only attracted to porn…'*

Some participants do not experience problems with sexual performance, but lack interest in sex outside the pornography context. They find intimate sexual relationship unappealing. In addition, they experience problems with relating emotionally to their partners, which puts a strain on their relations.

This is the case of P3, who experiences a diminished interest in intimate relationships. He feels emotionally detached from his girlfriend, which he reveals in L36: *'... Emotionally, I'm completely blank towards her (...). I have trouble (...) allowing myself to feel emotions...'* He feels no sexual attraction and displays little affection towards her to the extent he *'forget(s) she's a person'* (L39).

P7 too lacks interest in sex with his wife or any other person outside his marriage. He finds sexual variety in pornography very appealing, but does not look for it outside the pornography context and avoids sex with real partners. He contents himself with easy access to pornography. He says in L42: *'At first I thought that (...), sleeping with the same person years on will eventually get boring at times. But it's not as if I'm trying to sleep with other women...'* Although he does not experience problems with sexual performance, he is simply uninterested in sex with a real person, which he describes in L41:

> *'It's not even that I couldn't get it up, so to speak (...). But yeah, it's not just the physiological side of it, I just don't have much interest in sex with her. Actually with anyone, to tell you the truth...'*

P7 remains secretive of his pornography use and looks for excuses for not having sex with his wife, which causes tension in their relationship. He says in L32:

> *'... If I watch porn in the evening (...) and she wants to have sex after, I'm not going to be able to do it (...). And obviously I won't tell her it's because I've just masturbated to some women on the internet. She wouldn't like to hear something like that. So, I'd usually just say it's because I'm tired from work or something (...). It is an issue for us...'*

P7 considers his preference of pornography over sex with his wife to be a form of infidelity. Although he does not have sexual relations outside his marriage, he thinks that he is in fact cheating on his wife, as he is much more allured by women featured in pornographic material than by her. He says in L75:

> *'She looks at porn like I've been cheating on her… Like a betrayal. I thought she was over-sensitive at first because it's virtual, all online. It's not even… a sex chat where it's you and a real person. But looking at how excited I get with porn and … compared to her when we try to have sex, I get it. It is a betrayal, in a way.'*

P7 is concerned about the impact of his pornography use on his marriage and fears the negative consequences such as the breakdown of the family. He says in L85: *'This is much bigger than just me (…). I know that I'll lose my family over porn and it's not worth it. Nothing is worth it.'*

In the case of P8, his perceived inability to engage sexually and emotionally with women makes him feel inadequate. He considers being unable to form intimate relationships, which he reveals in L74: *'And I feel sort of inadequate with women (…). I can't be intimate with a girl or have a real thing. I just can't.'*

P5 experiences relationship problems extending beyond the sexual sphere, which he attributes to his pornography consumption. He believes to be unable to engage in meaningful and sustainable relationships or relate to women in a genuine way, which in his opinion is the result of his pornography consumption. He has no doubt about the causal effect of his pornography use on his ability to form intimate relationship. In L65, he says:

> *'I'm sure the fact that I can't seem to form attachments with girls, with women (…) has something to do with porn. I mean I've had girlfriends in the past, but for like… the longest was three months. I finished the relationship because I was bored.'*

P5 is concerned that his sexual and relationship problems make him miss out an important aspect of life. He expresses his disappointment and regrets related to his perceived inability to sustain relationships in L87 as follows:

> *'I see myself settling down eventually (...) I want to be able to connect with women, not get bored like I do now. Because I really don't think I can connect to them in any real... real, genuine way.'*

The present sub-theme captures the complexity of the sexual and the relational dimension of the experience of self-perceived pornography addiction. The participants give high value to their sexual sensations, which they experience when watching pornography in an isolated and intimacy-free way. However, problems with sexual performance or lack of interest in sex with a real person are commonly experienced. In the eyes of some participants, this quality of their experience is a marker of being addicted to pornography. Inabilities to form intimate relationships or problems with sustaining the existing ones, emotional detachment and self-focussed attention are also the key features of the experience.

Living an alienated existence

Several participants convey the message that their experience of self-perceived pornography addiction is characterised by a limited interest in other activities or people.

The narratives of all the participants show clearly that they watch pornography frequently and have little time for other activities. Seven participants (P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10) use it on a daily basis or used to watch it daily before starting therapy. Four out of the seven (P5, P6, P7, P10), view it more than once a day. The remaining three participants (P1, P2, P4) consume pornography several times a week. However, even those participants who reduced their pornography consumption (P1, P5, P8), did not manage to stop it completely over a substantial period. P5 and P7 watch it for relatively short periods. The remaining participants spend hours. For instance, P4 estimates that he watches pornography on average five to six times a week, for three to four hours

each time (L8). However, in the periods of intensive use, which he calls '*pornography binging*' he can watch it all day long. He says in L66:

> '... *When I'm, when I'm in the binge, when I'll go home and fucking watch it for hours and the next day I'll be like fucking hell, it's time, I got loads of time, I'll watch it all day, I'll watch it for ages...*'

P9 gives in L16 the following weekly estimates of how much time he spends watching pornography: '*On average, I'd say that in the weekends… it was probably like six to seven hours. During the week… maybe around four… I know it sounds unbelievable…*'

P3 watches pornography every day for several hours. He reports incidents when he watched online pornographic content for up to 24 hours a day, which he describes in L22 as follows:

> '... *I used porn, like (…) every day, for hours, like, every day. And sometimes – and now, I can go for like (pauses) 24 hours almost. Just, sometimes even just ten hours straight. Just, like, crazily attached to my phone or my computer.*'

P8 reports a daily use of three to four hours each time. However, there were days when he was searching for pornographic content online and watching it almost the whole time without doing anything else. At times, he was looking for excuses to stay home to watch pornography. He says in L22: '... *Sometimes I'd fake being sick and stayed home and watched it for like five or six hours.*'

It is common for the participants to express no interest for anything other than pornography. This is the case of P3, who finds all other activities '*mundane and boring*' (L101). He feels unmotivated and does not see the need to engage with people. He has no interest in friendships. He has very little contact with other men, as he considers that they do not '*have anything to offer in terms of relationships or friendships*' (L109). Although all kinds of relationships with people around him, including his family, deteriorated throughout the years he was using pornography, he expresses no regrets about it.

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In the case of P1, contacts with others are also limited. Although he has friends, he sees them rarely. He says in L131: '… *I have a circle of friends but I basically kept on seeing them maybe four times a year, at the most….'* He lives a lonely life, socialises little and is not at ease when being with people, which he describes in L132 as follows: *'I avoided social contact with people and I felt extremely uncomfortable (umm) really, just being with people.'* He pulled out from social or personal interactions. He characterises his experience of pornography addiction as a '*social, emotional and sexual anorexia'* (L132).

P8 considers that his pornography use has an impact on his behaviour and the way he relates to others. After watching pornography, he feels drained of all energy and becomes less interested in social interactions such as dating or going out with friends. He gives the following example of how his social behaviour is impacted by his pornography use in L9:

> *'I found that when I watched porn… like the time of day or even the day, really influenced how I behaved. Like… I'd watch porn before getting ready to go out on a Friday or Saturday, and I wouldn't like going out anymore. I cancelled dates and wouldn't go hang out with my mates. I'd be quite drained by it…'*

Overall, P8's engagement with other people is rather limited. Although he has some friends, he does not feel particularly close to anyone and has never been in a romantic relationship. He reflects on this aspect of his experience in L105 as follows: *'I don't have anyone. I have never been in a relationship. I have no interest, no real friends.'* He feels lonely and regretful about his lifestyle. He wonders how different his life would be if he were less focused on pornography. He says in L104: '… *I lost many years in my life to watch porn. It was not worth it. I wonder where I would be now if I didn't spend so much time on porn.* '

P9 cannot think of any meaningful activity he does. Actually, he finds it difficult to focus on other activities, because even when he does not use pornography, he fantasises frequently about it. He says in L94: *'I found it hard to focus on other things, even easy things, like movies. If anything*

even vaguely sexual would take place, (...) I'd think of porn.' Throughout the years when he has been watching pornography, he did not make any friends or rarely went out with the colleagues from the office (L98). He is uninterested in other people or activities as he considers them being an obstacle for him watching pornography. He says in L101: *'...Everything else was just a distraction from porn, so I didn't pay much attention to making friends or being around people.'*

This sub-theme demonstrates that the experience of self-perceived pornography addiction is characterised by a strong focus on pornography and little interest in other activities, be they relations with other people or hobbies. As the amount of time spent watching pornography is very high, there is little time left for anything else. However, the participants do not experience a real need or desire to engage in other activities, which they see as hindrances to their pornography use. Although most of them live a rather lonely life, which they do not enjoy, they feel unmotivated to engage in other activities or relations with other people.

Master theme 3: Expression of a fragile sense of self

The focus of this master theme is on the sense of self characterised by negative self-affect and adverse self-beliefs. Two sub-themes help to understand this feature of the experience of self-perceived pornography addiction: negative self-perception and feeling powerless. The first one captures participants' subjective evaluations of their little self-worth. The second one focuses on one's beliefs about their inability for decision-making and change.

Negative self-perception

Negative self-perception is experienced on the affective and the cognitive level. Seven study participants in particular (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P8, P10) give evidence of negative feelings and intensely critical views of themselves. The intensity of negative beliefs and feelings directed towards the self is reflected in the choice of the vocabulary used by the participants when they refer to themselves. Highly pejorative terms such *'loser'*, *'pervert', 'pathetic', 'freak', 'bad', 'inadequate', 'not normal' or 'crazy'* are used, reflecting participants' perception of their little

self-worth and low self-esteem. For some, a low sense of worth is at the crux of their experience of self-perceived pornography addiction.

In the case of P3, his experience of self-perceived pornography addiction embroils a range of negative feelings and attitudes directed towards the self, indicating an extreme dislike of himself expressed as shame, self-loathing, self-hatred and a lack of self-acceptance. The bearing of these negative emotions is expressed in L111 where P3 says: *'...I feel (uh)… a lot of (uh) shame, yeah. A lot of self-hatred. A lot of self-loathing. A lot of (uh) I find it very difficult to accept myself...'* Actually, P3 has difficulties with finding any good qualities within himself and tends to think that he is a bad person altogether. He attempts to articulate this message, not without difficulties, in L112, where he says:

> *'I feel like I'm a good person but if behaviourally I act like a bad person, then I'm bad (...). It's like if a good person kills someone, they're, they might be a good person but they killed someone, so they're a bad person. (...) It's like I'm inherently good, it doesn't matter because if I behave like a bad person, I'm therefore bad…'*

Also in the case of P1, high levels of self-hatred and low self-esteem are the key characteristics of his experience. In his eyes, the intensity of self-contempt explains why he became and continues to be addicted. He says in L77: *'I think my level of self-esteem and my level of self-hatred and my level of despair was so high that it felt like I had no other option.'*

P1's pornography use reinforces his low confidence in his own worth. His experience of self-perceived pornography addiction is accompanied by constant shame. The significance of this feeling is reflected by the fact that he uses the word '*shame*' or its paronyms such as '*ashamed*', '*shamed*' or '*shameful*' over twenty times in his narrative. The persistence of shame in his experience is shown in L139, where he says: *'... I just constantly feel the shame'*. P1 finds many reasons to feel shame. He is ashamed because of his use of certain types of pornographic content involving young women, which, as a mature man, he should not watch (L40). He also finds it

reprehensible that pornography heightens his sexual intensity (L166). For a long time, he was ashamed to talk about sex (L41). P1 experiences intense shame because of his inability to control his behaviour, notably his frequent relapses, which cause him to feel and think low about himself. He says in L110: *'Every single time it would be a few days and there would be the shame (...), there would be these feelings of being so low.'* In P1's view, shame is a reflection of his little self-worth, which is at the root of his problem, rather than pornography use. He says in L158: *'... I think a lot of shame isn't actually to do with what I'm looking at. It's to do with how I feel about myself, how I feel about the world.'*

In some participants (P3, P8, P10), negative self-perception is fuelled by the lack of acceptance of the way they consume pornography. This is the case of P10, who feels abhorrent of the excessiveness of his pornography use, which he finds abnormal. He says in L96: *'.... I feel bad because I'm so dependent on it and it's not normal. It's not a normal way of using porn (...) It's excessive, unhealthy excessive.'* His inability to use porn in a *'normal way'* like *'everyone else'* results in him feeling disappointed with himself, as well as guilty for letting pornography holding too much of a grip over his life to the extent that he became *'a fucking addict'* (L115). He says in L110: *'... I feel guilty that I let porn control my life so much, to this extent.'* Even his participation in therapy for pornography addiction entails critical self-judgements. He says in L104: *'It took a while to persuade myself that I ought to go. I was quite afraid of what it implied about me if I go for treatment. Like that I am crazy or something.'*

In a similar way, P8 sees himself in a very negative light and is ashamed about watching pornography. He fears to be humiliated, should other people find out about the way he consumes pornography (L115). He expresses a high degree of self-hate for feeling dependent on pornography. He says in L97: *'I really hate myself. I hate myself for doing what I do. I hate myself for being who I am.'*

In the case of P3, the lack of acceptance of his behaviour powers his low self-esteem and negative self-image. He considers the way, in which he uses pornography to be wrong, which makes it

difficult for him to have self-respect. He describes the relationship between the disapproval of his behaviour and his lack of self-esteem in L113: *'So it's very difficult for me to feel sort of any kind of self-esteem or anything like that, if I'm behaving in a way which I view as completely wrong….'*

Some participants' self-perception is affected by their apparent weaknesses or inadequacies. For instance, P5's involvement with pornography makes him question his masculinity on a physical level, as well as with regard to his inaptitude for being in a relationship. His sexual problems, which he attributes to his high pornography use, cause him to doubt himself. He feels inadequate as a man and sees himself as a weak person. In his eyes, he is not a *'real'* but a *'disabled'* man. He says in L78:

> *'… if I'm still watching porn and I still cum in two minutes (…) what would that say about me, if I (…) couldn't have actual, real sex? (…) It would make me feel like weak. Like less of a man. Like I have some kind disability I've chosen to inflict on myself.'*

P5 feels inadequate also with regard to his physical appearance. He compares himself unfavourably to men performing in pornographic material, who in his opinion, are *'traditionally macho'* and more muscular than he is (L74). He questions his looks and acknowledges that this kind of comparison has some bearing on the way he sees himself as a physical man, which he describes in L72 as follows: *'… And I definitely feel the pressure to look a certain way because of the men I see in porn, for sure.'*

The feeling of being a failure as a man is experienced by P5 not only because of sexual and relational problems but also in connection with him attending therapy for pornography addiction, which in his view implies that he is not a *'normal man'*. In a similar way to P10, he considers that a *'normal man'* should be able to watch pornography and perform sexually in a satisfactory way, without needing therapy. He says in L86:

> *'Even being in therapy for porn addiction makes me feel like less of a man. Like, I'm supposed to be able to watch porn normally and to have sex normally… I feel like… like I've failed in that aspect in some way.'*

Also in the case of P6, sexual problems experienced in the context of his pornography use make him feel inadequate as a boyfriend and a man, which he expresses in L48 as follows: *'I was ashamed of myself (…) and I felt like the most pathetic boyfriend… and man, ever.'* In P6's view, his engagement with pornography reinforces his long-standing perception of himself as an inadequate person. For instance, his perceived inability to reduce the frequency of his pornography use makes him formulate critical judgments about himself, which are expressed by a choice of a very pejorative set of words to describe himself. He says in L46: *'… I felt like… like some kind of sad, pathetic pervert who can't stop watching porn (…). I didn't feel like a normal person.'* The whole experience of self-perceived pornography addiction has a bearing on P6's self-esteem. He sees himself as an inadequate and a failed person. He describes how the experience affects the way he sees himself in L61 as follows:

> *'I just see myself as this inadequate man. I got myself addicted to porn. I can't have regular sex. I lost my girlfriend. I went from an inadequate child to inadequate grown-up. It's quite sad. It definitely impacted my self-esteem… the way I see myself.'*

The present sub-theme shows that nearly all the participants see themselves in very negative light and experience a range of adverse feelings about themselves. These negative feelings are fuelled by critical views of themselves and the lack of acceptance of their behaviour. Some participants focus on their weaknesses or perceived inadequacies. Beliefs about one's worthlessness or unattractive physical traits are also part of the participants' experience. In the case of several participants, negative self-perception is a marking feature of their experience of perceived addiction to pornography.

Feeling powerless

A sense of powerlessness and a lack of autonomy over their pornography use direct the narratives of seven participants (P1, P3, P4, P5, P8, P9, P10). These participants consider that their pornography use dominates their lives. They feel as if they had little or no control over their pornography consumption. Some participants experience their powerlessness in the form of perceived inability to resist urges and compulsions to use pornography. They feel overwhelmed by the intensity of these drives and express a high degree of scepticism as to their ability to overcome their problems with pornography use.

The perceived lack of control over pornography use is mainly grounded in many unsuccessful attempts to cease or reduce its consumption. All the participants made efforts at some point of their engagement with pornography to stop using it. They have all failed. For some, the realisation of their inability to cease to consume pornography led them to believe that what they experience is a form of addiction. The most acute case involves P1, who has been in therapy for problems surrounding his pornography use for over twenty years. In spite of his aspiration to cease using pornography altogether, as well as various forms of support he had at his disposal, he has managed to reduce its consumption, but not to stop using it completely. He reflects on his struggles in L107 as follows:

> *'… It's been twenty years that I've been in therapy for this… and (…) I have done CBT, I've been working the twelve-step program. (…) I have outreach resources, people I can talk to every day. I have a spiritual life based around getting support around this stuff. That hasn't stopped me using porn completely. It has significantly reduced it, but it hasn't stopped it completely.'*

P1 gives a suggestive example of how determined and effective he was in sabotaging his goal to quit pornography consumption in L109:

> *'... I asked a girlfriend to help me to stop looking at porn, so she took my computer to work... so then maybe after a day or two, I used her computer... and then she took her computer to work. And then, there was another computer in the house which had a cable in it, and she had taken the cable for that as well, and then I went out and bought a cable.'*

His numerous failed attempts to cease watching pornography undermined P1's belief in his ability to overcome his addiction. Every time, he tried to cease using pornography, he was able to abstain only for a few days. A sense resignation and despair emerges from the account of his numerous failed attempts to quit in L113:

> *'... I just want to stop this, and two, three days later I'd be out buying pornography, I'd be going buying (...) I'd be buying videos and whatever else. And it's just been like that, fucking continuously. You know, sometimes it's longer periods (...) I'll be... yeah. Like, what is this insanity, really?(...)   And I'll be like ''right, I'm gonna stop, I'm gonna stop, I'm gonna stop'' and then... I'll be on it again two days later, three days later, and that's just gone on forever.'*

P1's perceived inability to cease watching pornography makes him think that pornography had taken over his entire life. He says in L102: *'... And then it felt like it was dominating everything in my life and I was like ok this is a problem and I want to stop, and then I couldn't...'*

P3 expresses a similar understanding of the experience. The difficulties that he experienced in the past to cease using pornography, which he qualifies as *'crazy'*, *'extremely difficult'* and *'very hard'* (L81) made him realise that he was addicted to pornography. He says in L60: *'I wanted to stop and I couldn't (...) and then I felt like I wasn't in control anymore (laughs). But before that I wasn't aware that it was an addiction...'* The inability to cease consuming pornography is for P3 a marker allowing the distinction between a pornography addict and a pornography user (L62).

Several participants (P3, P4, P5, P10) convey the message that they experience strong urges and compulsions to use pornography. This is the case of P4, who reports feeling strong cravings and

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compulsions. He defines craving as the want to watch pornography, whilst compulsion is the need to use it (L64). In his case, compulsion takes over because he would engage into the activity even when he does not want to do so on the cognitive level. This is for him the essence of what addiction to pornography is about. He describes his understanding of pornography addiction in L52 as follows: *'... to be consumed by the activity of watching porn and masturbating (...), thoughts about it, doing it when I don't want to be doing it.'* P4 feels overpowered by the need to use pornography, in particular in periods of intensive use, when he becomes single minded about watching pornographic content. The intensity of his pornography consumption makes him believe that the activity has *'infected'* his life (L99). In his opinion, pornography addiction is an experience, which happens beyond one's control. P4 feels overpowered by the intensity of the urges to the extent he does not believe he can deal with the problem on his own.

P5 expresses a very similar understanding of his experience. He reports feeling a strong desire and compulsion to watch pornographic content, even where on the cognitive level he does not want to do it. This is for him the core feature of addiction. He explains it in L46: *'To feel a strong desire, and even compulsion to do certain behaviour, even when you mentally don't want to and know it harms you in the long term.'*

In the case of P3 and P10, urges to consume pornographic material are accompanied by persistent thinking about sex and pornography. P3 calls it a *'maniac state of mind'* (L87). He gives a powerful account of the intensity and persistency of him thinking about using pornography in L75: *'... all day, like I'll wake up (...) and my face and my head and my mind is just burning to use more, like to grab my phone and just use and use and use and use and use.'*

P10 finds himself thinking a lot about sex and pornography use. Sometimes, his thoughts are so intense that they prevent him from concentrating on other activities. He states in L62: *'Sometimes it's really intense. Sometimes I wonder if it's even safe, like when I'm driving and I can't concentrate because I'm thinking a lot about sex.'* He finds these thoughts intrusive. He is under the impression that he cannot resist or control them. He says in L52: *'I also find myself*

daydreaming of sexual scenarios (…) Sometimes it even feels intrusive, but I can't help it. It feels quite out of my control.'

Some participants point to neurological or behavioural mechanisms as drives for their behaviour. For instance, P3 fears he will always be drawn to pornography and remain addicted. He feels to be manipulated by the pornography industry, which exploits neurobiological mechanisms underpinning human behaviour with full intent to make people watch pornography against their will. He says in L45:

> *'Obviously, the people behind these websites are (…) very smart people that know exactly how to design a website to make it sort of stimulate the reward loop in your head and make you keep coming back over and over again (…). They know exactly how to melt your brain.'*

P5 explains his inability to stop using pornography in behavioural terms. He believes to have learnt to use pornography in certain situations to the extent that he conditioned himself and is no longer in control of his behaviour. He says in L43: *'…And I know it's because of porn, because I'm (uh) I conditioned myself, my dick basically, to respond sexually like this.'* He reiterates this understanding in L88: *'And it's because of porn. I've conditioned myself to do this, and it's out of my control now.'* Being out of control of his pornography use is for him the fundamental criterion to differentiate between a habit and an addiction (L57). In his opinion, the latter is problematic because it overpowers the user who becomes unable to control his behaviour in an autonomous way.

In some participants, the perceived powerlessness is reinforced by a belief that pornography addiction is particularly hard to overcome. This is the case of P1, P3, and P5, who experienced other forms of problematic types of behaviour in the past. In their opinion, addiction to pornography is more potent than addiction to any other kind of behaviour or substance. P3 considers that pornography addiction *'… surpasses any drive (…) it's very strong'* (L77). He

experiences strong cravings for pornography, which he finds more powerful than those that accompanied his use of drugs.

In the same way, P1 who was able to stop other types of problematic behaviour considers overcoming his perceived addiction to pornography the most challenging (L148). He finds it difficult to understand why he has not managed to stop his pornography consumption. He says in L145: *'…I was just like stop being so pathetic, pull yourself together and just stop using porn. I mean, for God's sake, how hard is it?'*

Similarly, P5 who managed to stop most of the other problematic types of behaviour is unable to quit watching pornography. He says L51: *'I thought it would be like everything else I quit (…) Smoking wasn't difficult even though I smoked for years (…). But porn… it was kind of like gambling. I haven't been able to shake it.'* The belief in a particular power of pornography addiction undermines his ability to deal with the problem in an autonomous way and he remains sceptical about overcoming it.

A high degree of resignation as to his ability to overcome his problems with pornography use emerges also from the account by P8, who expresses doubts about succeeding to live a different kind of life. He does not believe that he would be able to settle down or be in a meaningful relationship because of his problems with pornography use. He says in L76: *'I wish I could settle down with someone, but I think it'd never work. If it was not pornography, maybe I would be hooked on something else (…). Anyway, I don't think any women would accept me…'*

The present sub-theme demonstrates that the experience of self-pornography addiction is characterised by the attitude of powerlessness. The participants feel overpowered and believe that their behaviour occurs beyond their control or against their will. They experience urges and feel the need or compulsion to watch pornography. They seem to be overwhelmed by the intensity and persistency of these drives, which they find impossible to resist. Their ability to deal with their problems is seriously undermined, in particular, due to numerous failed attempts to cease

pornography viewing, as well as beliefs about neurobiological or conditioning mechanisms driving their behaviour. Participants' apparent powerlessness makes them believe that their pornography use dominates their life to the extent they have little or no influence over enacting changes in order to live a different kind of life.

Master theme 4: Expression of inauthentic existence

This master theme captures the participants' approach to their way of living centred on pornography use, which encompasses an acknowledgment of the inauthenticity of their existence. The participants reveal that their experience involves conflicting attitudes and states of mind, tensions and ambivalences towards the way they live. Some of them search for a new way of living, which goes beyond an aspiration to cease pornography consumption. Three sub-themes have been identified to capture various facets of this dimension of the experience: engaging in behaviour in spite of fearing its consequences, living in confusion and self-deception and seeking a new way of being.

Engaging in behaviour in spite of fearing its consequences

The study participants are not oblivious to the fact that they experience problems with their pornography use. They are all aware of the negative consequences of their pornography consumption in various areas. Several participants link their pornography use with problems affecting their physical and emotional health, relationships and life obligations. Some fear that their pornography use may cause family breakdown, damage their reputation or result in a job loss. However, despite the awareness and the perception of harm, they chose to use pornography. Their experience of self-perceived pornography addiction involves shifts in their states of mind, where engagement with pornography occurs without much consideration for the future, followed by concerns about the long-term implications of their behaviour. This is the case of P1, P2 and P6, for whom continuous pornography consumption despite the full awareness of the costs and the risks involved, is an innate feature of their experience.

P1 struggles to understand why he engages in pornography use despite experiencing numerous negative consequences in several areas of his live for over thirty years. He acknowledges that his pornography consumption affects how he views himself and relates to other people. It bears financial consequences and makes him feel detached from the world, lonely and distressed. Overall, he considers that his addiction prevents him from living fully (L132). P1 points to the irrationality of his behaviour. In his opinion, the experience brings about a paradox, which he cannot understand or accept. On the one hand, he is aware that being addicted to pornography has a highly destructive effect on his life. On the other hand, despite being aware of the damage it causes, he continues to watch pornography. P1 is puzzled by the fact that every time a thought about using pornography crosses his mind, he finds it to be a good idea in spite of being consciously aware of physical and mental distress, which follows its use. He is astounded by the inexplicable character of the choices he makes, which he describes in L76:

> *'It's like even though I know I got work to do, even though I know I feel utterly exhausted cause I've been up to four in the morning looking at porn. Even though I know I feel shamed, even though I know I can't relate to my girlfriend… you know, when that thought comes in about 'ooh I could use some pornography today,' it seems like a great idea every single time, even though I've been struggling with it for so long…'*

In P1's opinion, a person who is fully aware of the negative consequences of their behaviour should be able to cease engaging with it. He cannot understand why, despite being highly committed to abstain, he chooses to watch pornography. He compares himself to an alcoholic who keeps on drinking despite the full awareness of great distress caused by his behaviour. He says in L75:

> *'… It's like an alcoholic would get up every morning and drink the same amount, even though they know they feel shit, even though they know things are falling apart, and I think that's definitely been my experience of the pornography.*

P1 cannot rationally understand why he continues using pornography in the face of the difficulties and challenges that his behaviour entails. He thinks of the way he acts as *'insanity'* (L113). This irrational aspect of the experience is one of the reasons P1 considers it to be addiction. He says in L71: *'... This is one of the reasons I call it an addiction: because the evidence is so clearly that it's not good for me...'* Thus, for P1 the choice to use pornography despite the full awareness of negative consequences is the fundamental characteristic of his experience of self-perceived pornography addiction (L76).

Also in the case of P2, his persistent high pornography use, while being aware of the harmful effects of his actions, is a defining feature of his self-perceived addiction. He says it in L43: *'...If I were to say what addiction is, it's the compulsion to repeatedly do something... even if there are negative, mostly negative consequences.'* He considers that in his case, the negative consequences are extremely high. In particular, he fears personal, professional and reputational risks, which he describes in L65 as follows:

> *'There's the risk of (uh) patients finding out, of course. Not just patients. My family, my friends and (uh) people I come into contact with through hobbies and... I doubt my cycling team mates would (uh), would see this as normal, as a normal way to be (uh)... yeah. There's also the threat of hackers finding this and (uh) using it against me in some way.'*

However, despite fearing the risks attached to his pornography use, P2 looks for excuses to continue watching pornographic material. He says in L39: *'... If this wasn't such a problem for my wife, I'm sure I would have been making some excuse for myself why (uh) why I can't watch it on Mondays and Thursdays, you know?'* However, unlike P1, who points to an irrational character of his conduct, P2 finds explanation for his choices. He considers that his addiction is driven by strong impulsive processes, which make him want to access pornography without paying attention to the rational considerations. He says in L19: *'It's very... impulsive. Right here, right now. I don't care what else is going on around me or what I need or ought to be doing...'* The negative nature of the consequences is for P2 the most important criterion for interpreting his experience in terms

of addiction. In his view, the difference between a pornography addict and a pornography user is about the consequences for their lives. The latter is able to watch *'a standard amount'* of pornography, which *'… does not wreak havoc in their lives'* (L81).

Similarly, in the case of P6, continuous consumption of pornography despite growing awareness of the negative impact it has on his life is a part of his experience. P6 is aware of the problems his pornography use entails, in particular for his health and relationships (L50). He is committed to cease using it. However, he continues going back to pornography consumption, which is one of the reasons he interprets his experience in terms of addiction. He explains it in L42 as follows: *'It means (…) I can't stop watching porn, even when I know it's detrimental to things I care about, I really value.'* P6 cannot understand why he chooses to watch pornography despite the harm its consumption was causing to his relationship. He says in L48: *'…And I didn't know why I watched porn (…). I really cared about my girlfriend and I knew she was upset…'* In a similar way to P1, he finds this aspect of his experience incomprehensible.

This sub-theme demonstrates that self-perceived addiction to pornography is an experience where one repeatedly engages in pornography consumption despite the awareness of the costs involved. The participants continue to consume pornography although they know that their behaviour is against their own interests. Although they know it would be better for them to cease watching pornography, they keep reengaging in its consumption against their better judgements. The participants have problems with comprehending why they persist in watching pornography despite the full realisation of the negative consequences of their behaviour on their lives. For some, this irrational aspect of their experience involving acting against their interests is a marker of being addicted.

Living in confusion and self-deception

Some participants believe that their experience allows them to disengage from reality, leading to feelings of confusion and ambivalence about the value of pornography consumption, their identity and their value system. Living in confusion and uncertainty as to who they are or what they get

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from their pornography consumption is experienced as a form of life characterised by a high degree of incoherence and deception.

This is the case of P4, whose experience of self-perceived pornography addiction involves leading '*a double-life'*. His engagement with pornography allows him detaching from reality and harbouring secrets about who he is and what he does. He says in L87:

> '*... I suppose the creation of that (umm) I don't know if that's what they call it, but it's a good way of describing it: the double-life. Means that I (umm)… having, not being able to disclose parts of myself…'*

P4 manages to set a barrier between his '*real life'* and his *'other life'*, which is centred on pornography. He applies this barrier when relating to his girlfriend. He considers that his pornography use is of concern only to him and does not see a need to let his girlfriend know about it. He says in L115:

> '*... for me (…) my addiction, my porn, my use of porn is not to do with her. It's not to do with being in a relationship with her (…). In essence, it doesn't have anything to do with her...'*

However, despite believing that his pornography use has nothing to do with his real life relationship, P4 is fearful of his girlfriend finding out about his high pornography usage. He conceals his behaviour from her, which makes him question his honesty and his system of values. He says in L78: '*…my girlfriend doesn't know about it, so that crosses my values because I want to be honest with her....'* He acknowledges that his experience of pornography addiction requires hiding part of himself and not being truthful with his girlfriend and ultimately with himself. He realises the unauthentic character of this *'other life'* and its impact on his '*real life'*. Concealing his behaviour from people close to him means that he is '*…less… sort of…present (…) in myself, less happy in myself… less authentic'* (L87).

In the case of P3, his experience involves uncertainty about the authenticity of his sexual behaviour. He finds it difficult to ascertain whether certain types of sexual practices in which he engages are the expressions of him as a person or are rather the imitations of what he has seen in pornographic material. Throughout the years he has been using pornography, he experienced changes in his sexual taste. He started by watching content, which he considers *'completely sort of healthy'* (L18). Then, he started watching violent material, involving bondage, dominance, sadism and masochism (L17). This change causes him to wonder whether his sexual behaviour in real life situations is a natural expression of his sexuality and his genuine self or something that he has learnt from pornography. He says in L15: *'... It's hard for me to measure what is something that I had (...). Did I have that already, as a person, or was that something that I conditioned myself (...) through pornography over time?'* P3 is confused not only about the behavioural aspect. He is also unable to evaluate his feelings about engaging in violent sex. He is unsure whether he genuinely enjoys it in real life. In L99, he says: *'...It's so clouded by how much porn I've used. (...) It makes it more confusing for me cause I don't know if I like it.'* P3's sense of confusion goes beyond the sexual sphere. He questions who he really is and how he views himself (L112). He expresses a need for a greater self-understanding and self-awareness. He would like to understand why he behaves the way he does, which, in his opinion, would facilitate recovery. He says in L126: *'.... If I'm aware why I do what I do then I'm a lot more able to stop doing it, you know?'*

P2 frames his self-perceived addiction to pornography as a substitute for reality, in particular, on a sexual and a relational level. On a purely physiological level, he considers that pornography allows him meeting his sexual needs. This happens in the absence of sex with his wife (L15). When he uses pornography, it is very important for P2 that there is an aspect of reality in material that he views. The pornographic content that he watches should not address his fantasies, but be entrenched in reality. He says in L49: *'...It's kind of emulating a real world situation'.* His choice of pornographic material reflects his desire for reality-like and '*appropriate*' sexual relations that he misses in his life. In this way, through pornography consumption, he creates an illusion of being with '*age-appropriate*' and mature women. He wants to feel that *'...there is some reality to*

it…' and it would be *'… appropriate to look at those women in real life…'* (L28). That is why he is not interested in pornographic material picturing young women but prefers material, which matches in some ways the lifelikeness. He reveals in L49 that a desire for an apparent realness has always been an important aspect of his experience:

> *'… Over the years (uh) the decades, has, has been an age-appropriate increase (…). Rather than the fantasy of, you know, the, the, the teenager, or something like that (…). What I mean to say is that, that, it's not the final picture, the, the money shot, it's the story. There needs to be some reality aspect to it…'*

Some participants experience a sense of confusion or a conflict concerning the dichotomy between their ethical values and actual behaviour, in particular with regard to the abusive nature of the pornography industry, exploitation of pornography actors and objectification of women. The participants question their attitudes and responsibilities as high pornography consumers for the abuses and exploitation of people acting in the so-called *'adult films'*, as well as other pornography users, in particular the young ones, who are increasingly attracted to pornography.

In the case of P1, his pornography consumption represents a huge challenge to his belief system. He expresses concerns about actors featured in pornographic material and recognises the ambivalence of his attitudes. On the one hand, he sees pornographic actors as dehumanised performers, almost as if there were not real people. He says in L68: *'… somehow in my mind, because it's on the computer, and they're not people there (…) it's just porn'*. On the other hand, he expresses concerns about them being exploited by the pornography industry (L162). This causes him to wonder whether his behaviour contributes to mistreatment of people performing in pornographic films, which, in principle, would be at odd with his values. Similarly, he wonders whether his behaviour contributes to the increasing influence of the pornography industry on other users who become increasingly attracted to pornography and adversely affected by its consumption. He says in L167:

'And so that's kind of my view of pornography really, is that it's fucking dangerous, and it's naturally going in that direction and it will naturally draw more and more people into it, and that it's particularly dangerous because people think it's kind of ok.'

Moreover, P1 acknowledges that his behaviour is inconsistent with the values he holds about women. He would like to think that he respects them. However, the fact that he enjoys watching women being objectified contradicts this belief. He says in L144: *'... So that kind of jars with what I believe, I think about women and how I feel about women and then how I actually behave. So that's been a real challenge to my beliefs'.* This lack of congruence between what he would like to think of himself and his actual conduct causes him to question whom he truly is and what he stands for.

P2 considers that his pornography use in inconsistent with the moral standards appropriate for a medical professional (L70). In a similar way to P1, he experiences ethical dilemma with regard to the problematic nature of the pornography industry and is concerned about the way women are treated. He says in L45: *'...And I (uh) (long pause) uh, I uh, I get all the exploitation of women, yeah (um). The problematic nature of the industry...'* P2 questions the genuineness of his own moral standards. He would like to think of himself as a moral and an ethical person. However, he behaves like a misogynist and finds it difficult to admit that he has a role to play in the successful functioning of the pornography industry. He explains it in L79 as follows:

'I never thought that way before but (uh) that's probably because it's, it's terrible to think that way. To see yourself that way. I never saw myself as this misogynist. (...) I like to think of myself as fair... moral. Having morals. And I know that when it comes to (uh) the degrading aspects of the industry and, I mean... what is my role in this? I consume, I mean, I purchase and spend money on (...). So, thinking about my own role in this, is... is difficult.'

Similarly, P3 experiences a deep sense of confusion as to the authenticity of his values, in particular his attitude towards women. He describes his bewilderment around these issues as a *'complete mind fuck'*. He questions his morals and ethical standards and is astounded by the degree of changes in this area occurring throughout the years when he has been watching pornography. He would like to see himself as someone with *'an ethical moral compass'*. However, he wonders whether he actually has any moral standards, whether he behaves in line with them and whether they have changed because of him using pornography. He says in L41:

> *'I's made me question my morals and values. I mean, how can I say that I'm sort of, how can I say I'm a person with an ethical moral compass if all I do all day is crave like, really hard-core pornography)?(…) and things that I've sort of (pause) like the, the degree of which I've changed as a person because of… because of my sexual porn addiction is just crazy, yeah, it's just crazy.'*

This sub-theme demonstrates that self-perceived pornography addiction is experienced as a form of life characterised by confusion and self-deception. The experience encompasses an appearance of reality, which in the case of some participants serves as a substitute of certain aspects of their real life, which they have been missing. However, a high degree of confusion is experienced about the genuineness of this way of living, in particular with regard to the authenticity of the participants' ethical values.

Seeking a new way of being

Some participants are very clear in their wish to lead a more authentic life. They consider their experience of self-perceived pornography addiction to be destructive and detrimental to their well-being. Thus, they wish to enact a change to pursue a different kind of life. This desire goes beyond a simple aspiration to be free of pornography consumption. This facet of the experience emerges in particular from the accounts by P4, P8 and P10.

P4 wants not only to cease watching pornography, but also to start living a more fulfilling life. He expresses the following hopes and ambitions as to what he expects for himself in L78: *'... I want to look after myself, I want to do things that are good for me and I want to think well of myself...'* P4 would like to behave in a more genuine way. His expectations about this new way of being include ceasing to conceal his pornography consumption out of fear of being exposed or losing important relationships. He also believes that living in an authentic way would give him more confidence and enable him to build stronger relationships. He says in L122: *'...I'd feel more confident because I wouldn't feel like there's something I need to hide. I wouldn't conceal from people. And I'd feel like I'm at risk of being exposed or (umm) shamed or... (umm) losing the relationships.'* Ultimately, he expects that a new way of life would be different in nature in particular in those areas, which he finds the most troublesome, for instance the way he sees himself and deals with difficult feelings. He expresses his expectations in L121 as follows:

> *'...I think... I would start to feel better about myself and (umm)... and I think I would (umm) I would eventually learn to deal with my emotions in a more productive, productive way. I would be calmer, because I'd spend more time sitting and dealing with difficult feelings...'*

In P4's view, leading a more authentic life requires gaining a deeper self-awareness, in particular with regard to the way he feels about himself in the context of his problematic pornography consumption. P4 reflects on the complexity and ambiguity of the feelings accompanying his experience, which he needs to reconcile. On the one hand, he feels angry with himself for engaging in pornography consumption, which he finds devastating and destructive. On the other hand, he feels sorry for himself and tries to adopt a more empathetic attitude. He says in L95:

> *'I think I'm still probably angry with myself (umm)... but then at times I can feel sorry for myself in terms of that I was so scared at home that I... (umm) that I can look at myself, at myself in a sympathetic and empathetic way. I can look back at myself and think: 'oh that kid (umm) he's scared, no wonder he found, he watched a lot of porn because it took his*

mind off it.' I couldn't be annoyed at a seven-year-old… But that's a smaller percentage of the time than the angry one.'

In the end, P4 believes that despite the hurdles that need to be resolved, greater self-awareness would allow him dealing better with inherent difficulties of life. He says in L120: *'I think it would still be difficult, because life is difficult.'*

P10 feels that his pornography use is an obstacle for engaging fuller with life. He expresses a strong desire for another way of living, which does not have to be free of pornography, although he would like to watch less of it (L68). He wants to perform better at work and be in a meaningful relationship. However, he is convinced that he would not be able to achieve these goals, as long as he is addicted to pornography. In L82, he says: *'… I know deep inside that nothing beats a real person. No porn will give me the same thing (…). But I don't think I'm ready for that. I have to sort myself out with porn to begin with.'*

P10 looks beyond his own interests and goals. He would like to behave in an altruistic way and be of service to the wider public by helping other pornography users to understand the implications of high consumption, so that they would be in a position to make informed choices. P10 wants his voice to be heard in order to raise more awareness about high pornography consumption, which could benefit others. He testifies to that in L116: *'I think people should talk about porn more, about relying on it, like what it can do to you, to your life. In a way, people like me should speak up more and be heard more.'*

P8 too expresses a desire for a change in life and has aspirations for the future. He would like to settle down, have more interests and be a person other people would like to engage with. He expresses his goals and ambitions in L118: *'I'd like to have some hobbies, some interests. I'd like to be a person other people could be interested in.'* P8 believes that he can achieve a change by exercising a greater degree of control over his pornography use. He has implemented a number of rules to achieve his goals and minimise the impact of pornography use on his life. He has installed

devices on his computer, which would prevent him from accessing pornographic websites (L68). He allows himself to consume pornography on days where it would have less impact on other activities (L6). P8 considers that a higher degree of control would ultimately enable him to deal with difficult feelings outside the pornography context, which would reduce his reliance on pornography to feel better. He says in L60: *'I'm also learning to control my emotions and to deal with them outside of the porn.'* His overall objective is to achieve a shift in focus from pornography consumption to other life activities, which would result in a better quality of life. He believes that he can achieve this objective by exercising a greater degree of control over his pornography use.

This sub-theme reveals the desire to lead a more fulfilling and meaningful life experienced by some participants. Those who express this wish want to not only free themselves from their perceived dependence on pornography, but also have hopes and ambitions going beyond pornography abstinence. The participants envisage various paths in order to achieve their goals. Some want to have a greater self-understanding. Others wish to engage in altruistic endeavours or exercise a high degree of self-control over their pornography consumption to achieve a better quality of life.

Master theme 5: Appropriating the addiction narrative

This master theme captures the value attributed by the study participants to framing their experience in terms of addiction. It includes considerations of their identities as pornography addicts, as well as main concerns about being perceived as such. Three sub-themes have been identified within this master theme: finding understanding in the addiction discourse, feeling misunderstood and fearing stigma.

Finding understanding in the addiction discourse

Although the participants have various understandings of what it means to be addicted, they all frame their experiences in terms of addiction and see themselves as addicts. In the case of P2, P3, P7, P8 and P9, the concept of addiction provides them with a framework for understanding their

experience. All five participants have actively explored the meaning of addiction and have concluded that the concept accurately reflects the nature of their experiences.

As a medical doctor, P2 is aware of certain biological mechanisms underlying addictive behaviour. His own understanding of addiction is influenced by biomedical explanations. He believes that his addiction to pornography has the evolutionary underpinnings. In P2's opinion, the drive for sex is inborn and people are biologically programmed to be interested in sex and are driven to engage in sexual practices. In his case, this interest is expressed by means of pornography consumption. He explains his understanding of the nature of his experience in L21 as follows:

> *' It's also… evolutionary I suppose, to like (uh) beautiful women, to find them sexually attractive and want to interact with them in (uh) this way, even though it is very indirect. So, so in some ways, I struggle, because I see wanting to see (uh) ladies like this as a normal experience…'*

In P2's view, whilst people do not have to drink alcohol, gamble or take drugs in order to live, they need to have sex because it has the biological basis. Therefore, he does not consider his interest in pornography to be abnormal, as he finds it natural to find women sexually alluring. He says in L76:

> *'With porn. I see it as biologically necessary and normal. I don't believe I'm not going to see beautiful women and find them (uh) appealing in the sexual sense. You know, I don't think any amount of therapy can help that…'*

In addition to acknowledging the evolutionary-based need for sex, P2 considers having an *'addictive personality'* (L43), which makes him susceptible not only to high pornography consumption, but also to other kinds of behaviour involving for instance alcohol drinking, smoking or cycling. P2 engages in all these types of behaviour in an excessive way. In his view, behaving in a way exceeding what would normally be acceptable or necessary is the essence of an addictive personality. He says in L61: '… *When I get into something (...), I just don't stop when I start. I*

take it until its conclusion, which is (…) always this excess.' Thus, the combination of biological understandings of sexuality and his perceived psychological propensity for excessive behaviour helps P2 understand his vulnerability to high pornography consumption, which he considers addiction.

Some participants have specifically explored whether the problems, which they experience with their pornography consumption can be a form of addiction. This is the case of P7, who got himself informed about pornography addiction. He says in L48: *'I remember reading something, when I was in that ''do I, don't I'' stage of pornography addiction, wondering if I really have it.'* This information allowed him concluding that a range of symptoms he experiences such as cravings or compulsions to watch pornography are characteristic of addiction. He says in L49: *'So there's a few factors that make me know I'm addicted to it, yeah.'*

P9 too got himself informed about addiction and found this information sufficiently convincing to consider himself addicted to pornography. He says in L45: *'The more I know about addiction, the more I'm convinced that I'm addicted to porn.'* He finds many similarities with the other types of addiction such as alcoholism or gambling. He considers that pornography addiction serves the same functions, involves similar dynamics and consequences as other types of addiction. He draws the following parallels between other types of addictive behaviour and pornography addiction in L60:

> *'It's really similar. Like watching porn at work, or maybe drinking at work would have similar consequences. I'd get fired for both. Well, for me it's porn. And trying to stop (…), then breaking and going back… It's basically the same thing in my opinion, to porn or to something else.'*

Similarly, P8 sought information about problems related to high pornography consumption and concluded that what he experiences is a type of addiction. He noticed certain similarities between his experience and testimonies of pornography addicts published on the internet. He says in L53:

'…I came across some websites with information for addicts who struggle with porn. When I read some stories, they sound so familiar. As if I was reading about myself.' P8 is of the opinion that people struggling with pornography addiction experience similar symptoms. They think obsessively about pornography and sex, spend too much time watching pornography content and are unable to stop using pornography or to have sex (L55). P8 considers he is presented with all of these symptoms, thus he is a pornography addict.

P2, P3 and P9 emphasise that pornography addiction is a real phenomenon, which is comparable to the other types of addiction. P3 says in L145: '*That… it's… it can be just as much of a crippling addiction as any other addiction.'* This view is shared by P9 for whom pornography addiction is a genuine phenomenon involving similar dynamics to the other kinds of addiction. He says in L111: *'… like some people can't drink at all, I can't watch porn at all. I've just have to accept it and learn how to do it.'* P2, who as a medical professional is aware that the condition is not formally recognised as a mental health disorder or a disease, is of the opinion that pornography addiction is nevertheless real. At least, it is real to him and other pornography addicts. He says in L86: *'… pornography addiction is very real for me and many people here.'*

The present sub-theme demonstrates that the participants, who see their experience through the addiction lenses internalise the narrative of addiction and explanations that come with it. They compare their experiences with other forms of behaviour considered to be addiction and find similarities in terms of symptoms, consequences or functions their pornography consumption holds in their lives. They have no doubts that pornography addiction is a real phenomenon and that they are addicted.

Feeling misunderstood

Several participants are of the opinion that pornography addiction as a condition is widely misunderstood and not taken seriously by the public. As they see it, people misjudge pornography addiction or view it as an excuse for hedonistic behaviour. They fear that pornography addicts are

met with disdain or are perceived as if they were avoiding responsibility for their behaviour. The participants consider that the reality of their experiences is commonly misrepresented.

This is the case of P8, who deplores that the true nature of pornography addiction is misunderstood by the public. In particular, he argues with the assumption that pornography addiction involves self-indulgent behaviour. He says in L86:

> *'... People might think that watching porn and having porn addiction is just fun. But it's not. I mean… it's not fun when you think you can't stop, when you can't go through a day without watching porn or when you are scared to use the internet because you know that you would end up watching porn.'*

Several participants consider that pornography addiction deserves greater public attention. For instance, P6, P7 and P9 would like more information to be available about negative consequences of pornography use. P9 wishes also that there were more help available for those pornography users, who are affected by difficulties caused by pornography consumption so they would not feel like *'freaks left alone with their problems'* (L113). P6 expresses serious concerns about the lack of awareness of potential consequences among pornography users and the public in general. He finds it disturbing that young people can be exposed and normalise certain types of pornographic content, which he considers fundamentally wrong. He says in L51:

> *'And there's the whole thing about how creepy porn actually is (…) the fastest or biggest category on the rise (…) is incest. That can't be right. That can't be right for the ten, twelve-year-olds that are looking at porn, thinking that this is normal…'*

P6 considers that secretiveness and embarrassment surrounding pornography consumption contribute to the lack of awareness of the consequences of its long-term high use. He expresses strong regrets about insufficient information and attention given to this issue. He says in L64:

'I wish somebody told me about porn, that there were consequences, like any consequences to watching it for years and years. Nobody talks about anything like that (...) but I think that awkwardness created all this secrecy about sex and porn. I saw it quite shameful.'

P1, P2, P6, P8 and P9 stress that pornography addiction is not an excuse. P1 and P2 emphasise that assuming personal responsibility is part of the experience. P2 says in L86: *'...We're not all just men who have (uh), you know, committed indiscretions and are now turning around and saying (puts hands in the air): I'm an addict, I can't take responsibility because my addiction made me do it.'* This message is also echoed in the P1's account, who says in L171: *'...it would be really great to acknowledge that porn addiction is not just an excuse... but at the same time, it's not a reason not to take responsibility.'*

This message reverberates with P6, P8 and P9 for whom pornography addiction is not an excuse, but an unacknowledged and largely misunderstood problem. P6 says in L70: *'...It's real (...) It's not just a gimmick for men to try and get out of trouble when they're caught cheating.'(...) People should acknowledge that it can have bad consequences on you, just like gambling, just like anything else.'* P9 makes a similar observation in L116: *'It's not just an excuse. It's a very real addiction, like gambling.'* P8 stresses the need for help to those who struggle with overcoming their problems. He says in L122:

'... It's not just an excuse that guys hooked on porn came up with. It's a real thing. (...) I don't think someone who is addicted to porn can deal with it without help. At least I couldn't and obviously all the guys here couldn't either.'

Some participants feel that they find understanding in other pornography addicts. P8 experiences connection with other self-perceived pornography addicts with whom he is in therapy. He considers that unlike the wider public, other people who experience problems with pornography use have a better understanding of what he is going through. He says it in L82: *'I have some kind*

of connection with people here in the clinic, in therapy. I think it's because they are sort of going through the same stuff I do.' He takes solace in the fact that he is not alone in his struggles with pornography consumption.

P3 too experiences a sense of connection with other pornography addicts with whom he can be more open about his problems and who are for him a source of support. He says in L125:

> *'… So obviously having a support group here is (uh) beneficial. Obviously, it makes you not feel alone, makes you feel connected to other people, makes you feel you have the support network outside of your family (uh) it's a lot easier for me to say this type of thing to strangers (…). So, so, it's very (uh) helpful in that sense.'*

P2, however, finds it difficult to fully connect and identify with other people with whom he is in therapy for pornography addiction. He struggles with being open and distances himself from them, as he is not ready to share his experiences with them or anyone else. He says in L83:

> *'It's a strange dynamic. (…) There's also this, this understanding that we are, you know, in this together (rolls eyes) and some of the men socialize together outside of (uh) of group but I… I, they're nice. They are pleasant, don't get me wrong but, uh… I think I'm having trouble with identifying with (uh) them as addicts. A part of me still wants to hide, to keep this secret (long pause) sometimes I don't think they believe me (uh) either, about the content I watch. I'm not being truthful about it, that's what they probably think, you know?'*

The present sub-theme demonstrates that the feeling of being misunderstood by the wider public is commonly experienced within the study group. The participants consider that the reality of their experienced is misinterpreted. They deplore the lack of awareness of the condition in society, which makes them feel alienated. They fear that pornography addicts are not taken seriously, but are seen as self-indulgent individuals seeking excuses for their behaviour instead of assuming responsibility. The participants would like more help being available for those users, who struggle with their pornography consumption.

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Fearing stigma

Fear of stigma is widely experienced within the study group. The participants are concerned about other people finding out about their pornography consumption and moral judgments being passed. They believe that being perceived to be a pornography addict would result in ostracism and condemning attitudes by people close to them, as well as the wider public. This facet of the experiences emerges from the accounts by P1, P2, P7 and P8.

P2 expresses many concerns in this regard. Despite believing that his interest in pornography is natural and normal, he fears disapproval of people close to him such as his family members or friends. In particular, he dreads condemning reactions on the part of his children, should they find out that their father consumes pornography. He feels ashamed and finds it terrifying that they could think that he watches pornography involving young women of his daughters' age. Despite believing that his children might also consume pornography, he is deeply distressed about the possibility of them passing moral judgements or their relationships ending. He says in L72:

> *'... I have two adult children, (...) I would be so incredibly shamed if they found out. I know young people look at porn too, I mean (uh), more than other groups probably, you know that better than me. But to know your own dad looks… I don't think I could look either of them in the face… (long pause) and I can just imagine them thinking, like my wife, about how I like to look at girls in their twenties, their age… it would just be, be the end of our relationship really. I don't know how I could recover from that, from being seen like that.'*

P2 is also concerned about the reaction of his patients. He fears that they would feel uncomfortable with undergoing medical examinations carried out by a doctor who consumes pornography. He says in L31: *'There was also thinking about patients. What if they knew what I was up to (uh) I mean, they (uh) if they knew that a doctor examining them was watching those things?'* He expresses deep fear of stigma and public condemnation of his behaviour in the event of him being exposed. He contemplates various dramatic scenarios, which could lead to him being publicly perceived as a *'pervert'*. He says in L32:

'…Plus now with the internet, I'm sure it's been done before (uh) when people hack others and find out what they've been watching or (uh) get photographs of people watching pornography or (uh) doing (um) well, pleasuring themselves… I don't know if that's happened, maybe you know. That's also a great risk. I wouldn't like to (uh) see myself on the front of a newspaper with a (uh) dramatic headline, you know? Because whenever you do see like, a barrister or a… politician, yes, doing that, you always think the worst, don't you? You assume they're looking at (uh) the worst… the worst smut out there, you know? And even if it's not true, people will always want to believe that you are just, just this pervert…'

Being perceived as a *'pervert',* in particular by his daughter, is also terrifying for P7, who says in L77:

'I have a daughter, she's eight. I can't imagine what she'd think if she found out this was an issue for me when she's older. I can't even stand thinking about it. Her thinking that I'm such a pervert. '

P7 considers that in comparison with other forms of addictive behaviour, for instance drug addiction, pornography addiction is particularly stigmatising, as it entails more shame. He says in L103: '*So if you're addicted (…), you're just some pervert (…). It's more shameful to be a porn addict than a drug addict these days. More sympathy for them.'*

The view that pornography addiction is particularly prone to an adverse public reaction is also expressed by P1, who says in L175: *'Like, I'd tell someone I was an alcoholic if I was an alcoholic. Wouldn't think twice about it. But you know, I'm talking from a porn addict perspective (…) people are going to judge me.'* He thinks that some of the stigma attached to pornography addiction results from the lack of awareness of the nature of the condition and bad publicity. He explains it in L176*:*

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'... There's the stigma attached with that, and there's this association with Tiger Woods and all that, that if you tell people you're a sex addict people will just think you're a bloke who likes shagging around and using porn and wants an excuse for it. So, I think there is a stigma in that sense.'

Similarly, P8 fears public stigma surrounding pornography use and possible shaming and humiliation of pornography addicts. He is worried that his behaviour may be revealed to people close to him. He expresses his concerns in L115: *'... I wouldn't like anyone to know that I am addicted, like colleagues at work, to find out what I was doing. I'd be really ashamed and humiliated if they know.'*

The present sub-theme demonstrates that despite increased pornography consumption in society and calls for greater awareness of the phenomenon, the study participants assume that public reaction to pornography addicts would be very negative. They fear being perceived as deviants by other people. The assumption of negative reactions and moral disapproval is particularly strong with regard to pornography addiction. The other forms of addictive behaviour are perceived by the study participants to be more socially acceptable and less morally indicted. This assumption is experienced as a source of great distress by the study participants.

6.3. Summary of the findings

The identified master themes and related sub-themes bring to light the key features of the participants' lived experiences of self-perceived pornography addiction. They capture emotional, physical, behavioural, social, relational and ethical dimensions of the phenomenon, taking into account the context within which it occurs. They reveal the main concerns linked to self-perceived pornography addiction, including those resulting from the interpretation of their experiences as addiction. The following are the main features of the phenomena as described by the study participants.

The participants place their experience in the context of their life difficulties. Some participants link their experience to severe stressors or trauma that occurred in the past, while others see it being part of the on-going life struggles. The experience is not perceived as an isolated phenomenon, but is linked to afflictions the participants live with. The context within which self-perceived pornography addiction takes place is important for the participants for many of whom the search for understanding the reasons underlying their addiction is of the utmost importance.

The pursuits of emotional relief, distraction or escape are all significant aspects of the lived experience. However, emotional comfort that the participants seek to achieve through their pornography use is of a temporary nature. A brief disconnection from difficult feelings or emotional numbness, which they experience during their pornography use or immediately afterwards, are followed by intense emotional suffering expressed as self-hatred, shame and guilt. These negative feelings are exacerbated by low self-esteem and a persisting sense of worthlessness enhanced by numerous failed attempts to cease using pornography, causing the participants to see themselves as weak, inadequate and powerless.

Physical pain is part of the experience and manifests itself in many ways. The participants treat their bodies in an instrumental way by subjecting themselves to excessive masturbation, insufficient sleep and a lifestyle, which is damaging to their physicality. In some participants, physical pain is accompanied by problems with sexual performance in relations involving partners, which reinforces the overall sense of suffering.

The anticipation and experience of sexual excitement, as well as high value given to their own physical sensations play a significant role in the self-perceived pornography addicts' attachment to pornography consumption. The participants prefer to stimulate themselves sexually in a solitary manner by masturbating to pornography rather than having a direct encounter with a real partner, as they find this form of sexual conduct to be more satisfactory, convenient or causing less concern.

Relational problems are widely experienced. The participants who are in relationship do not feel fully engaged or connected with their partners. The others have problems with sustaining meaningful relationships or express no desire to pursue such relations. Participants' attention is strongly focussed on themselves, their needs, expectations or concerns, whereas little consideration is given to their partners.

The participants live an alienated existence and show little interest in other people or activities. To a high extent, their life revolves around pornography consumption. They spend a lot of time using pornography or fantasising about its consumption, which at times, causes them to neglect their obligations, underperform or put themselves at risk.

The participants are aware of the devastating effects their pornography consumption has on their lives. However, despite the full realisation of the negative consequences and their commitment to refrain from using it, they continue to engage with pornography consumption. Some participants cannot understand the paradox of re-engaging in the behaviour in spite of being aware of its negative effect on their lives. Frequently, they consider being unable to resist perceived temptations or compulsions to use pornography and experience the feeling of being out of control or lacking autonomy. Participants' belief in successfully dealing with the problems surrounding their pornography consumptions is seriously undermined.

Ambivalent attitudes are experienced in particular with regard to the ethical issues surrounding their pornography use. Concerns of a moral nature linked to the problematic nature of the pornography industry and misogyny, as well as perceived incoherence between participants' values and actual behaviour are common. The participants experience confusion as to the genuineness of their beliefs. This sense of confusion and incoherence is perceived as expressions of the lack of authenticity in the way they live, which is exacerbated by the fact they the participants commonly conceal their experience and believe they are being dishonest with others and, ultimately, with themselves.

The belief that pornography addiction is particularly hard to overcome is common. This belief is grounded in numerous failed attempts to cease using pornography, as well as neuro-biological, evolutionary or behavioural explanations of addiction that the participants appropriated.

The addiction-based explanations and perceived similarities with other types of addictive behaviour provide the participants with a frame for understanding their experience. The ranges of factors, based on which they conceptualise their experience in terms of addiction is broad. Reliance for emotional well-being, negative self-perception, disregard of long-term consequences, apparent dependence on pornography to function in life, perceived lack of control over pornography use, inability to cease viewing, sexual problems or lack of interest in sex with partners are among the factors, which affect participants' belief in being addicted to pornography.

Conceptualisation of their experiences as a form of addiction comes with an immense fear of stigma and the assumption that the true nature of their difficulties is commonly misunderstood. The participants believe that the wider public perceives pornography addiction as a self-indulgent behaviour or an excuse for renouncing responsibility for excessive pornography consumption. In the participants' eyes, however, pornography addiction is a real and genuine problem, which should be acknowledged as such.

An overview of the master themes and related sub-themes with examples of supporting statements is presented in Appendix 10.

7. Discussion

Given the gap in the qualitative understanding of pornography addiction, the present study sought to explore insights rooted in the lived-experience of individuals who self-identify as pornography addicts. The inquiry generated five master themes capturing the main features of the phenomenon, including the types of concerns it entails and a range of factors that influence one's perception of their experience in terms of addiction.

The findings reveal a multi-dimensional nature of self-perceived pornography addiction involving physical, emotional, behavioural, relational and ethical facets. These dimensions are not isolated entities. Rather, they unfold the complexity of the phenomenon by capturing its various expressions and bringing to light individual perceptions of the experience. They demonstrate what it is like to think, feel and behave as a pornography addict.

The findings of the present study will be discussed against the background of prior research. To this end, the five master themes will be linked to the theories and findings presented in the literature review with the view to establish how they contribute to knowledge. Moreover, the implications for counselling psychology and clinical practice will be discussed, followed by the recommendations for further research.

7.1. Research findings in the context of previous literature

In this section, the findings will be discussed to determine how they compare with prior research.

Master theme 1: Attempt to cope with pain and affliction

The findings captured in this master theme highlight the central role of pain and distress in the experience of self-perceived pornography addiction and reveal their various manifestations.

The most striking finding to emerge from this master theme is the experience of physical pain as a key feature of self-perceived pornography addiction. It reveals how physical pain manifests itself throughout the experience and co-exists with sexual pleasure. This is conceptually unique, as physical pain has received little attention in prior research. Unpleasant physical sensations, experienced especially upon attempts to cease engaging with addictive behaviour were addressed in the substance addiction literature, which refers to them as withdrawal symptoms (Brown, 1993). However, despite being a well-known concept in the area of substance addictions, withdrawal symptoms, in particular their physical manifestations were rarely discussed within the field of behavioural addictions (Kardefelt-Winther et al., 2017). This was also the case of pornography

addiction. Although Young (2001), Ford et al. (2012), Hall (2019) and De Alarcon et al. (2019) recognised the emotional aspects of withdrawal the physical dimension remained unexplored.

This study enhances the understanding of the physical aspects of withdrawal, by revealing unpleasant sensations such as soreness, aching, lethargy or tiredness accompanying participants' attempts to cease pornography consumption that, together with emotional reactions, make the process of quitting a challenging experience. Importantly, the findings reveal that physical pain was not restricted to withdrawal. Pain was present throughout the experience, with participants feeling physically exhausted, suffering from headaches and sleep difficulties associated with the long hours spent consuming pornography, staying up late at night or worrying excessively. Physical pain interfered with their experience of sexual excitement, as they developed symptoms such as itching, soreness or swelling of their genitals in response to excessive masturbation to the point that it impaired their physical health. To the researcher's knowledge, this is the first time the experience of pain and its physical manifestations have been revealed in relation to pornography addiction. It is important to recognize that this is owing to a comprehensive approach to the topic taken in this research. What sets this study apart from past research is that it examined the experience holistically, allowing for the analysis of the phenomenon's various dimensions, including its physical manifestations.

Furthermore, the findings cast new light on the emotional dimension of the experience, refining its understanding. Participants' testimonies consistently revealed that their experiences were rooted in a personal history of life adversity, with several participants finding a one-to-one causal relationship between their perceived addiction and specific painful situations they had faced. By demonstrating that pornography consumption was the self-perceived pornography addicts' deliberate attempt to escape emotional anguish providing them with a short-term disconnection from uncomfortable feelings and emotional numbness, the study provides unique experiential insights, while tying well with prior literature.

The findings are in tune with the assertion that addiction originates in pain and is a method of psychological coping to regulate negative emotional states (Munden, 2012; Maté, 2018). They are consistent with the idea put forth by Young (2001), Hall (2019) and Neves (2021) holding that engaging in compulsive pornography consumption is an emotion-focussed strategy with the objective to get emotional protection. In a like manner, they resonate with those psychological models of addictive behaviour presented in the literature review that emphasise the importance of affective and motivational aspects. This is especially the case of those explanations of pornography addiction that see it as a defence mechanism helping maintain a sense of detachment from difficult feelings by providing short-term benefits in the form of emotional relief (Katehakis, 2016; Birchard & Benfield, 2018). They link to the self-medication hypothesis holding that addiction soothes traumatic memories (Bakker et al., 2004). Furthermore, by demonstrating that disengagement from difficult feelings and emotional relief were linked to the experience of self-gratification to pornography, the findings resonate with the claim that sexual behaviour can be used to cope with trauma-related emotions (Gartner, 2001; Griffiths, 2012; Laier & Brand, 2014; Katehakis, 2016; Hall, 2019; Birchard & Benfield, 2018; Lew-Starowicz et al., 2020). Overall, they relate to Eysenck's (1997) assertion grounded in the psychological resource model holding that addiction develops because it serves a purpose for the individual, by showing that engagement with pornography was driven by a desire for emotional security.

Interestingly, when the findings were compared to existential literature on addiction, remarkable parallels emerged between the realities of self-perceived pornography addicts and those of substance addicts in terms of the experience of pain. The claims captured in this master theme resonate very closely with the accounts of suffering conveyed by O'Connor (2016) and Kemp (2018). As it is the case of substance addictions, suffering appears to be inherent to pornography addiction and its lived experience is intolerant of pain. Specifically, the findings are congruent with the view expressed by O'Connor (2016) in the context of alcoholism that suffering is at the same time the cause and the consequence of addiction. They also go in the same direction as the assertion made by Kemp (2018) in the context of drug dependence that suffering is experienced

not only in states of intoxication, but also in states that precede and follow them. Similarly to drug and alcohol addicts, self-perceived pornography addicts who engaged in addictive behaviour to shift their suffering away from its original source immersed in pain attached directly to their pornography consumption. In this way, they engaged in a cycle of behaviour where in an attempt to escape pain, they created additional forms of suffering, which they tried to alleviate by re-engaging with pornography consumption. By demonstrating the relevance of existential explanations of addiction, the study sheds new light on the experience that was not approached in this manner in prior literature, providing another perspective to understand self-perceived pornography addiction.

Master theme 2: Expression of constricted relatedness

The findings captured in this master theme reveal the importance of the sexual dimension and shed light on the self-pornography addicts' relational attitudes. Whereas prior research showed a strong interest in sexual aspects of high pornography consumption, in particular its links with sexual dysfunctions (Schneider, 2000; Park at al., 2016), loss of libido and reduced satisfaction from sex with partners (Zimbardo & Duncan, 2012; Voon et al., 2014; Harper & Hodgins, 2015), as well as changes in sexual tastes (Bridges, 2010), experiential insights into the sexual dimension and the ways in which self-perceived pornography addicts project themselves sexually were rarely addressed.

The most notable finding to emerge from this master theme was that anticipating and experiencing sexual arousal and self-gratification were important motivators behind their engagement with pornography, as the sexual sensations elicited by pornography were highly valued by the participants. In this regard, the finding differs from prior literature, which downplays the role of sexual motivation in pornography addiction by asserting that the experience is driven by unmet psychological needs rather than sexual pleasure (Katehakis, 2016; Lair & Brand, 2017; Hall, 2019). For this study's participants, regardless of their psychological motivations, seeking and experiencing sexual pleasure was a critical factor for engaging with pornography consumption. In

this regard, the finding ties with those explanations of problematic pornography consumption that emphasise the key role of sexual motivation such as hyper-sexuality (Kafka, 2010) and high libido (Ley et al., 2014; Williams, 2017). This is an important finding contributing to a better understanding of the factors influencing self-perceived addicts' attachment to pornography consumption.

In contrast to previous findings showing that high pornography users experience desire for sex without emotional involvement (Doidge, 2007), difficulties in establishing sexual boundaries or unrealistic expectations of partners (Bridges, 2010; Weinstein et al., 2015; Ward, 2016), this study demonstrates that the participants had no interest in sexual relations with partners or expectations of specific sexual practices, as they avoided sex entirely, preferring to masturbate to pornography. In this regard, the finding is in agreement with Zilmann and Bryant (2006), Zimbardo and Duncan (2012), Voon et al. (2014), Wilson (2014) and Harper and Hodgins (2015) who point to a loss of sexual interest in partners as a result of high exposure to pornography. Importantly, many participants regarded their express preference for pornography over sex with a partner as a clear indicator of addiction. This broadens the understanding of the factors influencing one's perception of experience as addiction in the context of high pornography consumption. Moreover, the finding shows that sexual avoidance was accompanied by emotional detachment from the existing partners or problems with forming emotional attachment with new ones, as the participants resisted closeness, which put a strain on their ability to form or sustain authentic relationships. These are new features, as previous studies almost exclusively focused on the sexual aspects of relationship problems.

Another interesting finding reveals pornography addicts' attitudes toward their own bodies, which were treated instrumentally, objectified and subjected to various physical sensations, ranging from sexual self-gratification to self-inflicted physical pain and a lifestyle damaging to the physical health in many ways. Their attitudes were also characterised by harsh self-criticisms concerning physical appearance, masculinity and sexual performance. In terms of bodily concerns, particularly

those related to sexuality, the finding complements previous literature, while going beyond what was previously known with regard to a number of aspects.

The excessiveness of masturbation to pornography as a behavioural manifestation of addiction was reported by Carnes et al. (2007), Blum et al. (2015) and Wright et al. (2021), whereas body image dissatisfaction was identified as a risk factor for developing pornography addiction by Young (2001), Skinner (2005), Weinstein (2013) and Wery et al. (2018). Although this study cannot confirm the correlational claims made in prior research, it does demonstrate that excessive masturbation as well as body image dissatisfaction were among the concerns experienced by self-perceived pornography addicts, negatively impacting their physical and mental well-being. It reveals that masturbation was an issue not only for those participants who experienced physical discomfort, but also for those who did not, yet were concerned about its excessiveness and reliance on it to detach from difficult emotions. This links to the claim about masturbation becoming problematic when it is paired with distress (Kraus et al., 2018). Moreover, in some participants, masturbation was viewed as problematic due to negative attitudes toward sexuality, such as guilt over a lack of sexual desire for a partner or shame about certain erotic interests. This links to the claim made by Leonhardt et al. (2017) according to whom the feelings of guilt and shame experienced by self-perceived pornography addicts are the result of negative personal attitudes associated with sexual expression.

When it comes to the participants' criticisms of their masculinity and sexual self-efficacy, the study substantiates the claims about high pornography consumers finding their physical appearance, sexual performance and responsiveness deficient, which has an impact on their behaviour, attitudes and self-esteem (Peter & Valkenburg, 2011). This is echoed in prior findings by Bridges (2010), as well as Sommet and Berrent (2022) who found that high pornography users doubted their sexual competence. Similar to their findings, the participants attributed their concerns about lacking sexual competence to unfavourable comparisons with pornography actors, who were perceived as sexually more attractive and skilled, leading to feelings of inadequacy. This links to the assertion based on social learning and sexual scripting theories by Hogben and Byrne

(1998) holding that through social learning, pornographic scripts can be used as a framework for users' sexual expectations and real-life sexual interactions. The finding also connects to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) holding that the feeling of satisfaction is influenced by comparisons between one's own and others' situations, for instance with regard to attractiveness, which may lead to feeling dissatisfied and engaging in problematic behaviours.

Interestingly, the study reveals that self-perceived pornography addicts projected themselves sexually in a self-centred manner. They focused on their own bodily sensations, feelings or concerns about how they would appear to others in hypothetical situations or relationships. Their thinking, behaviour and emotions were all directed at themselves. For instance, it was more convenient to satisfy themselves alone because it did not require them to consider their partners' needs or expectations. These are new experiential insights that were not reported in prior research. Although self-centred thinking and a lack of consideration for others may be linked to prior literature suggesting a high prevalence of narcissistic traits in pornography addicts (Egan & Parmar, 2013; Katehahis, 2016; Birchard & Benfield, 2018), no other traits characteristic of narcissism, such as an inflated sense of self-importance or entitlement (Jauk & Dietrich, 2019) were observed in the participants. Therefore, despite some similarities, it cannot be concluded that the finding is clearly aligned with previous literature.

Together, the above findings resonate with the existential observations on the basic tenets of addiction made by Straus (1966) and Kemp (2011) who posit that addiction is a form of *'being-in-the world'* characterised by the attitude of withdrawal, alienation and narrow world-relations, involving the shift in focus from the world to the addict's body. They demonstrate that self-perceived pornography addiction is experienced as a diminished engagement with others, where pornography serves as a substitute for intimate relations.

Master theme 3: Expression of a fragile sense of self

The findings captured in this master theme reveal intense emotional suffering as a key feature of self-perceived pornography addiction. Whereas previous literature examined correlational links

between high exposure to pornography and a range of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression or low self-esteem (Weinstein, 2013; Doornwaard et al., 2016; Laier & Brand, 2017; Perry, 2017; Wery et al., 2018), there is surprisingly little in-depth discussion of emotional difficulties, negative self-affect and adverse self-beliefs. Qualitative studies by Cavaglion (2008) and Palazzolo (2020) point to emotional distress as a core feature of pornography addiction, which they consider a symptom of pornography addiction as a mental health disorder. The present study cannot lend support to this view because it did not approach self-perceived pornography addiction as a mental health dysfunction. Nevertheless, it can demonstrate high levels of self-directed negative emotions and hostile self-perceptions, revealing self-loathing, feeling of insecurity and beliefs about inadequacy of one's physical appearance or sexual abilities, as well as perceived ineptitude to use pornography in a *'normal'* way, indicating self-perceived pornography addicts lack a global healthy sense of self. Taken together, these findings are in tune with the idea put forward by Maté (2018) that addicts have a sense of '*insufficient self*', feel '*incomplete*' and believe to be a '*failure*' (p. 36). They are also in agreement with Kemp's (2018) assertion that implicit and explicit criticisms to the self are the core aspects of addiction, as low self-esteem and high levels of self-hatred were among the keys features of the participants' experiences.

The findings also substantiate previous research suggesting that low self-esteem experienced by pornography addicts is influenced by shame associated with a lack of acceptance of their behaviour, a dichotomy between values and actual behaviour, as well as perceived inability to break the cycle of addiction (Katehakis, 2016; Birchard & Benfield, 2018; Hall, 2019). However, in some aspects, they differ from previous findings. Whereas prior literature situates the feeling of shame in the so-called *'regret phase'* that occurs between the *'acting out'* and the *'reconstitution'* phases of addiction (Hall, 2019), this was not the case of this study's participants. Although perceived inability to cease pornography consumption and concerns about negative consequences bolstering shame were also part of their experience, this study provides a more complex representation of how shame and other negative self-perceptions on the affective and cognitive levels manifest themselves in self-perceived pornography addiction.

Firstly, they cast doubt on the claim that shame or other self-directed hostile feelings and beliefs can be reduced to a phase of the experience. In contrast to earlier literature (Hall, 2019), the findings demonstrate that self-directed adverse feelings and judgements, which are for many participants the fundamental aspect of their problems, are present throughout the experience, in some participants in an almost incessant way. Moreover, they go beyond the context of pornography use, as in some participants, negative feelings and adverse cognitions directed towards the self, have been experienced since the early years of their lives, which indicates a long-lasting sense of worthlessness that is not solely related to their engagement with pornography. This highlights the importance of understanding the entirety of a person's difficulties, as postulated by Längle (2014), O'Connor (2016) and Kemp (2018).

An important novel finding reveals a generalised belief among the participants that in comparison with the other types of addictive behaviour, pornography addiction is particularly hard to overcome. Interestingly, participants demonstrated the understanding of biological explanations of the dopaminergic effects of pornographic stimuli on the brain disclosed by neurological research (Doidge, 2009; Voon et al., 2014; Kuhn & Gallinat, 2014; Love et al., 2015; Blanchard & Corazza, 2018) upon which they based their beliefs. In some cases, their beliefs about the power of pornography were rooted in the evolutionary-based need for sex. This bears some resemblance to the findings about men's biological susceptibility to pornography addiction reported by Taylor (2020) and Burke and Haltom (2020). This is an important finding indicating that those who conceptualise their problems with pornography consumption as addiction respond to their experience in a way, which is significantly restricted by their understanding of the concept.

Master theme 4: Expression of inauthentic existence

This master theme reveals self-perceived pornography addicts' realisation of the inauthenticity of their existence, involving conflicting attitudes and states of mind, tensions and ambivalences, going beyond their relationship with pornography. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, these concerns were not addressed in prior literature on pornography addiction.

A rather unexpected finding that emerged from this master theme was that self-perceived pornography addicts were aware of the deceptive nature of their experience, which commonly involved concealing their engagement with pornography, dishonesty and living against their values. When the finding was contrasted with existential literature on substance addictions, the relevance of certain constructs such as truth and its denial, self-deception, moral responsibility and ethical values revealed by Yalom (1980), Wurm (2015), O'Connor (2016), and Kemp (2018) became apparent. Most importantly, in agreement with O'Connor (2016) who emphasised the significance of self-fulfilment and meaningful life in addiction recovery instead of abstinence, the finding reveals that a desire for a more authentic and satisfying life, rather than an aspiration to free themselves from their perceived dependence on pornography, was a catalyst for change for many participants. This is an important finding, which shifts the focus of recovery away from the non-use paradigm toward broader considerations of authenticity and meaningfulness postulated by Yalom (1980), O'Connor (2016) and Kemp (2018).

A surprising finding was that the participants had little awareness that their engagement with pornography consumption was the result of their choices. The participants pointed to the irrational nature of their conduct or them not being their *'normal'* selves. However, they appeared to be unaware of the volitional aspect of their actions. When compared to previous findings, this study does not back up Längle's (2014) claim that addiction is an autonomous act where an addict can choose how to respond. From the participants' standpoint, the cravings and compulsions to consume pornography were beyond their control, leaving no room for choice. If there was a choice, it was dominated by the primacy of the immediate *'now'* over the long-term implications, since the findings reveal changing attitudes where a decision to watch pornography, which occurred without much consideration for the future, was followed by concerns about the long-term consequences. In this regard, the participants' interpretations of their experiences align with choice-based psychological explanations of addiction holding that addicts make decisions that prioritise immediate benefits over long-term costs (West & Brown, 2013), as well as cognitive explanations

of problematic pornography consumption pointing to impulsive decision-making, which prioritises short-term gains over long-term ones (Castro-Calvo et al., 2021).

The study also reveals that consuming pornography despite being aware of the negative consequences was one of the primary reasons the participants believed to be addicted. This links to the assertion made by Skinner (2005), Wilson (2014), Weinstein et al. (2015) and Munder (2017) according to whom the awareness of substantial harm rather than the volume or frequency of consumption is the most significant marker of addiction. This view was supported by the participants' interpretations of their experiences, who were perplexed by the irrational nature of their behaviour bordering *'insanity'* and their incapacity to react to it in a sensible way. This is an important finding showing that the perceived inability to respond adequately to the problems may be among the most difficult aspects in addiction recovery.

Master theme 5: Appropriating the addiction narrative

This master theme reveals critical perspectives on a range of highly contentious issues related to the application of the addiction paradigm to problematic pornography consumption.

The most important finding to emerge from this master theme, especially when contrasted with the views expressed by Ley et al. (2014) and Williams (2017) who hold that pornography addiction is not a real phenomenon, was the participants' belief that addiction was real to them. This finding indicates that the concept of addiction helped them understand their experience by providing explanations that, in their opinion, appropriately reflected the nature of their difficulties. The finding demonstrates that people who self-identify as pornography addicts would like their problems to be acknowledged as genuine. The significance of this aspect of the experience should not be undermined. Whilst for Ley et al. (2014), Grubbs et al. (2015), Williams (2017) or Neves (2021) addiction is not a valid construct when applied to problematic pornography consumption, it shows that some people feel addicted and find the concept helpful in understanding their difficulties.

Furthermore, the study reveals that those who conceptualise their experience in terms of addiction appropriate certain explanations associated with the concept, which affect their perception of themselves. This was seen in several participants who accepted the idea that learning and conditioning mechanisms, rather than them, were driving their behaviour. In this regard, the finding links to the concept of self-construct (Du Plock & Fischer, 2005), which draws attention to the impact of self-labels on people's responses to life events. It is in agreement with the view expressed by existential authors such as Guignon (1998), Wurm (2003), Kemp and Butler (2014) who hold that the preconceived ideas linked to the concept of addiction influence the meaning attached to the experience by those who perceive themselves as addicts. This is an important finding indicating that subjective perceptions associated with the concept of addiction may reinforce self-perceived pornography users' feelings of powerlessness and undermine their self-efficacy.

Interestingly, contrary to Wurum (2003) and Voros (2009), who argue that framing one's experience as addiction discourages responsibility, this study does not support the view that the concept of addiction inherently implies renunciation of accountability. Instead, the finding suggests that personal responsibility is embedded in the meaning of experience and that self-perception as an addict is not an excuse for renouncing it. Therapeutically, this is a significant finding with the potential to promote change.

Another important finding is that self-perceived pornography addicts believed that the *'true'* nature of their difficulties was misunderstood. They felt alienated from society and deplored the lack of awareness of the problems associated with pornography consumption, in particular the assumption of hedonism. This finding indicates that pornography addiction was perceived as a societal problem. It echoes the idea put forth by Kemp and Butler (2014) who hold that addicts feel rejected by society and perceive this rejection as an act of harm against them. It also links with the views expressed by Miller and Carroll (2006) and Alexander (2011) highlighting the importance of reducing addicts' alienation and addressing their need to belong. This is an important finding stressing the role of social factors and their influence on perceptions of addictive experience.

Importantly, the study reveals that the fear of ostracism and adverse public reaction was common among the participants for whom the presumed societal condemnation of their *'pervert'* behaviour was of great concern. The issue of stigma was addressed in previous literature by Lee and Mysk (2004), Kemp and Butler (2014) and Williams (2017) who argue that negative perceptions are inherent to the concept of addiction. What distinguishes the findings of this study from the previous ones, is the perspective, from which stigma was approached. While previous research focused on society's moral biases and negative attitudes toward addicts (Clarkson & Kopaczewski, 2013; Lang & Rosenberg, 2017), this study reveals fear and anticipation of stigma from the addicts' perspective. They demonstrate that moral judgments and condemning attitudes were assumed rather than experienced, as no participants reported any factual instance of such adverse public attitudes. The finding highlights that concerns about stigma were highly disturbing for the participants who believed that pornography addiction is more stigmatised than any other type of addictive behaviour. This is an important finding demonstrating that anticipation of social rejection has a deep impact on self-perceived addicts' attitudes.

7.2. Implications for counselling psychology and clinical practice

With pornography consumption on the rise, practitioners are likely to encounter more clients seeking treatment for problems related to their pornography use (Sniewski et al., 2018; Carnes & Adam, 2020). By helping to get a better sense of the lived experience from the self-perceived addicts' perspective, rather than a theoretical standpoint, this research not only adds to the understanding of the phenomenon but also has the potential to inform clinical practice. Although generalisation from an IPA study comes with a caveat discussed in section 3.3, certain implications for clinical practice and counselling psychology can be suggested.

Therapeutic applications

The findings of this study are relevant to clinical practice, as they can help practitioners recognise and better understand the difficulties faced by clients for whom pornography consumption is problematic. This is important in light of many practitioners' stated unwillingness to work with

this client group due to a lack of knowledge of the difficulties involved (Schneider, 2000; Hinman, 2013: Short et al., 2016; Sniewski et al., 2018). It is also possible that this study's findings may challenge practitioners' ideas about the nature and the severity of the issues involved, helping them reassess their assumptions. In the absence of guidance and evidence-based recommendations for practitioners (Blanchard & Corazza, 2018; Blaszczynski, 2019), experiential findings generated by this study can give them ideas about the issues to be explored in therapy. Until the therapist has a clear understanding of their client's concerns, the findings can serve as a starting point for further exploration. This would be especially helpful in the early stages of therapy or for practitioners who are unsure on how to proceed when working with this client group.

The study's foremost clinical implication concerns the therapeutic objectives. Prior literature shows that the primary goal in therapy is to help problematic pornography users cease or reduce their consumption, while preventing relapse (Crosby & Twohig, 2016; Sniewski et al., 2018; Blaszczynski, 2019; Briken, 2020). However, self-perceived pornography addiction, as demonstrated in this study, is a complex phenomenon including a variety of intra and interpersonal difficulties affecting many aspects of life. Abstinence from pornography was not the goal in and of itself for the participants. Their aspirations extended beyond a simple aspiration to be free of pornography and toward living a more authentic life. The implication of this finding is that the focus of therapy should go beyond abstaining from pornography use toward the issues that impair overall quality of life.

Furthermore, the study shows that self-perceived pornography addicts experienced a range of concerns that are similar to those experienced in other types of addiction, for instance, a deep sense of suffering and worthlessness, reliance on addictive behaviour for emotional regulation and disempowering attitudes (Miller, 2015). The implication of this finding is that, in the absence of evidence-based therapeutic recommendations (Hinman, 2013; Sniewski et al., 2018), addiction therapy approaches should be used to address those issues that are common to various types of addiction. These issues are well understood in addiction therapy, which employs a variety of models and strategies, with the strongest evidence for practices targeting cognitive- behavioural,

psychodynamic and motivational mechanisms (Miller, 2015). Depending on the theoretical framework of the practitioner, addiction therapy approaches should be applied to support self-perceived pornography addicts, by addressing internal and external triggers to engage with pornography consumption, reducing negative self-beliefs and learning how to cope with difficult emotions to reduce their motivation to engage with pornography consumption.

The study also identifies a range of challenges that are unique to self-perceived pornography addiction, requiring specific interventions.

Firstly, it reveals concerns about pain, instrumental treatment of the addict's body and maintaining a lifestyle that is damaging to the physical health in many ways, as well as critical attitudes towards their physical appearance, masculinity and sexual abilities. These findings inform practitioners that they should be sensitive to the physical aspects and support their clients in coping with their fears, while encouraging them to reflect critically on their attitudes towards their bodies and lifestyles. The therapeutic process should include re-evaluating the client's way of life and the way in which they approach their physicality. Various methods can be used to address harmful beliefs with the view to construct perceptions that are more positive. For instance, CBT-based approaches such as schema therapy were found effective in changing counter-productive beliefs and assumptions in addiction (Miller, 2015). In the case of clients who are presented with body dysmorphic symptoms, reflective methods may be used to reinforce their self-esteem and form new understandings of themselves, for instance by shifting the focus of attention from the appearance or sexual abilities to personal qualities (Grant et al., 2019). Self-compassion strategies stimulating self-kindness and decreasing self-judgment, guided meditation or mindfulness can be used to enhance self-esteem and generate a positive body image (Carnes & Adams, 2020). Regardless of the modality, therapy should aim to restructure the client's negative reference frames. In this way, practitioners can help their clients shift away from therapeutically counterproductive negative self-beliefs towards more de-shaming and positive attitudes about their physical way of being, ultimately strengthening the sense of self.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of the sexual dimension of the experience and the need for it to be addressed in therapy. In order to overcome clients' reliance on pornography for sexual purposes, clinicians ought to assist them in understanding the sexual aspect of their engagement with pornography and identifying such forms of sexual expression, which they would find beneficial for their physical and emotional well-being. The client should be encouraged to develop an increased awareness of the reasons why pornography became their main or sometimes the only means for expressing themselves sexually. For instance, this study shows that some self-perceived pornography addicts were brought up in a way, which makes them feel ashamed about sexuality. It also demonstrates that some participants felt uncomfortable and were reluctant to interact with women. Such attitudes can undermine their self-confidence, inhibit sexual expressions or make it difficult for them to express their sexuality in a satisfying way. When working with clients who struggle with certain aspects of their sexuality, therapy should include reflective examination of the client's earlier experiences, which might have affected their attitudes. The therapist should help the client understand how these attitudes developed and how they might have contributed to their use of pornography as the main form of sexual expression. Interventions that help clients understand their sexual identity, experiences and difficulties can help them overcome their negative expectations and avoidance of real-life sexual relationships.

It is worth noting that the self-perceived pornography addicts in this study were first exposed to pornography when they were six to fifteen years old, with an average age of just over eight. When early exposure to pornography is relevant, therapists should encourage their clients to explore its impact on their understanding of sexuality and the ways in which they express themselves sexually. It is essential to take into account the issues, which present challenges to the client, for instance negative thoughts about sex, unrealistic expectations or confusion. Various therapeutic modalities may be employed to facilitate the process. For instance, analytically oriented sex therapy combining psychodynamic, psychoanalytic and cognitive-behavioural elements was shown effective in addressing problems in this area (Montgomery, 2008). In the case of clients who experienced trauma associated with sexuality, therapy should include interventions aiming at the

reduction of the impact of negative experiences. For instance, EMDR-based techniques were proved effective when dealing with distress associated with sex (Cox, 2007).

Furthermore, the present research shows that self-perceived addicts experience relational problems marked by restraint openness, self-focus attention and avoidance of emotional and physical closeness with partners. These findings inform practitioners that therapeutic work with clients who express a strong preference for pornography over relations with others ought to include critical re-examination of their relational attitudes. To this end, the worth of one's pornography consumption devoid of emotional and physical connection with another person should be challenged. This can be done by questioning the limits of emotional and physical detachment, for instance, by re-evaluating with the client what they are missing in terms of emotional and physical intimacy with another person. Moreover, the assessment of the effects of the relational attitudes on the client's life can be helpful in promoting change. A range of techniques can be used to enhance the client's abilities for greater openness and engagement with others. For instance, motivational interviewing can help them examine their ambivalences and conflicts surrounding pornography consumption and their impact on openness towards others (Carnes & Adam, 2020). In the case of clients who are in relationships, couples therapy can facilitate addressing the problems caused by pornography consumption for the relationship (Daniels & Farley, 2022).

In order to increase the client's motivation for engaging with others, they should be assisted in exploring the value of relationships, including the worth of closeness and intimacy. The client's restraint openness towards others can be transformed by directing their attention towards the benefits of emotional and physical intimacy, emphatic inter-personal attitudes and meaningful relations. Enhancing the client's understanding of their relational way of being should be part of therapeutic work. Their self-awareness can be increased by looking into factors, which may affect their attitudes. These factors are highly individualised and may include issues such as anxiety about interacting with other people or having sex with a real person, problems with trusting another person, social awkwardness, fear of expositing one's vulnerability or losing control. To achieve a change in the attitudes and the on-going patterns of behaviour therapists should assist their clients

in opening up, improving their ability to trust others or finding ways to relieve their anxiety. In therapy, the client should be offered the opportunity to discuss their fears. For instance, the existential-humanistic approaches can be used to help the client to recognise and release their resistances (Wright, 2013), enhancing their abilities to engage in healthy, adult relationships.

The study also reveals that self-perception as a pornography addict entails a range of assumptions, which are likely to undermine self-efficacy. The belief that pornography addiction is particularly difficult to overcome must be addressed when working with this client group. For instance, clients appropriating neuro-biological explanations of their behaviour might benefit from psycho-education based on research, which suggests that even long-lasting neuro-biological changes are reversible and are not deterministic over the way one behaves (Doidge, 2007). When such beliefs are based on an evolutionary understanding of sex as a primary need, as it was the case of some participants, clients might benefit from therapeutic approaches advancing that human sexuality does not have to be understood solely in terms of a biological activity. For instance, existential perspectives on human sexuality challenging biology and culture-based deterministic ways of thinking about sex can assist practitioners in questioning their clients' assumptions (Smith-Pickard & Swynnerton, 2005). Moreover, bringing attention to the testimonies of those users who managed to overcome their difficulties can be helpful in challenging therapeutically counter-productive beliefs about the overbearing power of pornography.

The study also highlights high levels of anxiety experienced by self-perceived pornography addicts about harsh public reactions and more stigma being attached to this form of addiction than any other. The validity of these assumptions should be challenged in therapy. To this end, rational strategies can be used, for instance, based on arguments such as widespread consumption of pornography, changing socio-cultural norms, lack of research substantiating this stance or examination of factual instances of stigmatisation in clients' personal experiences. By questioning the evidence, the therapist can help their clients reduce their absolutistic thinking and develop perspectives, which would be more balanced.

This study highlights that self-perceived pornography addicts find it distressing that the complexity of their experiences is allegedly misunderstood. They deplore the lack of awareness of the true nature of their difficulties, in particular perceived assumption of hedonism and insufficient attention to the negative consequences of pornography consumption. These attitudes are likely to enhance feelings of alienation and perception of not being taken seriously. Therefore, regardless of the practitioner's position as to the appropriateness of the addiction framework, when working with this client group, they should gain a deep understanding of highly individual contextual factors that led their clients to conceptualise their problems as addiction and be attentive to the effect of self-perception. Underestimating client's understandings or minimising the seriousness of their problems in therapy can be very frustrating for those who struggle with pornography consumption (Schneider, 2000). Thus, it is essential for the clients' stories to be heard to help them create more empowering attitudes.

Participants' testimonies reveal that being in therapy with other people who experience similar problems provided them with a sense of cohesiveness. Thus, therapists should facilitate interaction among clients for whom group therapy could become a platform for exchanging their experiences and fostering supportive social interaction, as well as a sense of acceptance and belonging (Yalom, 1980). Taking part in group therapy would help the client realise that they are not alone with their problems and could provide them with a sense of value by helping other group members. Learning from each other, becoming aware of the perspectives of the other group members or their coping strategies can be inspiring and give hope to the client.

This study also shows that the way of living of people who conceptualise their pornography use as addiction is characterised by tensions, ambivalent attitudes, confusion and incoherence, in particular with regard to their identity and values. Exploring these tensions and conflicts has the potential to be therapeutically transformative (Van Deurzen, 2012) in particular in light of the desire expressed by self-perceived pornography addicts of this study for a new way of living that would not be focused on pornography consumption. Based on this finding, therapists are advised to include considerations of broader world-views such ethics, consistency of moral beliefs, respect

for the self and others. Various avenues for a more authentic and meaningful life can be brought forth for clients' consideration. For instance, in a therapeutic dialogue with the client, the practitioner can explore how their tensions could be meaningfully transformed. As observed in this study, some self-perceived pornography addicts expressed concerns for pornography actors or other pornography users. Clients' altruistic attitudes, which emerged from this research as a factor promoting motivation for change, may support healing.

Implications for counselling psychology

Self-perceived pornography addiction received little attention in the field of counselling psychology (Hinman, 2013). Thus, in addition to the clinical implications, in light of the paucity of research in this area, this study's contribution to the field of counselling psychology consists in approaching the phenomenon from the phenomenological perspective. In this way, this study supplements explanatory research by providing another outlook for understanding the phenomenon. Together with previous research, it offers a more comprehensive view of self-perceived pornography addiction, which can be of value to practitioners, trainee therapists, researchers and policy-makers in the area of healthcare.

A need for research-based therapies to support this client group is well documented in literature (Crosby & Twohig, 2016; Sniewski et al., 2018; Lotfi et al., 2021). Experiential insights generated by this study can inform the direction of research on therapeutic approaches. This study highlights the complexities of the experience indicating the need to expand the range of clinical trial outcome measures beyond those that target decreases in pornography consumption (Crosby & Twohig, 2016; Sniewski et al., 2018; Blaszczynski, 2019; Briken, 2020). Thus, outcome research should better reflect the needs and expectations of this client group that go beyond pornography abstinence, by taking into account other dimensions of the experience revealed in this research, such as relational functioning, self-perception and inconsistency of one's values and actual behaviour. Evidence that is more diverse would help provide comprehensive support to this client group.

Guidelines and recommendations for practitioners that are yet to be developed would also benefit from a qualitative perspective. Despite some interest of public authorities in the problematic side of pornography consumption, as evidenced by a recent report by the Government Equalities Office (2020), support for those who struggle with pornography use received little attention in healthcare. To better support problematic pornography consumers, counselling research should engage in policy development and complement efficacy research by providing practice-oriented knowledge. By improving experiential knowledge of the phenomenon, this study can make a small contribution to the development of practice-oriented recommendations to support this client group.

7.3. Recommendations for further research

Given the scarcity of qualitative research on self-perceived pornography addiction, more research is warranted to understand the complexity of the phenomenon and the way in which it can be addressed in therapy.

Firstly, the homogeneity of samples is a recurring concern in studies looking into problematic pornography use, casting doubt on the validity of their findings (Crosby & Twohig, 2016; Sniewski et al., 2018; Blaszczynski, 2019; Briken, 2020). The samples are usually small and made up of male Caucasian individuals from the same geographic area (Ogier-Bloomer, 2021). In a like manner, the current study's findings were drawn on a group of heterosexual White men of a similar socio-cultural background living in London. Since human sexual behaviour is influenced by a wide range of biological, social, psychological and cultural factors (Lewczuk et al., 2017), future studies should be based on samples that are more diverse in terms of ethnic and cultural origins, as well as age, sex and sexual orientation. Given cross-cultural differences in pornography consumption patterns linked to factors such as age, gender, religion or access to the internet (Rowland & Uribe, 2020), studies involving individuals from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds who may have different perspectives on sex and pornography can provide different insights adding to the understanding of the phenomenon. Especially, research demonstrates large sex-related differences in terms of lifetime exposure to pornography, emotional reactivity to pornographic stimuli and

masturbation frequency (Wierzba et al., 2015). Differences between men and women were also observed in the expression of problems related to pornography consumption (Lewczuk et al., 2020). Given the scarcity of research into problematic pornography consumption involving women, more studies based on female samples are recommended. Exploring possible parallels and differences in the perceptions of experiences in various groups of self-perceived pornography addicts would allow researchers to determine whether the phenomenon is understood differently depending on the type of group. Such research could be useful for clinical practice, as it would make it possible to adapt therapy to the needs of a particular client group. Furthermore, research involving different samples would allow researchers to test the transferability of findings from one study group to other contexts.

Secondly, given significant gaps in the understandings of the concept of pornography addiction (Kraus et al., 2014; Duffy et al., 2016; De Alarcon et al., 2019; Taylor, 2020), further qualitative inquiry into the meaning of addiction in the context of problematic pornography use is recommended. Qualitative studies by Cavaglion, (2008) and Taylor (2020) demonstrate a high degree of ambiguity and inconsistent interpretations of the meaning of addiction, indicating a need for more research. In particular, deeper knowledge of the factors that affect ones' belief in being addicted to pornography is needed for clinical practice. Comparative research involving problematic pornography users who see their experience as addiction and problematic pornography users with other understandings is suggested to this end. Given that the present study captures the understandings of the participants' experiences at a certain moment of their problematic pornography use future research could examine how conceptualisation of the problem as a form of addiction evolves over a longer period. A longitudinal study would allow exploring how the understanding of the experience changes and how people who consider themselves to be addicted to pornography reconstruct themselves over a longer period. Getting insights into changing meanings and attitudes would allow taking the entire journey to healing into account when working with this client group.

Thirdly, since the findings of the present research are based on a sample whose members were in therapy for addiction to pornography, it cannot be excluded that the participants' perspectives of their experiences were influenced by the lens through which therapy was delivered. Theories assist people in making sense of the events they experience. In therapy, they provide a coherent framework for viewing human behaviour and therapeutic change (Wampold, 2019). However, the theoretical frame and explanations of human behaviour underpinning therapy may emphasise specific constructs or direct the participants towards particular dimensions or aspects of the experience. Given that theoretical orientations the participants were presented with in therapy may have influenced how they make sense of their experiences, it is suggested that future research be done into the reality of self-perceived pornography addicts who are not in therapy and thus are less likely to be affected by theoretical explanations. Such research has the potential to uncover new dimensions and understandings of the phenomenon that go beyond the preconceived notions associated with a particular therapeutic modality. Comparative research with individuals in and out of therapy would be another possibility for better understanding the impact of therapeutic explanations on how self-perceived pornography addicts make sense of their experiences.

Finally, the researcher fully supports previous calls (Minarcik, 2016; Sniewski et al., 2018; Blaszczynki, 2019; Bothe et al., 2021; Ogier-Bloomer, 2021) for research into the effectiveness of therapeutic approaches to support clients who present with issues related to their pornography consumption. Future research is also needed to inform practitioners training programmes and healthcare policy.

8. Reflective evaluation of the research

The final step of the research design consists in evaluating its validity and quality. The evaluation includes an assessment of the research's merits and efforts to achieve its objectives, an analysis of its strengths and weaknesses, as well as its broader impact. The evaluation of the present research was carried out by the researcher, who followed the guidelines for evaluating qualitative research study by Coughlan and Cronin (2007). It is composed of an assessment against Yardley's (2000)

evaluation criteria for qualitative research, an analysis of limitations and strengths and reflective considerations concerning the research process and findings.

8.1. Evaluation against Yardley's criteria for qualitative research

This section presents how the criteria for evaluation of qualitative research proposed by Yardley (2000) outlined in section 3.3 were satisfied throughout the research process.

Sensitivity to context

The conceptual and theoretical framework of the research was identified, described and discussed. The researcher explored the socio-cultural context within which her research is situated, including the controversies surrounding problematic pornography use conceptualised as a form of addiction.

Understanding the broader context within which the present study is placed was facilitated by an exhaustive review of the literature on the subject. The consulted literature included primary and secondary sources of a recent origin. The researcher consulted literature from various disciplines, including psychology, biology, neuroscience and sociology. In this way, she became familiar with a wide range of theoretical standpoints and a multi-disciplinary character of the researched phenomenon. In conducting her literature review, the researcher strived to offer a balanced critical analysis, taking into account possible implications of a given theoretical framework on the understanding of the investigated phenomenon. The researcher considers that she thoroughly explored the literature of relevance to her study, which allowed her to understand well the setting of her own research.

The more specific context concerned the sensitivity of the investigated topic. In particular, the researcher had to take into account the possibility that the participants might find it difficult to discuss personal issues. Thus, before the interviews, she spent some time building rapport with participants, which would facilitate communication. The researcher considers that she achieved this goal. Moreover, throughout the interviews, she was sensitive to the fact that some participants may have felt embarrassed disclosing certain behaviours, beliefs and emotions. She strived to

maintain an understanding attitude and an empathetic approach. She offered the possibility to all the participants to cease the interview, should they feel too uncomfortable to continue or be otherwise unwilling to discuss their experience.

Commitment and rigour

The researcher considers that she approached her study with commitment and rigour throughout the research process. In the initial phase, she spent substantial time reading around and consulting clinicians who work with people experiencing problems with their pornography use. She also approached a private practice specialising in sex and pornography addiction therapy to explore the possibility to host the study. In addition, the researcher followed a dedicated training for doctoral students to improve her skills in applying IPA. She thoroughly prepared her research proposal and the request for ethical clearance, which were respectively approved in November 2018 and April 2019.

As explained in section 4.1, the researcher considers that the selected sample, in terms of its size and composition, was appropriate to address the research questions. It provided her with a vast amount of data allowing an in-depth exploration of the experiences. The researcher was critically reviewing her findings throughout the research process. She was regularly interacting with her supervisors to enhance the thoroughness of her research.

Transparency and coherence

The research paradigm was outlined and the consistency between the philosophical perspective guiding the study, the methodology and the method chosen to carry it out were explained in chapter 3. The arguments supporting the choice of IPA and its advantages over other methods, which could have been used, were discussed.

The research design and its consecutive stages were detailed. The researcher followed these steps in a systematic way and documented the research process. Data collection, including the circumstances under which it was gathered, and the approach to coding were outlined. The

analytical steps and strategies were described. Each step of data analysis is illustrated with a relevant appendix. The methods used by the researcher allow data tracing all the way through.

Throughout the narrative account, the researcher was systematically supporting her statements with the quotations and references to the line numbers in the participants' transcripts to ground her interpretations in the data. Attention was paid to include the quotations from all the participants and ensure a suitable degree of detail, which can be traced to a given participant. The prevalence of the claims captured in the identified master themes and the sub-themes across the study group was noted. Convergences, divergences and nuances observed with regard to the quality of the experiences were presented. Overall, the researcher considers that the research process was coherent and transparent.

Impact and importance

As outlined in the literature review, despite an increased interest in the topic of pornography addiction, its phenomenological understanding has been under-explored. Thus, this research's findings help fill this gap. The relationship between prior research and the findings, as well as their contribution to the state of knowledge of self-perceived pornography addiction are presented and discussed in section 7.1.

The researcher considers that the topic she chose for her study is worthy and of concern to therapists, researchers and policy makers, as well as individuals presenting problems with pornography use. From the clinical perspective, there is limited guidance for practitioners and there are many disagreements about the nature of the phenomenon. In this context, the research might give an impulse to encourage more reflection on policy informing clinical practice, which demonstrates the potential for practical application of the research. Moreover, the researcher hopes that her study will stimulate future research in order to increase the understanding of the phenomenon and help develop suitable therapeutic approaches.

8.2. Limitations and strengths

This section presents the researcher's reflections on the limitations and the strengths of her study.

Limitations

Certain limitations stem from the intrinsic characteristics of the chosen method, while others from the way the researcher applied the method and reached her conclusions. The limitations of IPA as a research method are discussed in section 3.3. This section builds on that discussion and outlines those limitations that are most pertinent to the present study.

It has been acknowledged that difficulties with conveying thoughts can be a limiting factor in an IPA study, given the importance of language in capturing participants' experiences (Willig, 2008). This limitation was observed in the present research where the participants demonstrated various aptitudes to articulate the reality of their experiences. The communication styles and the clarity of messages varied within the sample. Some participants were more eloquent and expressive than others. They discussed at length various aspects of their experiences, were more descriptive and used metaphors or comparisons, whereas others answered the questions succinctly. Noon (2018) asserts that certain aspects of the realities of those participants who struggle with expressive articulation may not have been revealed. Thus, reaching experiential world of such participants may have been difficult for the researcher, resulting in their experiences not being sufficiently taken into account. There is also a risk that the researcher gave more importance to the narratives of those participants who were better able to communicate the complexity of their experiences, which might have resulted in the research findings being prejudiced in favour of these participants.

Another limitation of the study is the varying quality of the data the researcher had at her disposal, which might have resulted in certain aspects of the experiences being prioritised over others. According to Larkin et al. (2012), the quality of data rather than its quantity allows generating insightful IPA analysis. The quality of the data provided by the participants of this study differed markedly. While some participants had very clear ideas concerning the meaning of their

experiences, others were in the process of acquiring a better understanding of their engagement with pornography. For instance, some participants concerned themselves with the factual aspects of their pornography consumption, while others were much more reflective about the meaning attached to various aspects of their reality. Such different approaches to their experiences affected the quality of the data, in particular its consistency, as some participants extensively elaborated on a given aspect of their experience, while others revealed little or no detail at all. As a result, it is possible that the researcher gave more weight to the narratives of those participants who offered more reflective and in-depth insights.

Furthermore, it has been acknowledged that the generalisability and transferability of the findings generated by IPA research to other situations remain uncertain due to the sample characteristics, in particular its small size (Tuffour, 2017). This is also true of the present study, which used a small-scale sample and produced results that are context-specific and limited with regard to their generalisability. The sample's demographic homogeneity in terms of gender, race, socioeconomic, and cultural background, as well as the fact that all of the participants came from the same therapeutic setting, may have exacerbated this limitation. As a result, the findings produced by this research are pertinent to the study sample, but are at best illuminative with regard to other people experiencing problems with pornography consumption and self-identifying as addicts.

The researcher's limited experience with the method she chose for her research could have also been a limiting factor, in particular in terms of her interpretative abilities. Gadamer (2007) used the concept of '*historically effected consciousness'* to highlight uncertainty of one's interpretive understanding, which is influenced by the historical context such as previous interpretations, as well as the interpreter's abilities, questions or concerns (Van Niekerk, 2002). Although there is no *'right'* or *'wrong'* interpretation (Love et al., 2020), the quality of the researcher's interpretation might have been constrained by her abilities to make sense of the data and the interpretative choices she made. For instance, she might have inferred meanings that were not sufficiently grounded in the participants' accounts, were influenced by previous research or her own assumptions.

In addition, according to Noon (2018), IPA researchers must strike a balance between idiographic commitment and the search for commonalities of experiences. The double hermeneutics inherent to IPA exacerbate the difficulty of extrapolating the idiographic accounts within the common features of the phenomenon (Love et al., 2020). Thus, it may be difficult for a less experienced researcher to reflect each participant's idiosyncrasies within the shared experience. Although the researcher strived to remain as close as possible to the participants' narratives, their deconstruction might have been distorted in the process of reinterpretation by the researcher. Since the present study was her first attempt to apply IPA, there is certainly room for improvement in terms of in-depth engagement with idiographic and hermeneutic phenomenology.

Lastly, lacking a defined understanding of pornography could also have been a limiting factor. It cannot be excluded that due to a lack of common essential attributes of the concept, the participants may have referred to experiences involving different contents or means of accessing pornography. In the event of the participants' understandings of pornography being significantly divergent to the point of influencing their experience of self-perceived addiction, there could be a risk of the sample not being sufficiently homogeneous. This could pose problems, as the findings would relate to differing lived experiences and possibly lack coherence. Although in the researcher's view, this risk has not materialised, it could have been mitigated by imposing a defined meaning of pornography on the participants prior to commencing the interviews. However, establishing a predetermined definition of pornography would have come with its own downsides, such as narrowing the scope of the explored realities based on the nature of pornography consumed by the participants or possibly shifting the research's focus away from the experience of being addicted toward a study of pornography.

In an attempt to overcome the aforementioned limitations, certain changes, in particular with regard to data collection and their interpretation would be warranted if the research were to be conducted again.

Although replicability is not among the goals of IPA research (Smith, 2010), the transferability of the findings to other settings would be enhanced if they were based on a more diverse sample, such as women experiencing problems with their pornography consumption, non-heterosexual participants or people from more diverse backgrounds. If the study were to be replicated, a more diversified sample would be used to strengthen the significance of the findings.

To avoid prioritising the accounts of more outspoken participants over those who have difficulty expressing themselves the researcher ought to pay closer attention to how participants articulate their experiences, as, according to Smith et al. (2012), there is a link between how people speak about their life experience and related thoughts and feelings. This could help ensure that all participants' realities, including those for whom expressing their views is challenging, are accurately captured. In cases where language is a considerable impediment, alternative methods could be considered (Noon, 2018). Other data collection approaches could be employed to supplement the information gained from the semi-structured interviews. For instance, as a follow-up to the interview, participants could be given the opportunity to provide further data, for example, in writing, allowing for additional and possibly more open observations on their experience to be provided, which would have the potential to add to the data's richness.

External scrutiny of the researcher's interpretations could improve the narrative account's legitimacy. For instance, the findings could be subject to external validation by other psychologists or academics, as suggested by Brocki and Wearden (2006). Further, participants could be asked to provide comments on the preliminary interpretations, allowing them to rectify or contradict any misinterpretations concerning their experience, as suggested by Bradbury-Jones et al. (2010).

Strengths

The main strength of the research is that it meets its objectives. In the researcher's opinion, her study enhances the understanding of self-perceived pornography addiction. Exploring, describing and interpreting participants' experiences by bringing researcher's own perspectives resulted in

getting new insights into the phenomenon and a better understanding of the contexts within which it occurs.

The researcher considers that her findings, which deconstruct and interpret participants' experiences, are well embedded in their realities. The fact that the researcher decided to transcribe and code the data herself rather than using analytical software enabled a fuller immersion into participants' narratives, which helped her better understand the participants' perspectives and convey them in the findings. In this way, to the extent possible, the findings represent the phenomenon in a way it occurs to the participants, as postulated by Husserl (2017).

Moreover, achieving the objectives of the research was possible by systematically applying the chosen method and ensuring the overall consistency of the research process. The research process started with a clear identification of its purpose. It was followed by a systematic implementation of the consecutive steps making sure that the links between them are clear.

Furthermore, the researcher strived to present her study in an organised and structured way. She attempted to the best of her abilities to adopt a clear and concise writing style in the hope that her findings would be understood unambiguously.

Finally, in the researcher's opinion, the research is topical. It contributes to the on-going academic debate on problematic pornography use and its potential overlap with addiction and is of interest to the field of counselling psychology. With their focus on the client's perspectives, the findings are relevant to clinical practice. Moreover, taking into account the paucity of qualitative research into self-perceived pornography addiction, one of the strengths of the present study lies in its novelty and originality.

8.3. Reflective considerations concerning the research process and findings

In the final section of the research evaluation, I would like to reflect on how my own attitudes and background might have played a part in the study and what I have learnt from the research in content and in practice.

Looking at my standpoints and assumptions throughout the research process was not an easy task. It took me time and effort to examine what they might be and in what way they might have acted. I had to ask myself critically oriented questions at all stages of the process in order to reflect how my standpoints might have interacted with the research. I had to question the initial assumptions and reflect why I was thinking in a particular way. I had to ask myself why I asked certain questions to the participants, why I interpreted the answers in a given way and why I reached the conclusions that I did. I found writing the present thesis in a third-person helpful in reflecting on my standpoints and assumptions. It helped me hold a degree of distance towards myself and view myself as a researcher with an outsider perspective.

My own personal reflections are an attempt to demonstrate to the reader that this research is the result of the choices I made and a reflection of the person I am in a given period of my professional and personal life. They are a testimony to the stance that science is not neutral (McLeod, 2015). I have decided to bring the discussion of reflexivity to a range of issues within the research to demonstrate how they may have influenced the findings, starting with the identification of my pre-research positions and then reflecting on the consecutive stages of the process and its outcomes.

My views of pornography and pornography use

When examining the reasons for researching the topic of self-perceived pornography addiction, I had to reflect about my standpoints towards pornography. For instance, do I hold particularly strong beliefs about pornography? What is my attitude towards pornography users or the pornography industry? How do I view issues concerning sexuality? What do I think of people who watch specific types of pornography, such as violent pornography? Have my personal views on

pornography affected the questions I asked or my interpretations of what the participants told me? I realised that the answers to these questions that are presented below are not always clear-cut.

As a young person who grew up in a liberal Western European country with an open attitude towards sexuality, I found pornography use to be a normal part of human behaviour. I assumed that almost all men consume pornography and that most do not consider their pornography consumption to have any observable negative consequences. I assumed that their interest in pornography is an expression of their sexuality. Prior to being confronted with problematic pornography use, I had given little though to other motivations behind one's interest in pornography. In my mind, interest in pornography was inherently sexual. This way of thinking may have influenced the type of questions I asked during the interviews. For instance, the question concerning the pornographic content that the participants consumed proved to be largely irrelevant to the findings of my research. Although all the participants described their preferences, for most of them, the content they watched had little bearing on the understanding of their experiences and consequently on the findings.

When reflecting on my own attitudes towards the investigated phenomenon, I realised that although I considered pornography consumption normal, I had negative views on the pornography industry. In particular, I considered that it might treat pornography performers, especially women, unethically. When reflecting on my study, I realised a lack of consistency in my attitudes towards pornography. I could not reconcile my acceptance of pornography consumption with my views about performers' negative treatment by the industry. This again made me wonder whether certain questions about the ethical aspects of pornography use, which I asked during the interviews, may have been the expression of my own views and uncertainties.

Ethical concerns in research on pornography consumption

Researchers may face special challenges and concerns while conducting a study with people who consume pornography, such as those related to the use of child pornography. Working with male prisoners in the past, particularly sexual offenders who viewed pornography, including its unlawful

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forms, provided me with insight into the issues at hand. For instance, it was quite common to hear about consumption of pornography involving acts of violence or child pornography in this client group. It was also typical for clients who were viewing child pornography to have been abused as minors. I was also aware that recidivism rates in sexual offenders are significant (Griffin-Shelley, 2014). I understood that for a therapist, balancing the needs of the public, in particular the risks to children or other vulnerable individuals, and the well-being of the offender, who was a therapy client, can be difficult.

In the context of this study, I was not a therapist, but a researcher. However, just like in therapy, I had to prepare myself for the possibility of being faced with this this type of ethical concerns and consider how to respond. Despite making it clear that I intended to explore only experiences involving the legal forms of pornography, which the participants consented to, in the end, I had to rely on their assessment of the legality of pornography consumption. As a result, I could not rule out the possibility that their assessment was incorrect or that there could be borderline cases. For instance, in the event of a participant revealing his consumption of pornographic material portraying *'teens*', would that mean that he was viewing pornography with actors of legal age, or illegal child pornography involving adolescents? Similarly, would the use of pornography involving certain acts of violence be considered extreme, thus potentially unlawful? Although I have some experience with clients consuming pornography, I certainly do not have the legal expertise to determine clear-cut cases of legality and illegality. When discussing the arrangements for the interviews with the clinic hosting my study, I was informed of the procedure to deal with cases that could entail disclosure of information to a third party, which I found reassuring. In the end, no participant revealed engaging with unlawful forms of pornography, which would have necessitated disclosing this information to avoid endangering somebody. However, the lesson that I take from this experience is that working with clients who use pornography, whether as part of research or in therapy, is likely to involve ethical concerns that may not be typically encountered with other groups of clients. Thus, it is important to determine from the outset a way to handle any ethical or legal issues that may arise.

My attitudes to addiction

Another issue that influenced my way of thinking throughout the study was the reaction of several therapists whom I contacted prior to starting the research to the idea of exploring pornography addiction. Although it was never my purpose to prove or disprove that problematic pornography consumption is or is not a type of addiction, in some cases, the immediate and rather categorical reaction was that the phenomenon I intended to explore was not addiction. I realised that this initial attitude of others made me watchful of not being perceived as a proponent of the addiction-based understanding. For instance, I tended to emphasise in my interpretations that it was the participants' view that what they experienced was a form of addiction. In this way, I was distancing myself from the meaning they attached to their experiences.

My immersion into the topic of problematic pornography use understood as addiction started with the literature review. My understanding of the matter increased with the amount of literature I consulted, which I found very interesting. Rather unintendedly, I started the literature review by consulting neurobiological research largely supporting the application of the addiction framework. I acknowledged the soundness of the argumentation stemming from this area of science. However, with a broader exploration of literature, my attitude evolved, as I realised and understood certain limitations stemming from the application of the addiction framework based on biological explanations.

Realising the controversies surrounding the application of the addiction framework and the conflicting views concerning its use in clinical practice and research had an impact on my attitude towards the phenomenon under study. As a researcher, I wanted to adopt as neutral stance as possible in respect to this debate. I undertook an effort not to express my views concerning the arguments for or against the use of the addiction framework to the problematic pornography use or take any side. This was my attempt to bracket the preconceptions resulting from the literature review in order to avoid that the findings of my research are influenced by the ex-ante attitudes towards the investigated phenomenon. As a result, throughout the research process, I strived to

approach the investigated phenomenon with openness rather than with some conceptual assumptions.

Being a female researcher with regard to male participants

The researcher-researched relationship is a well-known concern in qualitative investigation (Walsh, 2014). For instance, the outcome of a qualitative study may be influenced by conflicting viewpoints between the researcher and the participants (Raheim et al., 2016). In the context of this study, I thought in particular about the impact of certain gender-related issues, which emerged from the participants' accounts and my interactions with the male pornography users. For example, several participants considered that they had experienced a shift in attitudes towards women during the time they were consuming pornography. Some expressed problems when interacting with women, while one participant acknowledged a strong dislike of women. Although interaction difficulties and dislikes of women reflect different dimensions of the participants' perceptions, both factors could have had an impact on the way the participants communicated with me, as well as the content of their responses to the questions I asked. When looking back on the interviews, I wonder whether the fact that I was a woman researcher came into play. Was it an influencing factor for what they were revealing? Would a male researcher have obtained different kind of information? Would the participants have been more or less open in their discourse when engaging with a male researcher? Would they feel more comfortable discussing issues related to their sexuality with a male researcher? Just as negative transference, resistance, or distrust of the opposite sex may all play a role in a therapeutic relationship (Diamond, 2011), it cannot be excluded that these factors could have also influenced the interaction between the male participants and the female researcher.

Although it is impossible to provide clear-cut answers to these questions without asking the participants, from my perspective, I do not think that the fact that I was a woman researcher affected my aptitude to remain inquisitive about intimate male views concerning pornography use. I encouraged an open dialogue with the participants by striving to adopt a non-judgmental attitude

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and a direct communication style. I sought to make the participants feel at ease when discussing personal matters involving their use of particular forms of pornography or relations to women. I did not demonise any form of their engagement with pornographic material involving women, but remained enquiring. As a person, I do not shy away from difficult topics and do not become discouraged by statements involving sexually explicit talk or misogyny. I consider them informative and inviting further inquiry. Thus, I did not hesitate to ask additional questions to gain better access to the participants' experiences and understandings. Therefore, from my perspective, I do not consider that being a woman researcher was likely to form a significant barrier, which would have prevented me from generating data providing insights into the experiences of male-only participants.

It cannot be excluded that the fact that this research was conducted by a woman could have had positive implications. According to Seidler et al. (2018), cultural standards and gender role expectations of masculinity that dictate *'how to be a man'* interact with help-seeking processes in therapy. This could have also been the case in this research. Female researchers, just like female therapists, may approach *'masculine'* issues from different perspectives and perceive them in another way than their male counterparts due to different life experiences, psychologies or communication patterns (Diamond, 2011). Thus, the participants could have felt more comfortable, allowing themselves to be more open in their discourse if they felt that they were not being judged from a male perspective, for instance, the perspective of another male pornography user. Further, they could have considered that since women do not experience the physical sensations associated with pornography and masturbation in the same way, they had to be more descriptive about their experience, as there was no assumption that a female researcher would automatically identify with and understand their experiences in this domain.

Furthermore, when working with male clients, a female researcher may be faced with erotic transference. This issue received quite a lot of attention in the therapeutic context (Potash, 2013; Lukac-Greenwood & van Rijn, 2021). According to Potash (2013), clients bring their gender role expectations, attitudes and behaviour to therapy. For some, vulnerability and sharing of deep

feelings occurs in the context of sexual intimacy. Setting firm boundaries in therapy is vital, while still encouraging exploration of difficulties (Lukac-Greenwood & van Rijn, 2021). This could be the case in research as well. Thus, I had to consider the possibility that inviting an open discussion about intimate sexual behaviour could lead to the participants sexualising me. In a therapy context, this is something I would consider addressing directly, as I believe it would be beneficial to the therapeutic relationship. In this situation, though, I was the researcher, not the therapist. The way I went about it was to ask the questions in a direct and confident manner. I thought that if the participants could see that I was focused and comfortable, it would show them that my reason to be there was to learn about their experiences.

My experience with qualitative research

In the preparatory stage of the research, I had to consider various possibilities concerning the methodology. Given the exploratory nature of the study, qualitative research methods seemed to be the obvious choice. Yet, I had to reflect on my own abilities to carry out qualitative research, taking into account my background as a researcher. Although I had some experience with conducting an independent psychological research, this experience involved the use of quantitative methods. At graduate level, my final research project, which concerned women's evolutionary-based rape avoidance behaviour involved gathering, analysing and presenting statistical information. My MSc thesis on recidivism rates in female sexual offenders consisted of carrying out a systematic review and meta-analysis. Although throughout my studies, I had modules on qualitative research methods, I had no practical experience in the area. Thus, in the preparatory stage, I had to spent time exploring the logic of qualitative research methods and reflecting whether I had appropriate skills. Although I attended dedicated training for doctoral students on the use of IPA to become more confident in using the chosen method, since the present research is my first major project where I used it, I recognise that there are certainly shortcomings resulting from my inexperience.

Further, some difficulties also emerged throughout the research process, which might have had an impact on the findings. Recruitment proved to be more difficult than I had anticipated. Despite support from the clinic, which hosted the study, few people were ready to take part in the research. Although I managed to recruit ten participants, which was the minimum number I had in mind when planning my study, I wonder what findings could have been achieved and whether additional insights might have emerged, had the sample been larger. I acknowledge that I would never know the answers to these questions and I accept that my findings concern the ten specific participants, who were willing to share their experiences.

As explained in section 4.3, the formulation of certain interview questions was influenced by the literature review and the issues, which emerged from prior research. Although this way of proceeding facilitates the linking of my study with previous research, it also bears a risk of pointing participants' attention in the direction of the specific concerns identified in previous literature, thus imposing certain biases, which can have implications for the findings. Moreover, I noticed my tendency to be particularly attentive to the causal aspects of the participants' narratives. This tendency can be attributed to the explanatory nature of the vast majority of research on problematic pornography use. However, being aware of the issue, I strived to stay focused on the research question, which is phenomenological in nature and does not attempt to provide causal explanations.

The interview questions were slightly refined following the pilot interview and the exchanges with my supervisors to reflect better the phenomenological nature of the study. I consider that the questions allowed me engaging in a dialogue with the participants and reacting flexibly to their statements. This means, however, that not all the participants answered exactly the same questions and that some explored the areas of their experiences, which were not discussed by the other participants, which affected data consistency. I wonder whether different data would have been obtained and different conclusions reached, had I invited the participants to talk completely freely about their experiences.

Data collection resulted in a vast amount of material to be analysed. At first, I felt overwhelmed by the quantity of data and feared a risk of missing the overreaching meanings. My first attempt to identify the subordinate themes following the pilot interview resulted in thirty-nine themes just with regard to one participant, which was obviously too many. Therefore, I had to refine my analytic tactics to identify patterns that were more overarching. This was a complex and time-consuming task. However, I was under the impression that my skills in this area were improving with each subsequent transcript.

Data analysis and interpretation required immersing into the participants' accounts and refraining from imposing my pre-conceptions. In order to limit my biases, I made a point of distinguishing clearly between the explicit statements made by the participants and my interpretations. I was systematically cross checking the latter with the statements made by the participants during the interviews to ground my positions in the data and limit their contamination with my preconceptions.

Another issue, which became apparent during data analysis and interpretation, was a risk of transferring the findings from the earlier transcripts on the latter ones. I realised that when reading a new transcript, I was comparing it and looking for patterns or confirmations of some conclusions reached when analysing and interpreting the previous ones. In order to mitigate this risk, I decided to impose intervals between analyses of the transcripts or periods of absence from the research to approach each participant's experience with an open attitude. I also found that repeated reading of each transcript was quite effective in mitigating the risk of transferring the analytical findings and interpretations from the earlier examined transcripts on the latter ones.

Bracketing

I would like to acknowledge that despite all the attempts, I could not fully identify or bracket my assumptions. Although I was making efforts to identify and address them as much as I could, I recognise that in the end, the outcome of the study is a subjective product. I could not completely detach from my standpoints or my professional and personal background. I do not believe that it

is possible for anyone to bracket fully their assumptions and prior knowledge. Therefore, the findings of my research do not represent the '*universal truth*' about self-perceived pornography addiction, but my version of what it is, grounded in the participants' experiences.

Finally, I wish to note that the present study was my first major research project. It was a challenging, yet rewarding task. I found it fulfilling to engage with the participants in an attempt to understand the problems they experience. Qualitative research was intellectually challenging, but it helped me appreciate its importance in the field of psychology much more.

9. Conclusions

This study explored the experiential dimensions of pornography addiction from the perspective of individuals who self-identify as addicts with the view to capture the key features of the phenomenon. It revealed several new characteristics and enhanced the understanding of the difficulties faced by pornography users who believe to be addicted. In the absence of evidence-based recommendations and guidance for practitioners, the study has the potential to inform clinical practice of clinical psychologists working with clients who experience problems with pornography consumption.

The key contribution of this study is that it provides mental health practitioners with qualitative insights into pornography addiction based on real-life experiences. It can help them learn about the challenges from the perspectives of pornography users rather than from a theoretical standpoint. No less important is that the findings of this research can challenge their assumptions about the nature of the difficulties faced by self-perceived pornography addicts, causing them to become more sensitised to their clients' needs or reconsider their therapeutic approaches when working with this client group. Practical conclusions that practitioners can draw from this research can result in supporting clients who struggle with pornography consumption in a more effective manner.

The research also contributes to the on-going academic and clinical debate on the nature of problematic pornography consumption and its potential overlap with addiction. Whilst for many researchers and clinicians addiction is not a valid or a useful construct, the study demonstrates that addiction-based explanations are meaningful to some problematic pornography users by providing them with a framework for making sense of their difficulties. The meaning they attach to their experiences should not be undermined, despite the controversy surrounding the concept of pornography addiction.

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11. Appendices

Appendix 1: Schedule of changes

Conditions

- The diagram with an overview of identified master themes and sub-themes has been replaced with Table 3.
- Tables have been reformatted in line with the APA style.
- The novelty of the study has been strengthen and clarified in the introduction and the discussion.
- A critical engagement with the publications included in the literature review has been strengthened, particularly by evaluating the reliability of the sources and their relevance to the state of knowledge in the context of the present study.
- A meta-synthesis of qualitative studies has been conducted. Other studies' findings have been synthesised at the end of each section.
- The publication dates of the reviewed literature, as well as the search terms, have been clarified. The difference between pornography and erotica has been explained in section 1.6.
- A lack of a defined understanding of pornography has been discussed in section 8.2.
- The counselling component has been strengthen in the literature review (section 2.11) and the discussion (section 7.2.).
- Legal and ethical aspects of participants' disclosure have been addressed in sections 4.4. and 8.3.
- Direct references to primary literature have been made in the literature review.
- Legal pornography has been defined in section 1.7.
- Examples of reflexivity have been provided in Appendix 2.
- Reflections on being a female researcher with regard to male participants have been expanded in section 8.3.

Recommendations

- Table of contents has been formatted in line with the APA style.
- Abstract has been compiled and reorganised as requested (background, methodology, what was included in the methodological approach, findings, discussion). More methodological details, including sample size and participants' breakdown have been provided. The discussion has been more clearly expressed.
- Introduction has been reorganised, including subheadings. Theoretical support has been strengthened, while subjective statements have been reduced. The reader is provided with the concept of pornography in section 1.3. An overview of key terms, including pornography, has been provided in section 1.6. Personal rationale has been

expanded in section 1.4. The study's relevance to counselling psychology has been presented in section 1.5. A model of reflective practice has been indicated in section 3.4.

- Literature review: A critical engagement has been strengthen. Cultural and legal aspects of pornography use in the UK have been addressed in section 2.6. An overview of the definitions of pornography addiction has been reduced and moved to the introduction. Therapeutic approaches have been addressed in section 2.11. Sexual compulsion, risky sexual behaviour and sexual self-efficacy have been addressed in sections 2.2. and 2.9. A critical summary, including rationale for the present research has been presented in section 2.12.

- Methodology: Theoretical support has been reinforced, while subjective statements have been reduced. Reflexivity on epistemology and ontology has been included in section 3.1. The theoretical model of the reflexive practice (Gibbs's) has been outlined in section 3.4. A summary of participants' profiles has been included in section 4.1. Ethical and legal concerns relating to participants' disclosure have been further developed in section 4.4. Appendix 3 presents participants' profiles. Appendix 10 presents master themes and related sub-themes with examples of supporting statements and line numbers. The consistency of terminology has been reviewed.

- Discussion: Theoretical support has been reinforced, subjectivity reduced. For each master theme, the literature gap and the novel aspects have been identified, with greater focus on how the study adds to knowledge. The counselling component has been strengthened in section 7.2, with a focus on how the research findings can be used in therapeutic settings to support this client group, reflecting on changes in healthcare and clinical trials. More extensive argumentation and citations concerning future research are presented in section 7.3.

- Reflective evaluation of the research: Section 8.2. (limitations) has been expanded to provide more detailed argumentation, including reflections on how this study could have been conducted differently.

- Conclusions: Argumentation has been strengthen; including the research potential for supporting mental health practitioners' better understanding of the phenomenon.

Appendix 2: Excerpts from the reflective journal

Excerpt 1

Currently reflecting on how it is to conduct research on pornography addiction as a woman myself. My initial concern prior to starting the interviewing process was that participants were less likely to open up to me and engage in dialogue on this subject because I am a woman.

When dealing with this in therapeutic settings, I addressed this with clients. I asked whether they thought that me being a woman had any bearing on what they disclosed regarding their problems with pornography, their sexuality and general sense of comfort about the subject matter. I asked whether discussing this topic with a male therapist would produce different results. Almost all who I asked stated that they would not feel comfortable discussing this with a male therapist. A few stated they would not feel comfortable discussing this with a male in general, such as a male friend or family member. The reason was that they did not want to present themselves in a way that would emasculate them in the eyes of one. It is still possible that they would feel emasculated discussing this with me, but they maintained that they felt less judged speaking about their issues with a woman.

My other concern is being sexualised by the participants. This is something I have no control over. I have been openly sexualised by men in a variety of contexts, thus do not believe that I have any control over this happening in this one. However, I recognise that inviting open dialogue about something so intimate can result in participants gaining sexual gratification from the conversation, which will result in me being sexualised. In a therapeutic setting, this is something I would consider addressing directly, as I think it would be beneficial to the therapeutic relationship. However, I am not the therapist, but the researcher in this context.

As I cannot change being a woman, and have no control over the participants' level of comfort when speaking with me about this topic or whether they choose to sexualize me during the interview process, I am going to remain direct and confident in the way I ask the questions. Hopefully, seeing that I am not feeling awkward will assure them that I am confident in discussing the subject matter. I hope that the questions and the tone of the conversation which convey that I am comfortable speaking to them about porn, and am curious about their experiences and eager to understand their feelings and perspectives.

I will also seek out the guidance of my supervisors on these matters. Although they are both male, thus their experiences could differ from mine, they have experience in conducting research involving sensitive subject matters and have supervised other doctoral candidates who have. Their insight into how these situations were handled in the past could be helpful to my practice as a researcher.

I am currently reading through the transcript of P9 that I finished transcribing yesterday. On first glance, what I find unique about this interview is that unlike other participants, who have spoken about feeling distant from women (those they know and women in general), He was explicit about his dislike of women. Participant is single. He did not mention any specific women he did not like. He referred to disliking women in a general sense from what I could gather. Explored why he felt distant and disliked women, but could have gone further: how does he perceive women in general? Women in his life? Women in porn industry? How do women make him feel – as a man, as a porn addict?

Curious about how men see the women in their lives and their attitudes towards their porn addiction / porn addiction in general. So far, participants have almost all described their partners who knew about their issues with pornography as practically supportive, encouraging them to seek help, instilling controls and safety behaviours, etc. Participants thus far have not described the women in their lives as controlling and/or hyper vigilant when it comes to porn use (or in any other manner). Where do these helping behaviours come from? Do they feel threatened? Do they see porn actresses as more attractive and/or more sexually exciting than them? Or are they concerned by the negative impact on their partners? I assume it's possible to have a relationship with a porn consumer that cannot be emotionally intimate. Why would this be different when the partner considers himself to be addicted to porn.

Appendix 3: Participants' profiles

- Participant 1 (P1): P1 was a 45-year-old heterosexual man who worked as a web designer. At the time the interview took place, he had been in therapy for pornography addiction for over 20 years. He began watching pornography around the age of 12 or 13. He considered being a pornography addict since the age of 14 when he realised that he was unable to cease watching pornography. After many years of psychotherapy and personal efforts, he managed to substantially reduce the amount of time spent viewing pornographic content, but did not manage to stop using it completely. At the time the interview took place, his average use of pornography was around two hours per week.

- Participant 2 (P2): P2 was a 52-year old heterosexual, married male. He worked as a medical doctor in general practice. He started viewing pornographic magazines at the age of seven or eight and continued throughout his adolescence and adulthood. He considered being addicted to pornography for approximately 15 years. In recent years, his perceived addiction became more persistent, as he was watching pornography on the internet two to four times per week. At the time the interview took place, he had been in therapy for pornography addiction for two months. He started therapy at the request of his wife.

- Participant 3 (P3): P3 was a 23-year old heterosexual man, in a relationship. He worked as an IT specialist. At the time the interview took place, he had been in therapy for pornography related problems for three months, after numerous failed attempts to stop using pornography, in particular in the three preceding years. He started watching pornographic content on the internet at the age of 11 or 12. He considered being addicted to pornography from the age of 13. He watched pornography every day for several hours. He reported incidents when he was watching pornographic content for up to 24 hours a day.

- Participant 4 (P4): P4 was a 26-year old heterosexual man, in a relationship. He worked as a graphic designer. At the time of the interview, he had been in therapy for problems related to pornography use for three months. He started watching pornography at the age of seven. He realized he had a problem linked to his pornography use when he was around 16. He tried to cease watching pornography several times, but never managed to refrain from using it for longer than three to four weeks. According to P4's estimates, he watched pornography on average five to six times a week, for three to four hours each time.

- Participant 5 (P5): P5 was a 25-year old heterosexual man, not in a relationship. He worked as a financial analyst. He saw pornographic content for the first time at the age of six. His use of pornography continued throughout the years. He considered being addicted to pornography since his early twenties. Before starting therapy, he watched pornographic content every day. Since he started therapy, he had been watching it three to five times a week. At the time of the interview, he had been in therapy for pornography addiction for three and half months.

- Participant 6 (P6): P6 was a 26-year old single heterosexual man. He worked as a customer service agent. He first saw pornographic content at the age of eight. He started watching

pornography on a regular basis at the age of ten. The amount of time spent watching pornography varied throughout the years, with the peak at the age of 24, when he was accessing pornographic content twice or three times per day. This was when he realised he was addicted to pornography. At the time the interview took place, he was not watching pornography regularly. He had been in therapy on an irregular basis for one and half years.

- Participant 7 (P7): P7 was a 40-year old heterosexual, married man who worked as a civil servant. P7 was first exposed to pornography at the age of twelve. His use of pornography continued throughout the years. Prior to starting therapy, P7 watched pornographic content on a daily basis, two to three times a day, for rather short periods. Since he started therapy, he gradually managed to limit his use to about four times a week. At the time the interview took place, he had been in therapy for pornography addiction for four months. He started therapy at the request of his wife.

- Participant 8 (P8): P8 was a 34-year old heterosexual man, not in a relationship at the time of the interview. He worked as a financial controller. P8 was first exposed to pornography at the age of seven and continued watching it ever since. As of his mid-twenties, he watched it on a daily basis. Since he started therapy for pornography addiction four months earlier, he managed to reduce it to two or three times a week.

- Participant 9 (P9): P9 was a 37-year old heterosexual man. At the time of the interview, he was not in a relationship. He worked as an accountant. He was first exposed to pornographic content at the age of seven when he was forced to watch it in the context of sexual abuse, which lasted until he was nine years old. He started watching pornography on his own at the age of twelve. P9 realised he had problems linked to his pornography use in his mid-twenties. He had not been watching pornography for about four weeks before the interview took place. Prior to that, he was using it on a daily basis, sometimes several hours a day. At the time of the interview, he had been in therapy for pornography addiction for 4 months.

- Participant 10 (P10): P10 was a 26-year old heterosexual, single man who worked as a soldier. He was initially exposed to pornographic content at the age of ten and was a regular user since then. For several years, his pornography use occurred on a daily basis, sometimes, several times a day. At the time the interview took place, he had been in therapy for pornography addiction for three months.

Appendix 4: Semi-structured interview questions

The semi-structured interview will be preceded with gathering of demographic information with regard to gender, age, education, sexual orientation, relationship status.

1. <u>Can you describe your pornography use?</u>

   Prompts:
   - ➢ What do you consider pornography?
   - ➢ How often do you view pornography?
   - ➢ Where do you access pornography?
   - ➢ What kind of pornography do you view?
   - ➢ Could you give me an example of how your pornography viewing looks like in a typical day / week / month?
   - ➢ How do you feel when you watch pornography?

2. <u>How did your pornography use look like over time?</u>

   Prompts:
   - ➢ How did your interest in pornography begin?
   - ➢ What initially attracted you to pornography?
   - ➢ Can you tell me whether there were any changes in the amount of time spent watching pornography?
   - ➢ Can you tell me whether your preferences for certain types of pornography changed?

3. <u>What makes you think that you are or were addicted to pornography?</u>

   Prompts:
   - ➢ What does it mean to you 'to be addicted'?
   - ➢ What is it like to feel addicted?
   - ➢ To what extent did you feel that you were in control of your pornography use?

➢ To what extent did you feel cravings or compulsions to use pornography?

➢ What is your experience with trying to stop pornography viewing?

4. <u>What is your experience of engagements with other life activities?</u>

   Prompts:

   ➢ How would you describe your engagement with other life activities?

   ➢ How would you describe your relationships with others?

   ➢ Can you describe whether there were any risks involved?

5. <u>Can you tell me how you feel about yourself and your life in the context of your experience with pornography?</u>

   Prompts:

   ➢ Do you find pornography to be beneficial to you in any way?

   ➢ Can you tell whether there were any changes in your physical heath, emotional well-being, values and beliefs?

   ➢ Can you describe how you feel about yourself as an addict?

6. <u>When looking back at your experiences, how do you feel about pornography now?</u>

7. <u>What would be something that you would want others to understand about pornography addiction?</u>

Appendix 5: Ethical permission

Olga Pacholec
Apt. A7.01
80 Wood Lane
White City
London
W12 0BZ

18th March 2019

Dear Olga

Re: Ethics Approval

We held an Ethics Board on 22nd January 2019 and the following decisions were made.

Ethics Approval
Your application was approved with some conditions.

Conditions
Please see the attached scanned comments and resubmit your application accordingly. It will be reviewed for Chair's action once received.

Please note that it is a condition of this ethics approval that recruitment, interviewing, or other contact with research participants only takes place when you are enrolled in a research supervision module.

Yours sincerely

Prof Digby Tantam
Chair Ethics Committee
NSPC

From: Sasha Smith <sasha@nspc.org.uk>
Date: 24 April 2019 at 11:05:01 BST
To: "olga.pacholec@hotmail.com" <olga.pacholec@hotmail.com>
Cc: "werner.kierski@zen.co.uk" <werner.kierski@zen.co.uk>, "Mark Jepson
(mark1jepson@hotmail.co.uk)" <mark1jepson@hotmail.co.uk>
Subject: Ethics

Dear Olga

I am pleased to inform you that your ethics application has now
been approved by Chair's action.

Kind regards,

Sasha Smith
Academic Registrar
Course Leader: MA in Existential Coaching
*Deputy Course Leader: MA in Existential and Humanist Pastoral
Care and MSc in Autism and Related Neurodevelopmental
Conditions*
New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling
Tel: 0203 515 0223

Appendix 6: Analyses of individual cases - example

Part 1: Identification of the emergent themes

Exploratory Comments	Line	Transcript	Emergent Themes
	1	*I: My first question is: Can you describe your pornography use. We can start with saying what do you consider to be pornography?*	
Overt claims: Finds it interesting to define pornography. Pornography is nudity & sexual acts. Semantic: nakedness, sexual act; pauses; hesitant? Interpretation: Definition of pornography limited to nudity and sexual act	2	P: (Uhhh ooh) that's an interesting question. (Uh) For me personally, pornography is basically anything that involves nakedness or a sexual act (umm).	Defining pornography as an expression of sexuality
Overt claims: Boundaries between what is sexy and what is pornographic are not clear. Difficulties to come up with a personal definition of pornography. Semantic: sexy; pauses; uncertain? Interpretation: Finds it difficult to define the concept.	3	P: I think there is a thin line, especially with the modern internet, between what is kind of looking sexy, and therefore I find that quite triggering for me to use my own terminology, but (umm uhh) yeah, I don't think I would call that pornographic, certainly not within the definition that have been working, so yeah (ummmm) then… what else? So, could you ask the question again, otherwise I…	
	4	*I: The broader question was: describe your pornography use.*	
Overt claims: Finds it interesting to think about his use of pornography. Considers that he overcomplicates things. Semantic: pauses; uncertain? Interpretation: Thinking about thinking	5	P: Yeah, pornography use. So basically (ummm), it started off… that's interesting. Sorry, you just got me thinking… I just think I tend to make things more complicated than they need to be but you're just making me thinking.	
Overt claims: Pornography is about visual content and fantasies. Fantasies are major parts of his addiction. First experiences involved visual content and erotic stories. Not sure whether erotic stories are pornography. Semantic: images, fantasies, addiction, imagine, good or bad, visual, pornography, erotic, stories	6	P: Because pornography, for me, is more about images (ummm) but also fantasies is a big part of my addiction, has been a big part of my addiction since I was young. So I was just thinking about what was my earliest experiences. So, I basically experienced visual pornography (ummm) oh god, I think the first time would have been on the internet before it was even called the internet. (Uh) it was called bulletin board systems back then, and you'd	Defining pornography as expression of one's imaginary & fantasy

Interpretation: Expands his understanding of pornography by including the non visual, fantasies & stories. Fantasies and stories to avoid reality?

Overt claims: Erotic stories are also pornography.
Semantic:
Interpretation: His understanding of pornography goes beyond the visual.

Overt claims: Erotic stories are arousing and feed into fantasies.
Semantic: erotic, stories, turn on, fantasy
Interpretation: His understanding of pornography includes erotic stories & fantasy; Is fantasy an attempt to express his own sexuality?

Overt claims: Started with visual content in magazines belonging to family members, educational books which he found arousing. Wrote his fantasy stories at a young age.
Semantic: fantasy, stories, naked, pictures, turn on, seeing, reading, erotic
Interpretation: The non visual, verbal aspect is important for him. Fantasy stories as expression of his own sexuality or detachment from reality?

Overt claims:
Semantic: laughter
Interpretation:

dial in with a thing, and it had all sorts of crap on it, everything you could possibly imagine – good and bad. And I remember that was the first time I saw visual pornography. There were also erotic stories as well, so I don't know if that comes under the category of pornography or not, as that's obviously not visual.

7   *I: That depends for you.*

8   P: That was there then. I certainly would consider that acting out if I was using that now so that's, you know, yeah.

Pornography also involves the non-visual

9   *I: Although it's visual for you, that kind of erotic story is ambiguous for you in that way.*

10 P: Yeah, erotic stories are a turn on and they, they feed into fantasy and (uh) in that respect they, well, we'll get into this later, but anyway, that's how it started. I'll just stick to the question (*laughs*) before I start philosophizing!

Defining pornography as an expression of sexuality

11 P: Umm yeah, so it started with (uh) that. I remember finding my dad's pornography collection under his bed as well (umm)… yeah. And I started writing my own fantasy stories (ummm) quite young, eleven or tweve, and (umm) also, I saw naked pictures in educational books (umm) which were a turn on, and I also remember seeing, reading rather erotic… guide books, that I found in my grandfather's bookshelf. And so, you're looking for the overview of the story now? The whole thing? Or just the beginning, sorry.

12 *I: (Uh) I suppose we can start at the beginning, so we can go chronologically.*

13 P: (*Laughs*) Yeah, chronologically.

14 *I: Do you remember about how old you were when you first encountered pornography?*

	Line	Transcript	Theme
<u>Overt claims:</u> Started when being 12-13 years old. <u>Semantic:</u> pictures; pauses <u>Interpretation:</u> Displayed interest in nudity when a teenager. Acknowledgement of his sexuality?	15	P: (Uhh) I think those pictures, the bulletin board systems, I would've been thirteen, something like that. Thirteen… I don't think I was fourteen yet, 'cause this was before I moved to my second secondary school, so yeah, I'm pretty sure twelve to thirteen years old.	Interest in pornography as expression of one's sexual/physical/biological dimension
	16	*I: Yes, I was going to ask do you remember if there was anything specific going on in your life around then?*	
<u>Overt claims:</u> Problems with family members (father alcoholic, grandfathers ill & dying). Home was not a good place. <u>Semantic:</u> lots going on; pauses <u>Interpretation:</u> Problems and difficult relations with others when the involvement with pornography started.	17	P: (Ummmm) I've got lots of background stuff going on in my life (*laughs*) so my dad's an alcoholic and that was very active at that point. His dad was passing away. My mum's dad was quite ill as well, (ummm) home life… home was not a nice place to be…	Importance of the personal context and other life problems
<u>Overt claims:</u> Accessed pornographic content at cousin's & friend's when 12-13. <u>Semantic:</u> mess around; pauses <u>Interpretation:</u> Displayed interest in nudity when a teenager. Acknowledgement of his sexuality?	18	P: And I would go around to my cousin's house initially (umm) and we'd mess around with computers basically. So that's how we got around to bulletin boards systems, and then another friend as well (umm) so it would've been thirteen… twelve-thirteen, (um) just beginning secondary school.	Interest in pornography as an expression of sexuality
	19	*I: Mhhm okay.*	
<u>Overt claims:</u> Encounters with erotic stories earlier (8-9 years old) in a book. Reports feelings related to secrecy and elicit nature of the content. <u>Semantic:</u> stories, erotic, secret, illicit <u>Interpretation:</u> Importance of the non-visual, fantasy and verbal in his narrative	20	P: But the stories – I should just mention. I came across erotic stories when I was in primary school, so I must've been eight or nine. There was a book being circulated amongst people (ummm) and that book had, it was a self, not a self-help book, a kind agony aunt book, and it talked about everything (uh) so it was sort of circulated as information. I remember that feeling of kind of secret and elicit - is the best word for it.	Importance of the non-visual aspects of pornography
	21	*I: Do you remember an initial attraction to pornography?*	
<u>Overt claims:</u> Excitement & thrills resulting from seeing a beautiful woman. Finds it ridicule; excitement remains. <u>Semantic:</u> beautiful, burnt, excitement, thrill, image, stuck; laughter <u>Interpretation:</u> Acknowledgement of him as a sexual being attracted to beautiful women	22	P: (Umm) Yeah, so when I saw… I remember the computer image in particular. It was a very beautiful woman, and I remember it was like burnt on my retina (*laughs*). I remember literally skipping down the road, it was ridiculous, afterwards, just from the excitement and the thrill of having seen this image. So yeah, that kind of… that definitely stuck with me.	Feeling of excitement and thrill linked with pornography use
	23	*I: Did you start viewing pornography on a more regular basis then?*	

<u>Overt claims</u>: Viewed pornography whenever possible & regularly, in magazines and on internet. Had his own magazine collection. <u>Semantic</u>: laughter <u>Interpretation</u>: Escalation of behaviour	24	P: (Uh) I think I got pornography whenever I could (umm) with another one of my friends, we tried to buy pornographic magazines from news agents, which was the main way you got pornography back then, and I grew a beard quite young so (*laughs*) I was able to buy a bit more easily! But, yeah, I had a pornographic magazine collection. That was the main thing I used because we didn't really have the internet or bulletin boards back then, like, I only used them when I went to a friend's house. So yeah, I started- started using it quite regularly then.	Escalation of behaviour
	25	*I: Mhmm. Was there any kind of content you were especially into at that time?*	
<u>Overt claims</u>: Naked women attracted him initially to pornography. <u>Semantic</u>: attracted, excited, naked, women; sighs; laughter <u>Interpretation</u>: Attraction to the opposite sex as an aspect of his sexuality and him as a sexual being.	26	P: (Umm) in terms of what I was attracted to (*sighs*) back then, I don't think there was specifically (umm) I think that developed more later. I think I was just excited to see naked women's bodies basically (*laughs).*	Defining pornography as an expression of sexuality
	27	*I: Coming to now, do you still view pornography?*	
<u>Overt claims</u>: Confirms watching pornography nowadays. <u>Semantic</u>: <u>Interpretation</u>:	28	P: I do still view pornography, yes.	
	29	*I: How often do you view pornography?*	
<u>Overt claims</u>: His current use is about once a fortnight. <u>Semantic</u>: <u>Interpretation</u>: Not a lot, but this is after 20 years of therapy & 10 years of the 12-step	30	P: At the moment, it's between every… I think if we averaged out over the last year, it's about once every two weeks.	Considers to be addicted despite relatively little time spent watching pornography
	31	*I: Once every two weeks… where do you access pornography?*	
<u>Overt claims</u>: Accesses pornography mostly via computer. <u>Semantic</u>: <u>Interpretation</u>: Computer/internet as the main means of accessing pornography.	32	P: Usually on my own computer.	
	33	*I: Mhmm. Not magazines?*	
<u>Overt claims</u>: Does not use magazines anymore. <u>Semantic</u>: repetition, confirmation	34	P: Not anymore, no. Yeah.	

Interpretation:

Overt claims: Content of what he views has changed over time. Started with no particular preferences.
Semantic: interested; laughter
Interpretation: Reflected on his use over the time.

Overt claims: Pornography use evolved towards particular preferences which he still find attractive (e.g. blonds, women in cheerleader & schoolgirl outfits).
Semantic: interested, women; laughter
Interpretation: His interests became more focused, but have not moved to more extreme content.

Overt claims: Is ashamed to admit that this content still arouses him.
Semantic: ashamed, admit, turn on
Interpretation: Shame accompanying his pornographic preferences and being sexually aroused by them.

Overt claims: Feels uncomfortable about the possibility of watching teenage girls in porn. While it is natural to be attracted by young women, it is not to be aroused by teenagers.
Semantic: uncomfortable, attracted, natural, imagery, borderline, uhh
Interpretation: Anxiety around the fact that he might be doing something against his values, which he finds shameful

Overt claims: Enormous shame about sex, looking at women and finding them attractive. Is able to talk about it only after 20 years of therapy.
Semantic: shame, sex, women, attractive; laughter
Interpretation: Considers sex and sexuality shameful.

35	I: Has what you are interested in changed over time, in terms of content?	
36	P: Yeah, I would say so. This was something I looked at when I first sort of started to address this stuff. So, when I first started looking at pornography (umm), as I said, I was kind of interested in looking at everyone (*laughs*).	
37	P: As time went on, I started being more and more interested in (umm) redheads particularly… and blondes, and that's still a thing that sort of stays with me. Also, the kind of… I like women in sports clothing. That's kind of evolved and kind of grown as time's gone on. And um, I also (uhh) (*laughs*) cheerleader and schoolgirl outfits.	Becoming aware of one's sexual preferences
38	P: I'm ashamed to admit. But yeah, that's a turn on, yeah.	Shame associated with the use of certain types of pornographic content
39	I: What's shameful about schoolgirl and cheerleader outfits?	
40	P: P: I don't know I just really felt uncomfortable about it because it – it relates to the whole teen porn thing, and I think it's completely natural to be attracted to women in their sort of eighteen, nineteen, twenties, but it's the kind of whole imagery of it. There's a whole borderline with it that looks… I feel uncomfortable about it, to be absolutely honest with you. 'Cause who wears school uniforms in this country? As sort of like, they turn to be under seventeen so I feel quite uncomfortable… I don't know about cheerleaders, but I assume so (umm) it just feels a little bit uhh. I feel uncomfortable about it.	Concerns about compromising one's values
41	P: And I also have a lot of shame about sex. I mean, the fact that I'm able to have this conversation with you is reflected in about twenty years of therapy (*laughs*). I literally would not be able to even speak about it before because I felt a huge amount of shame,	Associating sex with shame

		that I shouldn't be (uhh) I shouldn't be looking at women, that I shouldn't find women attractive (umm) yeah so.	
	42	*I: How do you feel when watching pornography?*	
Overt claims: Pornography viewing involves both elation and shame. Semantic: elation, shame; pauses; uncertainty? Interpretation: Ambiguity about pornography; Extreme feelings	43	P: I… feel… a combination of elation and shame.	Ambivalent feelings about pornography use: combination of pleasure and shame
Overt claims: On the one hand, he gets excited from watching people engaged in sexual acts. Semantic: exciting, beautiful, sexual, acts, hit Interpretation: Him as a sexual being without experiencing it with another person.	44	P: So, on the one hand, it's very exciting because I'm seeing somebody who's very beautiful, and in seeing sexual acts, and that's literally a hit... that I get.	Feeling of excitement linked with the use of pornography
Overt claims: One the other hand, once sexually gratified, he wonders who the performers are; what their stories are. Semantic: performers, story, veil lifts, ejaculated, these people, posting Interpretation: Anxiety about the fact that his choice to watch involves also others; Ambiguity about the use	45	P: And on the other hand, I feel like who are these performers? (Umm) What's the true story behind them? What the hell is this anyway? It's like a veil lifts after I've ejaculated. I'm just like 'oh my god, who are these people?' Like, why are they filming themselves and posting it on the internet and like.	Being concerned about people features in pornographic content
Overt claims: Before ejaculating, it is the excitement of seeing sexual acts and nudity. Semantic: excitement, seeing, sexual act, naked, bodies Interpretation: Experience of a sexual nature; bodily-felt experience	46	P: Before that point, it's just the excitement of seeing the sexual act and seeing the naked bodies (umm) and… yeah.	Feeling of excitement linked with the use of pornography
Overt claims: Reports sick feeling when watching pornography, needing & wanting it relentlessly and losing his life. Reduced pornography viewing through work he has done. Semantic: sick, feeling, doing it, wasting, needing, wanting, relentless, never ends; clicks Interpretation: Not living his life fully; guilt for excluding other life options?	47	P: I think, I get a kind of sick feeling when I'm doing it as well, which is like I'm wasting my life (umm) because I mean, my average pornography use has changed particularly recently through the work I'm doing but minimum four hours (umm) and I'll just be there looking (*clicks fingers*) through (*clicks*) the next (*clicks*) one (*clicks*), looking (*clicks*) through (*clicks*) the next (*clicks*) one (*clicks*). And (umm) that is a kind of a sick feeling, like a needing, kind of wanting (umm) that's just relentless, it never kind of ends.	Relentless need to watch pornography despite negative feelings surrounding the use.
Overt claims: After sexual gratification wonders about the performers and experiences shame. Semantic: cum, these people, shame	48	P: And when I've cum, and then I've felt this kind of like 'who are these people?'… then usually the shame will kick in.	Feeling shame and guilt

Interpretation: Ambiguity: pleasure v guilt/remorse

Overt claims: Attempts to stop watching pornography, but images in his mind push him back to it.
Semantic: put away, pick up, images, images, coming back, my mind, the hit, want, look more
Interpretation: Finds the temptation to use irresistible.

49 P: And then I will think 'I'm just going to put the pornography away, 'But then, I'll just pick it up again, because the images will start coming back in my mind, they'll give me the hit, and I just think 'oh, I want to look at some more.'

Looking for excitement linked with the use of pornography

Overt claims: Confirms to watch 4 hrs every two weeks.
Semantic:
Interpretation:

50 I: So if you average it out, it would be four hours every two weeks or so?

51 P: I would say so, yeah.

Relatively low number of hours spent watching pornography

Overt claims: Through the work he has done (12-step for 10 years & therapy 20 years)
Semantic: laughter
Interpretation: Acknowledges the effect of the therapeutic work and reflecting on this issue; internal thinking about his experience

52 I: What happens in the two weeks, in the time in between?

53 P: (laughs) Well, this is through the work I've done. I've been in the twelve-step recovery group for ten years. I've been in therapy for twenty years, so it wasn't always like this at all.

Overt claims: Tries to carry on with his life in between watching pornography, but is triggered to watch porn & wants to watch a lot. Gives an example of how watching pornography interferes with his work and how it is always at the back of his mind.
Semantic: life, triggered, look at, want, stop, ticking; pauses
Interpretation: Living his life is disturbed by his desire to use pornography; sense of difficulties

54 P: But in between what I'm usually doing is (umm) trying to get on with my life, but I will be triggered to look at porn and want to look at porn a lot of the time, you know? So (umm), take today for example. I was just at home, working – I'm self-employed, and (umm) you know like, it's there, constantly ticking away in the back of my mind: 'stop working, don't bother with this. Go and use pornography, like, you could look at that, you could look at this… and so on.' It's just always ticking away (ummm).

Permanent desire to use porn despite the knowledge of negative consequences

Overt claims: Works on recovery, which involves making phone calls, meditating, writing, going to meetings. Lives his life.
Semantic: recovery, living, life; laughter
Interpretation: Is recovery for him living his life?

55 P: Yeah. That's… so, what I'm usually doing is working my recovery (laughs), making phone calls, I'm doing meditations, I'm writing, I'm going to meetings and otherwise, I'm just living my life really.

Efforts to stop using pornography

56 I: So, the aim is to resist the temptation?

Overt claims: His aim now is not to resist temptation. Semantic: therapy
Interpretation: Impact on his therapeutic journey/internal reflections

57 P: That's not quite how I'd phrase it these days. Certainly that's how I would have phrased it before I started therapy and (umm)

and twelve step work (umm) and to some extent, some Buddhist meditation that I'm working on as well.

Overt claims: Wants to stay with the feelings and take action.
Semantic: feelings, action
Interpretation: Acknowledging the feelings

58 P: I would say now the feeling, the first feeling is to stay with the feelings, and then take action.

Overt claims: Used to shut his feelings of wanting the porn, being anxious and feeling.
Semantic: shut down, want, anxious, feeling, shame
Interpretation: Used to avoid his feelings or focused on his internal states.

59 P: Because what I used to do was, basically, I used to just shut myself down. So I would basically, I would want the porn, and usually I would want the porn because I was really anxious about something, and feeling shame (umm) and I would want to shut those feelings down.

Addiction as denying one's feeling

Overt claims: The starting point was to deny his feelings of wanting to use the porn which were bubbling over. Could not fight or stop them.
Semantic: feeling, deny, triggered, bubbling over, overwhelmed, fight.
Interpretation: Unable to confront/sustain uncomfortable feelings.

60 P: And so, if that's my starting point, whatever I do, whether it's (uhh) a phone call to someone else who can help or (umm) you know, distracting myself with something I enjoy or whatever, I'm just trying to deny the feelings that are there. And so, by the time I get to the point where I'm really triggered and I want to use porn, the feelings are bubbling over. I'm in kind of overwhelmed already (umm) so I can't fight it. I can't stop myself from feeling those feelings.

Addiction as inability to sustain uncomfortable emotions

Overt claims: Accepting what he feels is a big step. Can take some positive action. Can talk about what he feels or gets support.
Semantic: accept, feeling, action, support
Interpretation: Importance of the awareness of internal states/feelings.

61 P: Once I've accepted I'm feeling them… which is quite a big step… then I can usually take some positive action. Then I can talk about the feelings that I'm feeling or I can get some help or support with what I'm feeling.

Addiction as detachment from one's feelings

Overt claims: Otherwise he shuts himself: makes phone calls, prays, meditates, exercises and ends up using porn.
Semantic: shut down, pick; clicks
Interpretation: Pornography use resulting from the avoidance of uncomfortable emotions.

62 P: But otherwise it's more a kind of… yeah. When I try and shut myself down is when it happens. Yeah, so I can literally make three phone calls, pray, meditate, do some exercise, and I'll just pick, pick (clicks fingers) the computer up and use porn.

Addiction as inability to confront uncomfortable emotions

63 I: So just delaying-

Overt claims: Unless he feels, he just employs delaying tactics.
Semantic: delaying, feel
Interpretation: Pornography use resulting from the avoidance of uncomfortable emotions.

64 P: Just a delaying tactic. Unless I feel the things.

Addiction as inability to confront uncomfortable emotions

222

Overt claims: Finds it interesting to reflect on the benefits of pornography. Was thinking about the performers and wonders whether they are supported. Links it to the 12-steps requirement of amending the wrongs. Consulted a website of a charity which talked about the myths around porn.
Semantic: performers, amend the wrongs, myths; pauses; hesitant?
Interpretation: His pornography use has implications on others & the social world. Anxiety around the fact that what he does might impact others. Are his values impacted by his behaviour?

Overt claims: A part of him says he can see whoever without consequences. Knows that it is not true. Enumerates consequences in terms of energy, shame and how he would like to operate in real sexual relationships.
Semantic: part of me, feel, consequences, true, shame, sexual, relationships; pauses
Interpretation: Tension between his freedom of choice and the impact of his choice to use pornography on different aspects of his life.

Overt claims: Because porn is on the computer, the performers are not people. The website was helpful as it showed what the performers went through in the porn industry, which although legal, treats them badly. There are drug addicts & people from abusive backgrounds. Consulting the website was a good reality check.
Semantic: people, just porn, industry, legal, treated badly, drug, addicts, abusive, reality
Interpretation: Tension between turning a blind eye to the reality of porn industry and his values; acknowledging reality

Overt claims: Pornography is liberating& exciting, otherwise he would not use it. Certainly, it is not good for him, but he is drawn to it.
Semantic: liberating, exciting, drawn to; laughter

65	I: Ok. Do you still consider pornography to be beneficial to you in any way?	
66	P: Ummmmmm that's an interesting question, actually. After a recent (uhh) use of pornography (umm) I was thinking about these performers a little bit more, and I thought, you know, is there even a charity that supports them? (Umm uh) That's also a part of the step nine work that I've been doing as well, so in the twelve-step program, step nine is to make amends for the wrongs that you've done. So, I thought I'd do a little more research and I was only able to find a charity in Australia, and maybe my research wasn't good enough, but (umm) there was a website that talked about the (umm) the myths around porn…	Concerns for people performing in pornographic content
67	P: And yeah, there is part of me that feels like (umm) I get to see whoever I want, there are no consequences… (umm) I know that's not true. I've got consequences coming out of my ears in my life in terms of my energy, in terms of my shame, in terms of like how I operate in real sexual relationships	Being aware of negative consequences of pornography use on many aspects of life
68	P: But still somehow in my mind, because it's on the computer, and they're not people there, I think… ahh, it's just porn. So the more I can just, I can read that – that website was really helpful, as it was talking about what some people have been through when they were in the porn industry, and how they were, you know, it's all legal, but they're still treated badly. They're still drug addicts. They're still from abusive backgrounds, and all the rest of it. It was a good reality check.	Concerns for people performing in pornographic content
69	P: But, to answer your question, sorry (laughs) yes, there is still this story in my head that porn is liberating, porn is exciting, otherwise, I wouldn't go to it, frankly. So, I don't think it's good for me. Certainly wouldn't say it's good for me… but I still am drawn to it.	Wanting to use porn despite the knowledge of negative consequences

Interpretation: Tension between beliefs and the impact of his behaviour on his life.

Overt claims: It is a mistaken belief that there is benefit in pornography. The evidence that it is not good for him is one of the reasons he calls it addiction. Yet he holds onto the belief that it will fix things for him.
Semantic: mistaken, belief, addiction
Interpretation: Acknowledging the impact of his behaviour on his life

Overt claims: When trying to deal with the problem he found it helpful to be considered addicted because of the analogy.
Semantic: addicted, useful, analogy; pauses
Interpretation: Calling himself an addict helped him to reflect & understand his problems.

Overt claims: Refers to someone drinking alcohol to the point of being sick and decides not to do it. They might drink occasionally, but feel consequences and act accordingly.
Semantic: feel, consequences, act; analogy
Interpretation: Importance of understanding the negative consequences of behaviour

Overt claims: His experience of pornography is like drinking alcohol every morning, feeling bad & experiencing consequences, despite knowing he has to work and feeling exhausted because of watching porn up to the early morning.
Semantic: feel, falling apart, exhausted; comparison
Interpretation: Addiction is a state when one does persistently something which is not good for them even though they know about the consequences.

Overt claims: Gives 1st definition of addiction: Despite feeling shame, being unable to relate to his girlfriend and struggling with it for so long, it seems a good idea to watch pornography.

70	*I: That belief isn't good for you… that there's a benefit?*	
71	P: Yeah. It's a mistaken belief. I mean, the ev- this is one of the reasons I call it an addiction: because the evidence is so clearly that it's not good for me, but yet I act and somehow hold onto the belief that it will fix things for me.	Wanting to use porn despite the knowledge of negative consequences is a characteristic of pornography addiction
72	*I: My next question is what does it mean to you to be addicted?*	
73	P: It's a big question (umm). When I first came into the process of trying to deal with this (umm), being addicted was really useful because for me it's the analogy.	Addiction as struggle to understand oneself
74	P: I read somewhere of somehow who drinks alcohol to the point of being really, really sick, gets up the next day and goes 'I'm not going to drink again,' and they don't drink for a long while. And maybe they'll do it again when they're very depressed or you know, get carried away at a wedding or whatever but you know, they feel the consequences and they act accordingly (umm).	Being aware of consequences deters someone who is not addicted from the problematic behaviour.
75	P: While in this example, it's like an alcoholic would get up every morning and drink the same amount, even though they know they feel shit, even though they know things are falling apart, and I think that's definitely been my experience of the pornography. It's like even though I know I got work to do, even though I know I feel utterly exhausted 'cause I've been up to four in the morning looking at porn.	Pornography addiction involves a strong desire to use porn despite the knowledge of consequences.
76	P: Even though I know I feel shamed, even though I know I can't relate to my girlfriend… you know, when that thought comes in about 'ooh I could use some pornography today,' it seems like a great idea every single time, even though I've been struggling	Pornography addiction involves a strong desire to use porn despite the knowledge of consequences.

Semantic: feel, shamed, related, great idea, every single time, struggling, addiction; pauses
Interpretation: Addiction is when one engages in behaviour despite struggles not to do so, despite harm because it feels a great idea.

Overt claims: The second definition: It is about self-esteem and high level of self-hatred and despair to the extent he felt he had no option.
Semantic: self-esteem, self-hatred, despair, no other option
Interpretation: Addiction is the lack of self-acceptance and belief that there no other options in life.

Overt claims: Pornography is very satisfying. It allows ejaculating and maintaining a high level of sexual arousal.
Semantic: big hit, ejaculate, edging, cumming
Interpretation: Focus on physical sensations; pornography is the expression of his sexuality; his experience as a sexual being

Overt claims: Satisfaction is very high & very often, which overshadows everything else. Does not think about anything else. It is as if the world stops.
Semantic: hit high, knocks everything out, don't think about anything else, stop the world;
Interpretation: High value of physical sensations and the sexual nature of the experience

Overt claims: When he feels low, desperate, self-destructive & self-harming, it is like…
Semantic: feeling, self-destructive, makes sense, despairing, self-shaming
Interpretation: Using pornography helps to avoid emotional discomfort.

Overt claims: … he felt he deserved to suffer.
Semantic: deserved, suffer, frankly
Interpretation: Being addicted means deserving to suffer.

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with it for so long. So… I think that's the first definition I would give to addiction.

77 P: The second definition, which is a bit more nuanced these days, is that I think my level of self-esteem and my level of self-hatred and my level of despair was so high that it felt like I had no other option.

Having low esteem for oneself/feeling despaired and believing that there is no other option than to use porn

78 P: (Ummm) You know, pornography is a very big hit. It's like a, a, you know, when you ejaculate and (umm) for me, when I've been, I think it's called edging is a term I've heard used, I don't – I think that's what it's referring to. Basically, I keep myself on the edge of cumming-

High value given to physical sensations and sexual gratification related to pornography use

79 I: Delaying ejaculating.

80 P: Yes. And, you know, as a result, the hit is very, very high very often (umm) and that, that just knocks everything else out of the park. I don't think about anything else. It's like literally stop the world, I want to get off. (Uh)

Expected sexual gratification seems to be more important than anything else

81 P: And when I'm feeling that way, being self-destructive kind of makes sense, frankly, when I'm feeling that low, and that despairing, and that self-shaming. It's sort of like, yeah…

Realising that behaviour is self-destructive and feeling shame and despair

82 P: I didn't come to do CBT until more recently, and it's really working well for me now, but I'm pretty sure it would not have worked well for me in the past, simply because I kind of felt that I deserved to suffer… frankly

Deep sense of suffering

Overt claims: Because of various personal reasons and people, it could have been any other drug, but for him it was pornography. Semantic: could have, hit, for me; repetitions, confirmation Interpretation: It does not matter what is the thing or behaviour that an addict is addicted to.	83	P: So (umm) yeah, for me I think it could have been any other drug. It could have been (umm) it could have been class A drugs, it could have been alcohol (umm) for various reasons to do with my personal history and (uh) other people I knew. It wasn't those things. Porn was the kind of hit for me, yeah.	It is not a particular substance or behaviour in themselves that are addictive.
	84	I: Can you identify a specific time when you went from pornography user to pornography addict?	
Overt claims: When he became aware that he had problems with using pornography he wanted to make sense of it and realised he was pornography addict. Semantic: aware, problem, exploring, making sense; pauses, reflects Interpretation: Calling himself an addict made sense when exploring his problems	85	P: (long pause) I think, yeah, it was the time when I became aware it was a problem. I think before then, I don't know if I was just exploring or kind of making sense of it but I (umm)…	Realising the pornography use is a problem is an aspect of being an addict.
Overt claims: When he was between 14 and 17, pornography use escalated and became more extreme. A lot was happening in his personal life. Semantic: escalated, shit, personal life; pauses; laughter Interpretation: Escalation of the use in the light of other problems in life. Was it a way of hiding from reality?	86	P: When I was… it was from the ages of about fourteen through… seventeen, I would say was when it kind of escalated and became more and more extreme. (Umm) I mean, there was a lot of shit going on in my personal life at the time and (umm) it doesn't say in the guidance about any disclosure about (umm) drug use (laughs) so I don't know what to say about that.	Escalation and extremeness of behaviour in the context of other life problems
	87	I: I mean, it's not going to have any consequences here.	
Overt claims: Used a lot of drugs. Semantic: drugs, mixed up; laughter Interpretation: Problematic behaviours do not operate in isolation.	88	P: (laughs) No, I was using a lot of drugs at the time. I was a very heavy cannabis user (umm) and I used class A drugs from the age of about fourteen and a half onwards. This was all mixed up in that behavior (umm)	Engaging in other types of problematic behaviour
Overt claims: When older, for various reasons, he realised that he did not want to use drugs. At that time (14-17), pornography use escalated. Semantic: escalated Interpretation: Is porn addiction more difficult than other forms of problematic behaviour?	89	P: But as I got older, as I said, for various reasons, partially because what I saw happen to my friends, partially because of what happened to my dad (umm) I realized that I didn't want to go down that route. But yeah, that was the time when things escalated basically, fourteen to seventeen.	Belief that pornography addiction is more difficult to overcome that other forms of problematic behaviour
	90	I: Did you consciously attempt to diminish your drug use?	
	91	P: Drug or porn?	

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	92 *I: Drug at this point.*	
Overt claims: Diminished his drug use after bad A-level results. Used drugs irregularly until his 20s. Semantic: gave up, falling apart; pauses Interpretation: Boundary situation which motivated him to move away from drugs.	93 P: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I did. I just gave up. So (umm) I gave up (umm) cannabis basically when I got terrible A-Level results. I was like 'this is just falling apart.' When I gave up the cannabis, there was less temptation to do about anything else anyway. Then I used the other stuff on and off. That was fairly irregular anyway, and I used that probably into my twenties.	Experience of severe stressors as motivation for change
	94 I: By other stuff you mean other drugs?	
Overt claims: Used occasionally class A drugs until 30 yrs old. Stopped because it was not worth it. Semantic: laughter Interpretation: Awareness of the consequences as motivation not to engage in this particular behaviour	95 P: Class A's, yeah. And (um) right up to about thirty, but that was about once every… three months or less than that. I would just be like… yeah (*laughs*) I just got more and more of a hangover and more and more of a come-down, so I just stopped because it wasn't worth it… yeah.	Engaging in other types of problematic behaviour
	96 *I: But through all that your use of pornography continued?*	
Overt claims: Throughout this time used to watch pornography. Smoked heavily. Gave up cigarettes. Semantic: trouble, giving up Interpretation: Porn use is more difficult to quit than other problematic behaviour.	97 P: Yeah, absolutely. And the same with cigarettes. I used to smoke quite heavily and again, I didn't have any trouble giving up cigarettes when I wanted to have cigarettes. I just gave them up.	Belief that overcoming pornography addiction is particularly difficult
	98 *I: Did you have any behaviors you felt like you were addicted to?*	
Overt claims: No addiction to other behaviour. Semantic: Interpretation:	99 P: (Ummm) Nothing else I was addicted to… no.	
	100 *I: Ok. At the time when you said that your pornography use was beginning to become problematic, did you feel like you were in control… of your pornography use? And if so, to what extent?*	
Overt claims: Did not know he was out of control until realised pornography had taken over his entire life. Until this moment he did not see harm in pornography. Semantic: control, take over, my entire life, exciting, harm Interpretation: Addiction is when someone believes that behaviour has taken control of their life and starts seeing the harm done.	101 P: I don't think I knew it was out of control until I was starting to just feel like it had taken over my entire life. So, I think until then it felt exciting and all the rest of it. And (uh) you know, what's the harm in porn and all of that.	Believing that behaviour dominates one's life over which there is no control

Overt claims: Felt pornography dominated everything in his life. Realised it was a problem and wanted to stop, but could not. It was a changing point. Semantic: dominating, problem, stop, could not, changing point; laughter Interpretation: Addiction is when one believes he cannot stop his problematic behaviour.	102	P: And then it felt like it was dominating everything in my life and I was like ok this is a problem and I want to stop, and then I couldn't, basically…. So that's (*laughs*) that's the changing point, really.	Undermining belief in one's capacity to address the problem
	103	*I: Did you experience cravings and compulsions to use pornography?*	
Overt claims: Continues to experience cravings and compulsions to use pornography. Semantic: confirmation Interpretation: Addiction is when one believes that cravings and compulsions prevent them from making a change.	104	P: Yeah, still do. All the time. Yeah.	Feeling compulsions to use pornography
	105	*I: You said that you tried to stop but you just couldn't. What was your experience like trying to stop?*	
Overt claims: Finds it difficult to express what it was like trying to stop. Semantic: uncertain, difficult to express Interpretation: Initial inability to articulate his struggle	106	P: I can't tell you… I mean, it's hard to put the whole experience into words, really (umm) what it's like.	Struggling with understanding one's experiences
Overt claims: After 20 years in therapy, the 12-step program, outreach resources, people to talk to, spiritual life, he reduced his pornography use significantly, but has not stopped it completely. Semantic: therapy, working, resources, people, spiritual, support, stopped, reduced Interpretation: Pornography addiction is difficult to stop.	107	P: But. I mean, to put it simply, it's been twenty years that I've been in therapy for this… and I have been- I have done CBT, I've been working the twelve-step program, (umm) I have been- the twelve-step program involves daily, kind of, very similar to CBT, actions. That means I have outreach resources, people I can talk to every day. I have a spiritual life based around getting support around this stuff. That hasn't stopped me using porn completely. It has significantly reduced it, but it hasn't stopped it completely.	Belief that pornography addiction is extremely difficult to stop
Overt claims: Before reaching this point, when he tried to stop, he experienced shame, exhaustion & felt overwhelmed. The solution was to use more porn. Semantic: stop, shame, solution, exhaustion, feeling, overwhelmed Interpretation: Porn use as a way of avoiding or sustaining uncomfortable feelings.	108	P: Before I even got into that I was trying to stop (ummm) I, as I said, the shame kicks in and then the solution to the shame and exhaustion and the feeling of being overwhelmed is to use more porn.	Pornography use as a reaction to the feelings shame, exhaustion and being overwhelmed

Overt claims: Gives an example of an unsuccessful attempt to stop watching pornography. Semantic: stop Interpretation: Extremeness of the behaviour	109	P: So (umm) to take on example in point, I asked a girlfriend to help me to stop looking at porn, so she took my computer to work… so then maybe after a day or two, I used her computer… and then she took her computer to work. And then, there was another computer in the house which had a cable in it, and she had taken the cable for that as well, and then I went out and bought a cable.	Conflicting longings: to stop and to use
Overt claims: After a few days of not using pornography, he experienced the feeling of shame related to wanting to quit & being low. Semantic: every single time, shame, quit, feelings, being low Interpretation: Self-hatred & lack of self-acceptance	110	P: Every single time it would be a few days and there would be the shame of 'I want to quit' and you know, there would be these feelings of being so low, so (umm).	Wanting to stop the behaviour results from shame and is undermined by low self-esteem.
Overt claims: Wanted to stop, but after a few of days was buying and watching pornography. Sometimes it was for a longer periods, but it was recurrent. Semantic: stop, continuously; laughter, swears Interpretation: Tension between a genuine desire to change and equally strong desire not to change	111	P: You know, I just want to stop this, and two, three days later I'd be out buying pornography, I'd be going buying, I used to watch videos, I'd be buying videos and whatever else. And it's just been like that, fucking continuously. You know, sometimes it's longer periods, sometimes it's – excuse my language, I'm swearing, I realize (laughs).	Being torn: struggling to make a change in one's life and backing off
	112	I: You're completely able to swear here.	
Overt claims: Wondered whether it was insanity. Semantic: insanity; laughter Interpretation: Addiction is mad and irrational behaviour.	113	P: (laughs) Ok, good. The (umm) like, I'll be… yeah. Like, what is this insanity, really?	Irrational behaviour
Overt claims: Watched for three days while getting four hrs of sleep. Was exhausted, missed jobs as self-employed, was not paid. Semantic: exhausted, missed, cancelled; laughter Interpretation: Extremeness of behaviour in terms of consequences	114	P: You know, when I've been using for like three days and getting four hours of sleep and I'm exhausted and I'm… I've not looked at my to-do list about anything, and I've missed jobs, cancelled jobs and I'm self-employed so that's (laughs) that's my money, I don't get paid for not being there… (umm)	Pornography addiction is about neglecting himself and his life obligations
Overt claims: Wanted to stop, but 2-3 days later was watching again. It was going on forever. Semantic: stop, on it again, forever Interpretation: Tension between a desire to stop and a desire to continue; finds the temptation to use irresistible	115	P: and I'll be like 'right, I'm gonna stop, I'm gonna stop, I'm gonna stop,' and then… I'll be on it again two days later, three days later, and that's just gone on forever.	Prioritising the option to use over the option not to use
Overt claims: Asked parents, girlfriends & friends for help. Tried self-help. Best help was from others, but it is hard work.	116	P: And you know, I've told parents, and tried to get them to help me. I've told girlfriends, tried to get them to help me. I've told	Inability to stop despite the availability of internal and

Semantic: help, hard work
Interpretation: Turing towards others and himself to stop

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117 I: In what ways were your relationships with others affected by your pornography addiction?

(context, line 116–117) friends, tried to get them to help me. I've tried to just do it myself. I've tried to set myself targets (umm) yeah, you know, the best progress I got is getting help from others but even that is still hard work.

Right column: external resources to address the problem

Overt claims: Pornography addiction affected his most significant early relationship. His fantasies prevented him from being present during sex.
Semantic: relationships, fantasy, never present, sex, effect
Interpretation: Pornography preventing relationship with others at a physical level.

118 P: So… to start with early relationships (umm), particularly my most significant early relationship I (umm) would go into fantasy basically about the pornography and I'd never be present during sex, so that had that effect.

Right column: Living a fantasy live rather than the real life. Placing the illusion of sex above one's own sex experience and sexuality.

Overt claims: Effects of pornography on him are hard to describe. They include being emotionally detached and separated from the world after he used it.
Semantic: effect, feel, emotionally detached, separated from the world
Interpretation: Pornography addiction makes him detached & separated from the world.

119 P: But I think pornography for me has this different, slightly subtle effect… it's kind of hard to describe, but the best way I can put it is after I've used, I feel emotionally detached. I feel emotionally separated from the world (umm).

Right column: Being detached from the real world

Overt claims: Was unable to engage emotionally in previous relationship despite the fact that they loved each other. It ruined it. The new relationship goes well.
Semantic: emotionally, engage, week upon week, ruined, relationships, not able
Interpretation: Inability to be in (physical) relationships with others.

120 P: And that meant that I was less able to emotionally engage with my girlfriend. And then when… on one occasion, the one that's every day, on week upon week upon week upon week upon week, that… that basically ruined my most recent relationship. But this, this new relationship is going well. But the relationship before… we loved each other, but I wasn't able to, wasn't able to engage with her emotionally…

Right column: Inability to relate physically and emotionally with others

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Overt claims: Gets depressed when using pornography, becomes angry & exhausted, cries, which prevents him from engaging in relationships.
Semantic: depressed, angry, crying, exhausted, engage; laughter
Interpretation: Desperation, suffering despite the desire to stop and engage with others

121 P: As a result of that and… and I get depressed when using it as well, so I'll be angry or crying basically (*laughs*), and I'll be exhausted, which means I can't really do as much or engage as much.

Right column: Addiction involves physical and emotional suffering.

Overt claims: The effect of pornography is that having sex is not appealing because he is exhausted and has pornographic images in his mind, about which he has mixed feelings.

122 P: Actually, the idea of having sex is not very appealing when I'm feeling exhausted and I've got all these images in my mind

Right column: Inability to engage sexually with others

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Semantic: sex, appealing, feeling, exhausted, image, mixed, effect
Interpretation: Pornography preventing sex life; detachment from others on the sexual level

Overt claims: Does not get into serious relationship without disclosing his problems. The effect was that a girlfriend did not want to get involved with him.
Semantic: relationships, involved, end, affected
Interpretation: Relations with others are affected.

Overt claims: Sharing his experiences and alleviating his woes damaged his relationship because it let to a different power dynamic.
Semantic: alleviate, confession, confessor, damaging, relationship, dynamic; sigh
Interpretation: Relationships with others are ruined; options are not enacted.

Overt claims: When being intimate, he thought about pornographic images, shared the details and compared the partner. Considers that the partners compared themselves to pornographic images.
Semantic: intimate, thinking, detail, comparing
Interpretation: Impacting intimate relationship and relatedness to others

Overt claims: The extremeness led him to seek out therapy. It was taking over his life. Was exhausted, filled with shame, depressed, scared & could not stop.
Semantic: extremeness, taking over my life, exhausted, shame, depressed, scared, could not stop
Interpretation: Extremeness of desperation and shame, inability to stop, to live his life.

Overt claims: Thought about seeking help. Was advised by someone he respected to get professional help.
Semantic: help; laughter

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which I have mixed feelings about and (umm) yeah, so it had an effect that way.

123   P: Also, a girlfriend – I have a policy, I don't get into relationships unless, serious relationships, unless I've talked to them about this stuff, so they know what they're getting into. And you know, you know, another girlfriend was just like 'well I don't want to get involved…' and off, basically. So that was the end of that one, which has affected it that way.

Relationships with others are limited.

124   P: And I think (uh) also what I've noticed is there's a really thin line- I used to kind of go into masses of detail and, kind of (sighs) for lack of a better word, alleviate my woes by confessing, so I'd use my girlfriend as my confessor, and that was just really damaging to the relationship as well because (umm) it's a completely different power dynamic. It sort of puts, it throws it.

Impacting negatively romantic relationship

125   P: But also, she's then there, every time we come to be intimate with each other, thinking about all the things I've told her in detail about the stuff that I've looked at, and how she's not that. So, it is definitely noticeable with girlfriends that they were, you know, they were, it seemed to me anyway, and what they hinted at, they were comparing themselves to the stuff that I looked at, so… yeah.

Inability to be intimate

126   I: What was the reason for you to seek out therapy?

127   P: Just the extremeness of it. Like I said, it was taking over my life, I was utterly exhausted, I was totally filled with shame, I was depressed, I was scared and I couldn't stop on my own accord.

Shame and despair undermining one's capacity for change

128   P: So basically I thought (laughs) better get some bloody help! I spoke to (uhh), I spoke to somebody I really respect (umm) and not my dad (laughs) and… through work and (umm) some sports

Looking beyond oneself for help

Interpretation: Looking to someone beyond self for help

training I do and, yeah, his response was like you need to get help with this. You need professional help, I can't help you. So, that's what I did, really.

129 *I: What was your engagement like with other life activities? You said you had trouble working. Did you have any kind of trouble maintaining a social life and other activities?*

Overt claims: Was using pornography when had spare time & often when did not have it.
Semantic: acting out, time
Interpretation: Not living life; reducing his options to watching pornography.

130 P: Yeah, I'd say so. All of my spare time, if I had spare time, I was acting out. And often when I didn't have spare time, I was acting out so…

Problematic behaviour dominates one's life

Overt claims: Socialised less. Saw his friends maybe 4 times a year. Had his girlfriend and work.
Semantic: socialise
Interpretation: Detaching and isolating from others

131 P: I socialized less. I have a circle of friends but I basically kept to seeing them maybe four times a year, at the most. I had my girlfriend and my work.

Living in isolation from others

Overt claims: Realised his 'social, emotional and sexual anorexia'. Was less able to have sex and avoided it. Avoided social contacts. Felt extremely uncomfortable about being with people. Glad that this has changed.
Semantic: social, emotional sexual anorexia, flip-side, less able, sex, (un)comfortable, avoided, social contact, extremely, people
Interpretation: Lack of relationships with others, including intimacy.

132 P: But one of the things, it's a phrase we use in various programs, which is 'social, emotional and sexual anorexia.' That became clear to me when I started working those twelve-step programs, that that was that kind of flip-side of this kind of behavior. I was less able to have sex, less comfortable having sex, and avoided having sex to some extent. I avoided social contact with people and I felt extremely uncomfortable (umm) really, just being with people. Yeah. That has changed, I'm glad so, but yeah.

Impacting the relatedness to others on many levels (social, relationships, being intimate)

133 *I: Can you describe whether there were any risks involved in how you consumed pornography?*

Overt claims: Porn sites present themselves as legitimate, but they do not have any requirements about posting. It is terrifying & scary. Does not know the age of the performers or the legality of postings.
Semantic: requirements, legit, age, terrifying, scary
Interpretation: Anxiety around the fact that he is implicated in illegal things and that is against his values.

134 P: Umm I think one of the risks that is with me is the fact that (umm) I discovered that the main porn sites… because it was always dodgy on bulletin board systems anyway, but the main porn sites like Porn Hub? I don't know if you're familiar with that one. Their requirements for people posting online – they don't have any! So I thought porn on Porn Hub would be, like, completely legit, because it presents itself as a really legit website, but actually anyone can post on it, so I have no idea what I'm looking at or where it's come from or who's filmed it, or like

Concerns about legal consequences of behaviour

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Overt claims: Scare of people knowing about his porn addiction, which he considers shameful. Experienced public shame about him watching pornography when in school. Semantic: scared, addicted, shameful; laughter Interpretation: Fear of stigma; His acceptance by others is threatened.	135	P: I think I'm scared of just, just people knowing that I'm addicted to porn, it's pretty shameful. It was exposed when I was younger… (*nervous laugh*) I had an experience where I shared pornographic magazines with a school friend and he basically freaked out and told the whole school. So that, I was public shamed around that anyway.	Fearing stigma associated with pornography use
Overt claims: Buying porn felt dodgy and dangerous. Semantic: dangerous, seedy Interpretation: Fear of stigma that someone will see him?	136	P: So I think wondering around Soho like, buying porn videos just felt seedy and dangerous as well.	Concerns about the consequences of behaviour
Overt claims: The main risk was to his health such as harm through excess masturbation. Semantic: health, physically harmed, excess, masturbation Interpretation: Impact on physical health as the main consequence of his addiction.	137	P: I think the main thing's actually been the risk to my health. I've literally, physically harmed myself through excess masturbation. I've been swollen for days.	Concerns about physical health
Overt claims: Very little ability to engage emotionally and mentally with other people or process his life. Semantic: emotionally, mentally, little ability, engage, people Interpretation: Not living his life, not relating to others, not accepting himself	138	P: I have (umm), as I said, emotionally, mentally deemed very little ability to engage with other people or process my life, generally.	Concerns about emotional health and living life fully
Overt claims: Constantly feels shame and despair, which he considers damaging. Semantic: feel, shame, despair, damaging; laughter Interpretation: Pornography addiction means suffering.	139	P: And yeah, I just constantly feel the shame and despair, frankly so that's (umm) pretty damaging (*laughs*). Yeah, I know you said risk rather than damage but yeah, I think.	Profound sense of suffering involving shame and despair
	140	*I: I suppose the two can go hand in hand. From what you said, there's definitely been a lot of physical health symptoms. Aside from swelling and physical pain, there's also been exhaustion from lack of sleep.*	
Overt claims: Was diagnosed with depression which confused him because when he does not use porn, he does not feel depressed & has a lot of energy. Semantic: depression, confusing Interpretation: Linking his depression directly to pornography use; When pursued other options in life, was not depressed.	141	P: And depression as well. It was really interesting when I was getting assessed by various people that I was initially diagnosed as having depression and that was kind of confusing to me, because the rest of the time I'm seriously get up and go. I don't have a problem making things happen, I have a lot of energy. But,	Direct linking suffering with behaviour

what age the participants really are. That's terrifying, that's pretty scary (umm).

Exploratory comments	Transcript	Emergent themes
	when I use the porn, I get depressed, and when I don't use the porn, I don't get depressed, so…	
	142 *I: Have there been any consequences of being addicted to pornography to your values, to your beliefs?*	
Overt claims: Massive consequences of being addicted to pornography on his values. Semantic: massive; laughter Interpretation: Pornography addiction compromised his values.	143 P: Yeah (*laughs*) massive ones!	Challenging one's values
Overt claims: Likes to think he respects women, but looks at women being used in a very objectifying way and enjoys it. His behaviour challenges his beliefs about women. Semantic: respect, women, being used, objectifying, turn on, jars with, believe, feel, actually, challenge Interpretation: Questions genuineness of his beliefs and not living in line with his values.	144 P: I mean, I think the first thing is, like I said, like… I'd like to think I have respect for women, but the reality is that I spend all this time looking at women being used in a very objectifying way (umm) and that's a turn on for me. And so that kind of jars with what I believe I think about women and how I feel about women and then how I actually behave. So that's been a real challenge to my beliefs.	Challenging one's beliefs and values
Overt claims: His belief that his was able to cope in life on his own and stop using porn was undermined. Semantic: cope, sort out, capable, deal with, fight, pathetic, pull yourself together, stop using, how hard is it; laughter Interpretation: Inability to confront the problem on his own.	145 P: And I think also the way that I've come to deal with my addiction, I've had a very strong internal message from a young age that (umm) I had to be able to cope on my own, that I had to be able to sort things out on my own (umm) and I think some, some arrogance, I'm sure it's not all gone (*laughs*) that I was tough enough and capable enough and intelligent enough to be able to just deal with it (umm) and that's still something I have to fight a lot because I was just like stop being so pathetic, pull yourself together and just stop using porn I mean, for God's sake, how hard is it?	Undermining one's belief in their capacity to address the problem
	146 *I: Yes, you gave up cannabis and drugs and…*	
Overt claims: Stopped smoking without problems. Semantic: Interpretation: Pornography addiction is harder than other problem behaviours.	147 P: Cigarettes. Yeah. No problems.	Believing that pornography addiction is more difficult to overcome than other forms of problematic behaviours.
Overt claims: His beliefs were unhelpful because they increased shame and despair and resulted in him using porn. Had and still has to challenge these beliefs. Semantic: sham, despair, beliefs; clicks fingers	148 P: So that's a really strong voice and it's really unhelpful basically because it increases the shame. When I increase the shame and despair (clicks fingers) go back to porn. So, I had to	Interrelations between shame, desperation and problematic behaviour

234

Interpretation: Interaction of shame, desperation and pornography use; retreat in the face of emotional discomfort

Overt claims: The spiritual focus of the 12-step programme emphasises a power greater than just an individual which is going to fix him.
Semantic: spiritual, individual, fix me; pauses
Interpretation: Integrated spiritual dimension; expects that a greater power is going to 'repair' him.

Overt claims: Relies on people and spiritual faith (God), but the spiritual has not stopped him so far.
Semantic: relying, people, spiritual, stop; laughter
Interpretation: His confidence in the external world is undermined.

Overt claims: A long process which changed his perspective. He believed he deserved to suffer because he was bad.
Semantic: perspective, deserved, punished;
Interpretation: Used to believe that his suffering linked to pornography use was a punishment; issue of self-acceptance?

Overt claims: Now believes that the world has a good side, which gives him hope he had never had before. Life involves good and bad things.
Semantic: hope, positivity
Interpretation: Exploring his relationship to the world and the fact that life has many different facets

Overt claims: Used to think that he and people around him were damaged. Had little hope.
Semantic: society, parents, friends, fucked, hope; laughter
Interpretation: Used to believe that the world is a bad place to be & everyone is miserable.

	challenge that voice and I still have to challenge that voice, so that's significantly changed my beliefs.	undermining one's capacity for change
149	P: Also, the program that I'm working, the twelve-step programs have a spiritual focus (uhh) to them so they (uhh) emphasize (umm) they emphasize having some kind of higher power, and that is a power greater than just myself as an individual. So I had to kind of examine what, if it's not me that's going to fix me, what is going to fix me?	Looking for help beyond oneself
150	P: So, that's partly been relying on people beyond myself, but it's also been developing a kind of spiritual faith, and I always believed in God before this even happened, and (uhh) so when they told me that doing spiritual stuff would help, I was like 'well I do spiritual stuff (*laughs*) and it hasn't stopped me so far!'	Looking for help beyond oneself
151	P: And it's taken, that's been a long process, and it's really changed my perspective on things spiritually. I… for lack of a better phrase, saw God as Santa Claus, as in he would give me good things if I was a good boy and he would punish me if I was a bad boy, and since I was a bad boy, I deserved to be punished. End of story. So, and it wasn't really more complicated than that.	Believing that suffering is deserved
152	P: And now I've come to believe that it's possible that the world, the universe… whatever you want to call it, might have good things in it. It might want things to work out well. So I've got a little bit more hope and a little bit more positivity than I think I ever had before. If you had asked me before I would've said, you know, life is a mixed bag, there's good and bad and…	Struggling to understand oneself and their relation to the world
153	I: A box of chocolates.	
154	P: (*laughs*) but deep down… I thought it was fucked. I thought my parents were fucked. Everything I could see about society was fucked. My friends were fucked (umm)… I was fucked (umm) so… as far as I was concerned, there wasn't much hope. So…	Having profoundly negative view of the world
155	I: Let's just get fucked.	

Overt claims: This belief has changed.
Semantic:
Interpretation: Effect of his therapeutic work on him

156   P: Yep! So, that's kind of changed.

157   *I: When looking back at your experiences, how do you feel about pornography now?*

Overt claims: Shame is reducing. It has nothing to do about what he is watching, but how he feels about himself and the world.
Semantic: shame, reducing, significantly, feel, world
Interpretation: Pornography addiction is not about the content, but about how he feels about himself.

158   P: Yeah, so like I said, the shame is reducing significantly, because I think a lot of the shame isn't actually to do with what I'm looking at, it's to do with how I feel about myself, how I feel about the world.

Addiction is a reflection of one's perception of their worth

Overt claims: Coming to terms with sexuality makes him feel comfortable about the idea of being aroused by looking at beautiful people having sex.
Semantic: feel, sexuality, come to terms, comfortable, turned on, beautiful, sex
Interpretation: Inability to make peace with his sexual dimension underlines pornography addiction; acceptance of him as a sexual being

159   P: And how I feel about (umm) sexuality basically (umm) and the more I've come to terms with sexuality, the more comfortable I am with the idea that I might just be turned on by looking at beautiful people having sex.

Not coming to terms with sexuality underlines pornography addiction.

Overt claims: Is more aware of what he is looking at. Previously he held extreme views: either pornography was horrendous and he was a terrible person or it was exciting.
Semantic: aware, either or, turn on, horrendous, terrible, extremes; laughter, disgust
Interpretation: Polarised & extreme views; discordant feelings about pornography use

160   P: That's less of a thing now. But with that being taken away, as I was talking about earlier, more aware now of what it is I'm really looking at. Because before it was either or. Either the best thing in the world (*laughs*) because it was such a turn on, or it was fucking horrendous, and I'm a terrible person and uhh, uhh (*makes vomiting gestures*). Those two extremes.

Holding extremely polarised views about the value of pornography and oneself

Overt claims: It is understandable that people are attracted to and turned on by a sexual act.
Semantic: sexual act, understandable, attracted, turned on
Interpretation: Was unable to accept his sexual dimension.

161   P: So the middle position feels a little bit more like 'you know what? It's a sexual act. It's understandable that people are attracted to it, turned on by it. It's understandable I'm turned on by it.

Overt claims: However, performers are exploited and unhappy.
Semantic: exploited, unhappy
Interpretation: Implication of his viewing of pornography on others; effect on his values

162   P: But… these people are being exploited, and that there are some really fucking unhappy people there,

Concerns for others

Overt claims: Pornography is on rise and is driven by those who watch it or some other agendas. It does not feel right. Semantic: acknowledgement, driven by, feels; pauses Interpretation: Pornography conceals reality; viewing it has implications for the others; it involves responsibility	163	P: And like there's not an acknowledgement of that, and that pornography seems to be sold more and more and more… yeah. It's weird, like, I don't know if you've been on Porn Hub, but there's some stuff, it's clearly… it's hard to say, like with the internet, it's hard to say if it's driven by the people watching it, or if it's driven by advertisers, or if it's driven by other agendas, or whatever else. But there are themes that run through and it will encourage you to look at certain images and link to other images and so on (umm) and other videos, and I'm just like 'this is fucked up!' That's how it feels.	Questioning one's responsibilities in the social world
Overt claims: For him, erotic part ties to the fantasy. Does not like what he watches, but the fantasy is playing out. There is a thrill in the illicit and the taboo. Pornography is not just about people and sexual acts, but about story it is telling and the fantasy. Semantic: erotic, erotica, fantasy, happy, terrible, thrill, illicit, taboo, sexual, story; laughter, analogy Interpretation: It is detachment from the real world, from the real relationships with others, intimacy; it provides security in the face of anxiety.	164	P: And to me, now, it's as much – to go back to the erotic stuff, it ties in it actually, the erotica and the fantasy – very often the pornography I'm looking at is… it's… I'm not happy about it, it's terrible, but the fantasy that it's playing out… I really don't fucking like that. Like, for example like, being unfaithful to your wife (laughs) it's like, why does that need to be part of the pornography? And I know there's a thrill in the illicit and the taboo and all the rest of it, but it's like… that gets pushed, and pornography feels to me like it's not just about the people and the sexual acts, but it's actually also about the story it's telling and the kind of the fantasy .	Looking for a secure sense of oneself through detachment from the real world
	165	I: The values.	
Overt claims: Pornography pushes the values and the fantasy. Pornography goes towards shame and fear which heighten sexual intensity. Semantic: values, fantasy, pushing, shame, fear, sexual intensity, fix Interpretation: Pornography as constricted expression of his expectations about sex?	166	P: Exactly. The values and the fantasy that it's pushing and… you know, yeah. And I can see that there, I've read somewhere that shame or fear heightens sexual intensity. So I can see that pornography would naturally will go towards things that heighten fear and… yeah, in order to give people a higher fix.	Pornography offers sexual intensity
Overt claims: Pornography is dangerous and will draw more people into it. It is dangerous because people think it is ok. Semantic: dangerous Interpretation: Anxiety about the dangers of pornography & implications on others	167	P: And so that's kind of my view of pornography really, is that it's fucking dangerous, and it's naturally going in that direction and it will naturally draw more and more people into it, and that it's particularly dangerous because people think it's kind of ok.	Concerns about social costs of pornography use

	168 *I: Ok. My last question is what's something that you'd want others to understand about pornography addiction?*	
Overt claims: Alcoholism is now accepted as addiction. Before it was not the case. Semantic: addict, accept; exhale, laughter Interpretation: Analogy with alcoholism; public perception of alcohol addiction in the past	169 P: (*exhales, then laughs*) That when somebody's deep, when somebody's really a porn addict and it's actually addiction (umm) I think that's it. With alcoholism people accept that people are alcoholics now. They can get that. But I know when alcoholism was like, first talked about, people would be like 'just stop drinking. What's the problem?	Concerns about public perceptions of pornography addicts
Overt claims: People see sex addiction as an excuse. Semantic: excuse; reflects Interpretation: Lack of understanding what pornography addiction is and that it is not an excuse	170 P: And I think… I think… there's these two extremes in the media at the moment. Tiger Woods was the, the one that brought it up. You know, he'd done all these things about being unfaithful to his wife and then he came out publicly and said he was a sex addict and quite understandably, people turned around and said 'well you're just looking for an excuse, you're just trying to excuse yourself,'	Concerns about public understanding of problems linked with pornography addiction
Overt claims: Would like to acknowledge that porn addiction is not an excuse, but it is not a reason for not taking responsibility. Semantic: addiction, excuse, responsibility Interpretation: Need to acknowledge that pornography addiction is not an excuse; need to take responsibility	171 P: and I think there's a line between the two. On the one hand, it would be really great to acknowledge that porn addiction is not just an excuse… but at the same time, it's not a reason not to take responsibility.	Addiction as a form of acknowledging one's responsibility
Overt claims: Alcoholics are being acknowledged as addicts and get treatment, but are expected to take responsibility. Hopes it will also be the case that pornography addicts will get help, but addiction will not be not be an excuse. Semantic: ill, sympathetic, treatment, responsibility, excuse, problem, hope Interpretation: Public perception of alcohol addiction has changed. Hopes pornography addiction will also be acknowledged.	172 P: So, like (umm) alcoholics now, if somebody says to you they're an alcoholic, well you're sympathetic to the fact that they're drinking really badly. You know that they're really ill, but you also hope that they'll get treatment for it, you know? You also expect them to take responsibility for the fact that they're an alcoholic. And that's what I hope is the same thing for a porn addict really, that it's not used as an excuse to use pornography and go crazy, that it's used as a like, there's a problem and you need to go get treatment for it so… that's what I'd hope, yeah.	Centrality of the others and their thinking
	173 *I: Do you believe there's a specific stigma surrounding addiction to do with sexuality and porn?*	
Overt claims: There is a massive stigma surrounding pornography addiction. Semantic: massive, definitely (stigma)	174 P: Massive. Definitely.	Belief that pornography addiction is not socially acceptable

Interpretation: Stigma related to pornography or sex addiction is greater than stigma surrounding other kinds of addiction

Overt claims: Would not feel embarrassed to disclose he was an alcoholic. people would judge a porn addict.
Semantic: shame, sex, judge me; analogy; laughter
Interpretation: Fear of being judged and not accepted by others

175   P: Like, I'd tell someone I was an alcoholic if I was an alcoholic. Wouldn't think twice about it. But you know, I'm talking from a porn addict perspective (*laughs*) as I've acknowledged, I've got a lot of shame about sex, so maybe I'm imagining that people are going to judge me.

Fear of being judged

Overt claims: There is stigma and belief among the public that porn addicts want an excuse for using porn.
Semantic: stigma, excuse
Interpretation: Stigma related to pornography or sex addiction is greater than stigma surrounding other kinds of addiction.

176   P: But you know, the porn industry is a pretty horrible place and I think a lot of people do not know that, so there's the stigma attached with that, and there's this association with Tiger Woods and all that, that if you tell people you're a sex addict people will just think you're a bloke who likes shagging around and using porn and wants an excuse for it. So, I think there is a stigma in that sense.

Fear of stigma related to this particular form of behaviour

Overt claims: Responsibility is at the centre. Otherwise it is just an excuse.
Semantic: responsibility, excuse
Interpretation: Taking responsibility is central in dealing with pornography addiction.

177   P: That's why I think responsibility is sort of in the center of it. Otherwise it's just an excuse.

Responsibility at the crux of addiction

Part 2: Identification of subordinate themes

Clusters of emergent themes (subordinate themes)	Emergent themes	Line number
Pornography addiction seen as a combination of shame and a desire for pleasure and relief	Ambivalent feelings about pornography use: combination of pleasure and shame	43, 48
	Conflicting longings: to stop and to use	109, 111, 113
	Wanting to stop the behaviour results from shame and is undermined by low self-esteem.	110
	Pornography use as a reaction to the feelings shame, exhaustion and being overwhelmed	108
	Associating sex with shame	41
	Not coming to terms with sexuality underlines pornography addiction	159
	Shame associated with the use of certain types of pornographic content	38
	Having low esteem for oneself/feeling despaired and believing that there is no other option than to use porn	77
	Realising that behaviour is self-destructive and feeling shame and despair	81
	Deep sense of suffering	82, 139, 140, 150
	Concerns about public perceptions of pornography addicts	169, 170, 172, 174, 175, 176
	Fearing stigma associated with pornography use	135
	Realising the pornography use is a problem is an aspect of being an addict.	85
	Feeling of excitement and thrill linked with pornography use	22
	High value given to physical sensations and sexual gratification related to pornography use	78

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	Escalation and extremeness of behaviour in the context of other life problems	86
	Having profoundly negative view of the world	154
	Looking for a secure sense of oneself through detachment from the real world	164
	Addiction as denying /detachment of one's feeling	59, 61
	Addiction as inability to sustain uncomfortable emotions	60, 62, 64
	Addiction is a reflection of one's perception of their worth	158
Exercising the choice to use pornography despite awareness of negative consequences	Prioritising the option to use over the option not to use	115
	Permanent desire to use porn despite the knowledge of negative consequences	54, 67, 69, 71, 75
	Being aware of consequences deters someone who is not addicted from the problematic behaviour.	74
	Living in isolation from others	131
	Being detached from the real world	119, 123
	Escalation of behaviour	24
	Problematic behaviour dominates one's life	130
	Addiction involves physical and emotional suffering.	121
	Relentless need to watch pornography despite negative feelings surrounding the use	47
	Impacting the relatedness to others on many levels (social, relationships, being intimate)	132
	Concerns about physical health	137

	Concerns about emotional health and living life fully	138
	Pornography addiction is about neglecting oneself and one's life obligations	114
	Living a fantasy live rather than the real life. Placing the illusion of sex above one's own sex experience and sexuality.	118
	Inability to relate physically and emotionally with others	120
	Inability to engage sexually with others	122
	Impacting negatively romantic relationship	124, 125
	Belief that pornography addiction is more difficult to overcome that other forms of problematic behaviour	89, 99, 107, 147
	Engaging in other types of problematic behaviour	88, 95
	Feeling compulsions to use pornography	104
	Believing that behaviour dominates one's life over which there is no control	101
	Undermining belief in one's capacity to address the problem	102, 145, 148
	Inability to stop despite the availability of internal and external resources to address the problem	116
	Efforts to stop using pornography	55
	Experience of severe stressors as motivation for change	93
	Looking beyond oneself for help	128, 149, 150
	Shame and despair undermining one's capacity for change	127, 139
Undermined belief in one's ability to change	Belief that pornography addiction is more difficult to overcome that other forms of problematic behaviour	99, 107, 147

	Engaging in other types of problematic behaviour	88, 95
	Feeling compulsions to use pornography	104
	Believing that behaviour dominates one's life over which there is no control	101
	Undermining belief in one's capacity to address the problem	102, 145, 148
	Inability to stop despite the availability of internal and external resources to address the problem	116
	Efforts to stop using pornography	55
	Experience of severe stressors as motivation for change	93
	Looking beyond oneself for help	128, 149, 150
	Addiction as struggle to understand oneself	73
	Shame and despair undermining one's capacity for change	127, 139
Challenging one's values	Concerns about compromising one's values	40, 143, 144
	Being concerned about people features in pornographic content	45, 66, 68, 162
	Questioning one's responsibilities in the social world	163, 167
	Concerns about legal consequences of behaviour	134, 136
	Addiction as a form of acknowledging one's responsibility	171, 177

Appendix 7: Subordinate and emergent themes identified across the study group

Clusters of emergent themes (subordinate themes)	Emergent themes	Line number
P1		
Pornography addiction seen as a combination of shame and a desire for pleasure and relief	Ambivalent feelings about pornography use: combination of pleasure and shame	43, 48
	Conflicting longings: to stop and to use	109, 111, 113
	Wanting to stop the behaviour results from shame and is undermined by low self-esteem.	110
	Pornography use as a reaction to the feelings shame, exhaustion and being overwhelmed	108
	Associating sex with shame	41
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	Shame associated with the use of certain types of pornographic content	38
	Having low esteem for oneself/feeling despaired and believing that there is no other option than to use porn	77
	Realising that behaviour is self-destructive and feeling shame and despair	81
	Deep sense of suffering	82, 139, 140, 150
	Concerns about public perceptions of pornography addicts	169, 170, 172, 174, 175, 176
	Fearing stigma associated with pornography use	135
	Realising the pornography use is a problem is an aspect of being an addict.	85
	Feeling of excitement and thrill linked with pornography use	22
	High value given to physical sensations and sexual gratification related to pornography use	78

	Escalation and extremeness of behaviour in the context of other life problems	86
	Having profoundly negative view of the world	154
	Looking for a secure sense of oneself through detachment from the real world	164
	Addiction as denying /detachment of one's feeling	59, 61
	Addiction as inability to sustain uncomfortable emotions	60, 62, 64
	Addiction is a reflection of one's perception of their worth	158
Choosing to use pornography despite awareness of negative consequences	Prioritising the option to use over the option not to use	115
	Permanent desire to use porn despite the knowledge of negative consequences	54, 67, 69, 71, 75
	Being aware of consequences deters someone who is not addicted from the problematic behaviour.	74
	Living in isolation from others	131
	Being detached from the real world	119, 123
	Escalation of behaviour	24
	Problematic behaviour dominates one's life	130
	Addiction involves physical and emotional suffering.	121
	Relentless need to watch pornography despite negative feelings surrounding the use	47
	Impacting the relatedness to others on many levels (social, relationships, being intimate)	132
	Concerns about physical health	137

	Concerns about emotional health and living life fully	138
	Pornography addiction is about neglecting oneself and one's life obligations	114
	Living a fantasy live rather than the real life. Placing the illusion of sex above one's own sex experience and sexuality.	118
	Inability to relate physically and emotionally with others	120
	Inability to engage sexually with others	122
	Impacting negatively romantic relationship	124, 125
	Belief that pornography addiction is more difficult to overcome that other forms of problematic behaviour	89, 99, 107, 147
	Engaging in other types of problematic behaviour	88, 95
	Feeling compulsions to use pornography	104
	Believing that behaviour dominates one's life over which there is no control	101
	Undermining belief in one's capacity to address the problem	102, 145, 148
	Inability to stop despite the availability of internal and external resources to address the problem	116
	Efforts to stop using pornography	55
	Experience of severe stressors as motivation for change	93
	Looking beyond oneself for help	128, 149, 150
	Shame and despair undermining one's capacity for change	127, 139
Undermined belief in one's ability to change	Belief that pornography addiction is more difficult to overcome that other forms of problematic behaviour	99, 107, 147

	Engaging in other types of problematic behaviour	88, 95
	Feeling compulsions to use pornography	104
	Believing that behaviour dominates one's life over which there is no control	101
	Undermining belief in one's capacity to address the problem	102, 145, 148
	Inability to stop despite the availability of internal and external resources to address the problem	116
	Efforts to stop using pornography	55
	Experience of severe stressors as motivation for change	93
	Looking beyond oneself for help	128, 149, 150
	Addiction as struggle to understand oneself	73
	Shame and despair undermining one's capacity for change	127, 139
Challenging one's values	Concerns about compromising one's values	40, 143, 144
	Being concerned about people features in pornographic content	45, 66, 68, 162
	Questioning one's responsibilities in the social world	163, 167
	Concerns about legal consequences of behaviour	134, 136
	Addiction as a form of acknowledging one's responsibility	171, 177
P2		
Living in a simulated reality	Pornography viewing seen as an issue of relatedness to reality	28

	Experience of feeling isolated from people	63
	Pornography enables satisfying sexual needs in the absence of interpersonal sexual and emotional relations.	17, 21
	Pornography enables relaxing & satisfying sexual needs.	15
	Watching pornography results in an emotionall distance towards people	63
	Pornography viewing is a solitary activity.	7
	Pornography viewing in the context of relational difficulties in the real life	36
	Pornography viewing as simulation of reality	49
Addiction as an all-consuming and immersive behaviour	Viewing pornography is an all-consuming, immersive experience	19
	Escalation of behaviour in terms of time spent watching pornography	41
	Addiction involves excessive behaviour	61
	Stopping pornography addiction is more difficult because of the biological need for sex	47
	Pornography viewing as a consequence of the biological sexual drive	52
	Excitement linked with pornography viewing	25
	Concerns over pornography use impacting one's well being	55
	Questioning ability to control behaviour	30
	Quitting pornography is more difficult that other types of problematic behaviour	39, 43
	Belief that unlike other forms of addiction one cannot quit pornography addiction	59

	Secretive nature of pornography use	27, 33
	Pornography is unique in its addictiveness and impossible to stop	43
Feeling morally inferior	Concerns over public perception of one's pornography use	31, 32, 65, 67, 70, 72
	Fear of shame and negative perception by people closed to the user	72
	Fearing how other people will react	35, 68a
	Fear of being perceived as a deviant/pervert	74, 67
	Attempts to rationalize pornography use despite moral concerns	46
	Moral dilemma surrounding pornography use despite increasing social acceptance	45
	Addictive pornography use seen as a moral dilemma	79
	Concerns over personal and social costs	69, 70
	Fear of social stigma of being perceived as pornography addict	84
	Concerns over the impact of pornography use on others	78
	Reflecting on problematic behaviour in the context of the social obligations	54
	Anxiety over negative impact of one's behaviour on others	68
Struggling with the ambivalence of addiction	Questioning ability to control behaviour	30
	Limited self-understanding	81, 83
	Distancing oneself from the addict identity while acknowledging being addicted	50

	Belief in being addicted to pornography over an extensive period of time	23
	Perception that pornography addiction is real, but it does not release from responsibility	86
	Anxiety about future	76
	Difficulty identifying as an addict	79a

P3

Living in confusion	Being confused about who he is	38, 112
	Questioning values	41, 96, 97
	Being confused about one's sexual preferences	15, 98, 99
	Change of sexual preferences	16, 17, 18
	Need to be aware about the costs of pornography use	129, 134
	Realising addiction requires being aware of consequences of behaviour.	132
	Need of self-understanding and awareness	126, 127
Pornography addiction as an issue of relatedness	Engaging in pornography as a way of being in relationship online	14
	Need for connection	23, 103, 104, 125
	Lacking of interest in life	34
	Feeling emotionally detached	36
	Deterioration of relationship	108, 109

	Deterioration of relationships with women	37, 39
	Linking porn use with problems with sexual performance	65, 90
	Limited interest in other life activities	101
	Need of support for addicts	128
	Fearing consequences	102
Expression of pain and suffering	Links to other mental health problems	21, 27, 31
	Using porn to cope with stress	20
	Expression of pain and suffering	135
	Numbing sensation of pornography	24
	Addiction to porn as manifestation of anxiety and pain	31
	Alleviating pain	33
	Feeling shame and self-hatred	40
	Lacking self-esteem	113
	Negative feeling surrounding the use of porn	42
	Physical pain accompanying withdrawal	83, 86
	Physical sensations accompanying porn use	88, 89
	Shame & lack of self-acceptance	111
	Emotional pain accompanying withdrawal	84
Surrendering to the feeling of powerlessness	Feeling manipulated into using pornography	45, 46

	Pornography addiction ruins one's life	148
	Behaving in a way which cannot be rationally explained.	56
P4		

Living a double life	Pornography used to calm emotions	22, 24
	Behaviour was used as distraction from anxiety, but at the same time engaging into it involves pain.	26
	Engaging into pornography allows taking his mind off things and helps feel better.	36
	Self-soothing effect of pornography viewing	38
	Not living in line with values	78
	Numbing effect of the experience	80
	Fear of revealing the experience	85
	Living double-life & not acting in an authentic way	87
	Feeling worthless and needing to hide part of himself	89
	Hiding a part of himself	93
	Engaging into activity to alleviate other problems	99
	Concealing behaviour	112, 114, 115, 116
	Not sure whether his use impacted his sexual taste	46
Lacking the sense of empowerment	Feeling of being immersed in the experience, distracted, aroused and anxious	20

	Being addicted means being consumed by the activity. It involves masturbating and thinking about it event when one does not want to do it.	52
	Not being able to stop makes one realise they have a problem.	54
	Being addicted involves realising one has a problem.	58, 60
	Addiction involves the feeling of wanting to engage into behaviour and the feeling of needing to engage into it.	64
	Difficulty in remaining 'sober'	67, 69, 70
	Pain accompanying the desire to stop using porn	68
	Feelings of shame, low self-esteem and blame for not controlling the behaviour	76
	Feeling worthless and needing to hide part of himself	89
	Feelings of anger and shame	97
	Addictive behaviour involves periods of binging.	66
Longing for an authentic life	Wish to have more authentic life	91, 121, 122
	Feeling angry and trying to understand one's behaviour	95
	Realising difficulties of life	120
	Pornography in itself is not a problem.	101
	The effect of pornography use is the problem, not pornography in itself.	102
	Problems with acknowledging pornography addiction is a valid condition	106, 107, 108
	Negative consequences of pornography use	104

Feeling overpowered	Experiencing other types of behavioural problems	25, 26
	Feeling shame and disappointment	28
	Experiencing problems with stopping various types of problematic behaviour.	29
	Pornography addiction involves conditioned behaviour, which is out of control.	88
	Feeling compulsion to use porn despite being aware of consequences	46
	Feeling helpless and dependent	59, 76
	Realising the debilitating impact of his pornography use	57
	Difficulties in stopping porn use	51
	Fear of being out of control	84
	Having regrets about the consequences of pornography use	82, 90
Relief for anxiety and stress	Using pornography as a coping mechanism for stress	7, 35, 36, 44, 49, 53
	Reaching orgasm allows de-stressing	11
	Excitement and pleasure linked to pornography use, which allow de-stressing and coping with life.	14, 22
	Pornography should not be used as a coping mechanism for stress relief.	16
	Pornography as a means of stress reduction and relaxation.	18, 37
	Pornography as a means of anxiety reduction.	20, 47

	Excitement and feeling of comfort linked to pornography use.	33
	Feeling compulsion to use porn to de-stress and having regrets about it.	41
	Addiction is when pornography is used for stress relief.	77
	Feeling that being dependent on porn to relive stress is not good.	67
	Feeling pornography is an effective stress relief mechanism	61
	Difficulties in quitting porn use because it is a coping mechanism related to stress	55
Questioning one's sense of masculinity	Questioning his sense of masculinity	72, 74, 77, 80, 86
	Changing self-perception	71
	Experiencing sexual problems	42, 44a, 49a
	Experiencing relationship problems because of conditioning to pornographic stimuli.	43, 65, 66
	Longing for a meaningful relationship	87

P6

Destroyed sex life and relationships	Pornography addiction makes one respond sexually only to pornographic stimuli and makes sex with real partners unattractive.	36
	Sex and relationship problems	37
	Sexual experience through pornography does not require any effort or taking into account partner's needs.	39, 40
	Linking pornography use with lack of interest to have sex with a real partner.	45
	Guilt, shame and lack of understanding concerning lack of interest in sex with a real partner.	48, 68

	Linking porn use with relationship problems	50
	Relationship is the most important area in life impacted by pornography use.	55
	No serious impact on other life activities	57
	Pornography use is detrimental to genuine relationship	66
	Attraction to female nudity underpinning interest in pornography	25
Reinforcing negative view of the self	Negative self-perception	46
	Guilt, shame and lack of understanding concerning lack of interest in sex with a real partner.	48
	Reinforcing negative self-perception	61
Seeking relief and comfort	Pornography as a means of not dealing with difficult emotions	27
	Pornography use in the context of mental health problems	62
	Failed attempts to quit	53
	Pornography use in the context of life difficulties	21, 23,
	Pornography use both alleviates other problems and creates new ones.	65
	Immersive experience, which allows forgetting about everything, but at the same time makes one feel repulsed.	10
Becoming aware of consequences	In a long-term pornography in not beneficial.	14
	Regular contact with pornographic content in childhood	16, 18, 19
	Pornography holding back in life	28

	Escalation of behaviour throughout the years	30
	Addiction involves engaging into behaviour despite full awareness of negative consequences.	42
	Secrecy surrounding pornography use despite the fact that pornography use is very common.	44
	Changing attitudes towards women	59
	Secrecy and shame surrounding pornography use underpin lack of awareness of negative consequences resulting from long-term pornography consumption	64
	Daily use of pornography	6
	Pornography addiction is real and has real consequences its users are not aware of	70
	Feeling uncomfortable about certain pornographic content	51

P7

Moving from the experimental and recreational use to the main focus of attention	Early exposure to pornographic content	5
	Progressing from soft to hard core pornographic content	6
	Curiosity about sexuality sparking interest in pornography	11
	Changing preferences for certain types of pornographic content	26
	Struggling with limiting pornography use	21
	No escalation of use in terms of time spent watching pornographic content	51
	Being curious about some types of sexual behaviour	56
	Exercising some degree of control over pornography use	58

	Experiencing problems with controlling pornography use	59, 62
	Unsuccessfully attempting to stop watching pornography	60
	Finding it difficult to focus on other activities	61
	Being partially in control of pornography use	63
	Feeling compulsion to watch pornography	80
	Desiring to stop watching pornography	78
Escaping life difficulties	*Feeling detached and escaping reality*	*12, 13*
	Escaping difficult feelings	*14*
	Escaping difficult feelings	*16, 17*
	Escaping difficult problems	*35*
	Experiencing emotional problems	*67*
Experiencing relationship and sexual problems	Masturbation being part of pornography use.	7-9, 22, 23, 45
	Solitary watching	30
	Daily use of pornography	29
	Experiencing sexual problems	32, 65
	Experiencing sexual and relationship problems	33, 74
	Experiencing sexual problems in real life	40, 41

	Seeking sexual variety in pornographic content	43, 44, 46-48
	Seeking sexual novelty in pornographic content	52, 55
	Being concerned about the impact on other people	65
	Being concerned about the impact on his relationship	84
	Being concerned about the consequences	85
	Betraying others	75, 76
	Being concerned about sexual problems	86
	Feeling sexual excitement	36
Adopting addict's identity	Pornography addiction is a real phenomenon	102
	Experiencing negative feelings towards himself	37, 38, 68, 91, 92, 100, 112
	Fearing being judged by others	77
	Being tempted to use pornography despite being aware of the risks involved	81
	Feeling cravings and compulsion	82
	Being convinced about being addicted	89
	Experiencing guilt and lacking motivation	93
	Blaming pornography for his problems	94
	Feeling powerless	99

	Fearing public perception of pornography addicts	103, 104, 114
	Fearing negative consequences of pornography use	110
	Experiencing negative consequences of pornography use	109, 111
	Being absorbed by activity and unable to quit	98
	Desiring more openness about pornography use	115, 116, 117

P8

Identifying with the addiction narrative	Attempting to limit regular pornography viewing	6, 7, 69, 70
	Experiencing urges to view pornography	18
	Early exposure to pornography	20
	Continuing watching	22
	Escalation of behaviour	37
	Secrecy surrounding pornography use	31
	Feeling obsessed with pornography	23
	Persistent thinking about sex	38
	Fantasising about sex clouds consciousness	39
	Changes in the type of content being viewed	42
	Looking for novelty	43

Feeling obsessed and thinking extensively about sex   44

Being aware of a problem with behaviour and feeling unable to stop it.   50

Feeling that activity dictates one' s life   51

Desire to watch pornography outweighing desire to stop watching   52

Needing help   53

Identifying with other 'addicts'   54

Belief that there are objective symptoms of pornography addiction   55

Inability to control thinking about sex   58

Finding it difficult to stop watching pornography   46, 67, 68

Contemplating the possibility of being dependent on something else than pornography   78

Feeling connected with people with similar experiences   82

Fearing public misconceptions about pornography addiction   83, 86

Less help available for pornography addicts   85

Desire to watch overweighting desire to stop   88

Focusing on sex   92

Considering one' s behaviour abnormal   94

Feeling unhappy about one's life and being afraid of people's reaction to his pornography use.   110

	Fearing public stigma surrounding pornography use	115
	Fearing humiliation related to his pornography use.	116
	Pornography addiction is a real phenomenon	122
	Needing help to deal with problems	124
	Pornography addiction having a harmful impact on sex, relationship and self-image	123
	Being comforted by the fact that he is not alone with his problems	125
Realising ambiguities of behaviour	Feeling release	28
	Feeling excited and sexually aroused	30, 27, 32
	Felling excited and fascinated by nudity	21
	Looking for emotional comfort	62
	Pornography viewing as distraction from stress	35
	Feeling comfortable when thinking of and engaging with pornography	93
	Linking pornography use with loneliness	61
	Pornography viewing influencing behaviour	9
	Attempting to limit pornography's impact on behaviour	10
	Limited engagement with other activities	91
	Limited engagement with others	40

Pornography as a substitute to real engagement with women	14, 24
Wasting time on pornography at the expense of other activities	47
Experiencing problems when having sex with real partners	48
Relying on pornography use to deal with uncomfortable emotions	63, 64, 65
Excitement linked to pornography use as the most vivid memory of childhood	33
Regretting that pornography dominated childhood.	34
Feeling indifferent about women and experiencing sexual problems	72
Relying on pornography for sexual satisfaction	73
Limited engagement with family and friends	81
Pornography addiction limits options in life and the ability to make choices	87
Pornography is not inherently bad.	103
Unhealthy use of pornography affecting life	104
Realising the impact of pornography use on his life	105
Feeling inadequate and unable to be intimate with women	74
Feeling bad when realising his inadequacy with women	75
Negative self-perception	89, 97, 112
Feeling lost in life	98

	Shame overweighting any benefits resulting from pornography use	101
	Blaming himself for engaging with pornography	106
	Feeling guilty for engaging with pornography	107
Desiring a change in life through a greater control	Attempting to control pornography use	11, 16
	Attempting to control pornography use in order to minimise its impact	17
	Feeling partially in control of pornography use.	57
	Attempting to control sex-related thoughts	59
	Attempting to control emotions	60
	Being pessimistic about the possibility of settling down	76
	Believing that pornography use prevents him from being in a relationship	77
	Believing that pornography use is an obstacle to be in a relationship	79
	Desiring a change in life	95, 99, 111, 113, 114
	Desiring an engagement with other life activities	118
	Desiring engagement with others	119
	Desire to shift the focus from pornography to other life activities	120
	Desire to control one' s behaviour	108

P9

Being totally immersed in pornography	Occasional use in the beginning	29
	Starting the use with mild content	9
	Looking for variety and novelty	10
	Moving to more hard core content	11
	Watching on a daily basis	13
	Changes in the type of content	36
	Looking for variety and novelty	37
	Spending a lot of time on pornography use	15-17, 31, 32, 43
	Attempting to stop pornography use	5
	Escalation of use	30, 34
	Limited engagement with other activities	93
	Realising he had a problem with pornography use	33
	Being out of control of pornography use	64
	Needing to control pornography use	67
	Struggling with controlling pornography use	71
	Unsuccessful attempts to stop pornography viewing	79

Needing pornography to function in life	Feeling that pornography is needed to function in life	52
	Finding it difficult to function without pornography	53, 59, 65, 66
	Addiction involves relying on something and not being able to function without it.	57
	Addiction is about not being able to function in life	58
	Using pornography in the context of other life problems	51
	Placing pornography use in the context of sexual abuse	50, 19, 20
	Escalation of pornography use in the context of depression	22
	Watching pornography in the context of other life problems	23
	Feeling sad and thinking about sexual abuse	42
	Feeling ashamed and disgusted	41
	Using pornography to cope with anxiety and stress	83, 85
	Feeling sexual satisfaction	40
	Feeling excited and thrilled about pornography use	39
	Focusing on pornography and sex	94, 95, 100, 101
	Fearing risks linked to pornography use	75, 77, 81
	Learning to control and accept anxiety	108

Experiencing relational problems	Difficulties with engaging with people	76
	Engaging with pornography instead of engaging with women	47
	Experiencing problems with relating to women	48, 49
	Experiencing problems with engaging with women	88-90
	Experiencing relational problems with men	91
	Lacking meaningful relationships	96, 98
	Experiencing relational difficulties	102
	Needing to connect with others	105, 106
	Needing to connect with others instead of focusing on pornography	107
Desire to understand oneself	Finding similarities with other types of addiction	60, 61, 116
	Attempting to understand the context of his involvement with pornography	21, 26
	Learning about addiction made him think that he is addicted.	45
	Finding it difficult to understand his engagement with pornography	27
	Pornography is not inherently bad.	110
	Need to abstain from pornography	111
	Needing more awareness	112, 113
	Pornography addiction is a genuine phenomenon	115, 118

	Deciding to make a change	82
	Feeling that life is being wasted	104
	Needing help	117

P10

Feeling trapped in pornography use	Pornography holding a strong place in life	48
	Early exposure to pornographic content	15
	Regular pornography use	18
	Finding internet pornography most interesting	19
	Considering interest in pornography normal	21
	Spending a lot of time watching porn at the expense of other activities	36
	Daily pornography use	26
	Pornography becoming an important part of life	27, 28
	Intense pornography use	51
	Preoccupation with sexual thoughts that is difficult to control	52, 62
	Thinking a lot about pornography	67
	Watching less because of unavailability was possible	71
	Attempting to reduce pornography use	9, 46

Giving high value to sexual sensations	Pornography use as a means of being sexually satisfied	107
	Being attracted by physical sensations accompanying pornography use	22
	Using pornography for sexual release	49, 50
	Excitement and sexual satisfaction underlying pornography use	56
	Preferring pornography to real sexual relations	58, 61
	Feeling of excitement and release	23
	Sexual satisfaction through pornography is more convenient	59
Attempting to deal with pain and suffering	Using porn as a coping mechanism for difficult emotions	37
	Pornography use as a coping mechanism to feel better	102
	Spending a lot of time watching porn and being dependent on it.	38
	Focusing on pornography in the context of other life problems	41, 43, 44
	Focusing on pornography gave a sense of control over life	42
	Pornography use a means of escaping from reality	54, 57
	Pornography use as a means of escaping reality and feeling better	106
	Pornography use providing some sense of purpose	55
	Feeling of being in control of pornography use	65
	Feeling of being compelled to use pornography	66

Appendix 8: Interpretation of individual subordinate themes - example

Participant 1

P1 is a 45-year-old heterosexual man in therapy for pornography addiction for over 20 years. He began watching pornography at the age of 12-13. He considers himself as a pornography addict since the age of 14 when he realised, he was unable to stop watching porn. After many years of psychotherapy and personal efforts to refrain from watching porn, he has managed to substantially reduce the amount of time spent viewing pornographic content. At the time the interview took place, he viewed porn for on average 4 hours a fortnight. He still considers himself to be addicted to pornography at present.

P1's defines pornography as a means of expressing sexuality by increasing one's sexual arousal. This is in line with those academic definitions of pornography presented in the Literature review, which emphasise the intended sexual gratification on the part of the user as a defining feature of pornography. However, P1's understanding of pornography is in some aspects broader than the academic definitions, as it includes not only the visual and the written content but also the imaginary and the fantasy. These non-visual features, which P1 integrates in his definition of pornography, are vital to understand of his experiences and are an important component of his pornography addiction. On the other hand, P1 did not verbalise the solitary and intimacy-free nature of pornography, which is considered by some to be a defining characteristic of pornography (Rea, 2001).

With regard to P1, four subordinate themes were identified, which reflect his understanding of what pornography addiction is and what concerns him as a self-perceived pornography addict.

Subordinate theme 1: Pornography addiction seen as a combination of shame and a desire for pleasure and relief

For P1, pornography addiction embroils conflicting emotions and attitudes involving experiencing both pleasure and shame. His conflicting emotions and attitudes can be observed on many levels. They impact the way P1 behaves, feels and perceives himself, and are the defining elements of his understanding of pornography addiction and his self-perceived addict's identity.

The feeling of shame appears in P1's account in several contexts. He uses the word *'shame'* or its paronyms such as *'ashamed'*, *'shamed'* or *'shameful'* over 20 times in his account. The centrality of shame in his experience is reflected in L139 where he says: *'... I just constantly feel the shame'*.

P1 associates sex with shame. For most of his life, he could not speak about sex or come to terms with sexuality without feeling shame. He considers his interest in sex and his sexual preferences shameful. He finds it reprehensible to admit what arouses him sexually. He summarises his feeling of shame with regard to sex as follows in L41: *'... I also have a lot of shame about sex. I mean, the fact that I'm able to have this conversation with you is reflected in about twenty years of therapy. I literally would not be able to even speak about it before because I felt a huge amount of shame, that I shouldn't be (...) looking at women, that I shouldn't find women attractive...'* P1 also experiences shame with regard to his inability to function satisfactorily in his real sexual relationships.

The feeling of shame is also present in P1's perception of himself and the world around him. In his view, his problematic engagement with pornography is a reflection of his perception of his own worth. He sums it up in L158: *'... I think a lot of shame isn't actually to do with what I'm looking at, it's to do with how I feel about myself, how I feel about the world.'* P1 speaks of his low self-esteem, high levels of self-hatred and despair, which make him feel he has no other option that to engage in the problematic behaviour. This is for him the essence of addiction. In P1's account, shame is his response to being detached from his feelings or denying them, which he acknowledges in L59: *'...I would want the porn because I was really anxious about something and feeling shame and I would want to shut those feelings down'*.

P1 also experiences the feeling of shame in relation to his engagement with pornography, both with regard to the content he views and his behaviour. He feels ashamed because of his use of certain types of pornographic content involving young women. He finds pornography viewing altogether a shameful activity. He is of the opinion that shame associated with pornographic content heightens sexual intensity, which he also finds reprehensible. At times, the feeling of shame is accompanied by guilt and remorse. This occurs for instance after experiencing sexual gratification while watching pornography or when he realises that he does something which is not in line with his system of values.

P1 experiences intense shame with regard to his inability to control his behaviour, notably to stop engaging with pornography. He explains the dynamics involving his desire to stop the behaviour, shame, exhaustion and the feeling of being overwhelmed, which result in him re-engaging with pornography. Such relapses make him feel low about himself and are accompanied by the feeling of shame and despair, which he considers to be at the same time the main motivator for wanting to stop the behaviour and obstacle to recovery.

P1 also feels shame when he realises that his behaviour is self-destructive. He summarises the inter-relations between the intensity of his feelings and his suffering in L81&L82: *'And when I'm feeling (...) self-destructive (...), when I'm feeling that low and that despairing and that self-shaming. It's sort of like (...), I kind of felt that I deserved to suffer...'*

The shame is also the underlying feeling behind his fear of being stigmatised as a pornography addict. He is concerned about people knowing that he is addicted to pornography, which he finds shameful. He believes that there is a massive stigma surrounding addiction to sex and pornography and regrets that unlike other types of addictions they are not understood or accepted as valid conditions.

The desire for pleasure and relief is another fundamental characteristic of P1's understanding of what pornography addiction is about. The desire for pleasure has a literal meaning with regard to the sexual gratification expected from P1's use of pornography. He gives high value to physical sensations surrounding his engagement with pornography, which he finds '*... the best thing in the world (...), such a turn on...*' (L160). He recalls the thrill and excitement resulting from his first encounter with pornographic content, which left a deep effect on him.

In P1's case, pornography addiction is also a form of relief from life problems in the context of his inability to sustain negative emotions and life problems. Holding a profoundly negative view of the world, his engagement with pornography provides him with relief and a secure sense of himself by allowing him to become detached from reality and living a fantasy.

For P1 the two main elements of pornography addiction are the feeling of shame and a desire for pleasure and relief. Both have a profound impact on how he understands and interprets his experiences. In his opinion, both elements involve opposite and conflicting longings: the feeling of shame is the main, although ineffective, motivator to stop the problematic behaviour, whilst the desire for pleasure and relief is the main motivator to continue it. P1 holds extremely polarised views concerning the value of both in his experience and understanding of pornography addiction.

Subordinate theme 2: Choosing to use pornography despite awareness of negative consequences

P1 discusses his struggles with quitting pornography, to which he returns despite the full awareness of negative consequences in several areas of his life. He links his pornography use with problems affecting his physical and emotional health, relationships, including intimate ones and life obligations. Pornography addiction is for him a source of deep physical and emotional suffering. He gives a powerful testimony of his suffering in L121: '*... I get depressed when using (...), so I'll be angry or crying (...) and I'll be exhausted, which means I can't really do as much or engage as much*'.

In his opinion, being addicted to pornography has impacted the way he relates to other people and the world in general. Because of his preoccupation with pornography he neglects himself and his work. He lives a lonely life, socialises little and feels detached from the world. In L118 he says: '*...after I've used, I feel emotionally detached. I feel*

emotionally separated from the world'. He feels very uncomfortable being with people. He feels that his addiction dominates his life and prevents him from living it fully. This is also the case of his intimate relationships. In P1's view, his emotional detachment and lack of interest in having sex with real partners contributed to problems in this area.

P1 cannot rationally understand why he continues this behaviour despite being aware of its impact on his life. In his opinion, someone who knows what their behaviour entails should stop engaging with it. However, this does not happen in his case. He considers it as *'insanity'*. He gives account of his resolutions to quit using pornography, which do not materialise in L115: *'... and I'll be like 'right, I'm gonna stop (...) and then... I'll be on it again two days later, three days later and that's just gone on forever'*. He feels triggered to use pornography and has the impression that he constantly wants and needs to use it. He gives an example of how his perceived need to watch pornography interferes with his work and how he is drawn to it in L54: *'I was just at home, working (...) and you know like, it's there, constantly ticking away in the back of my mind: 'stop working, don't bother with this. Go and use pornography, like you could look at hat, you could look at this... and so on'. It's just ticking away'*. In L47, he points to the persistency of the feeling of being attracted to pornography: *'And that is a kind of a sick feeling, like a needing, kind of wanting that's just relentless, it never kind of ends'*.

When trying to understand the reasons behind his decision to engage with pornography despite being aware of the consequences, he says in L71: *'... this is one of the reasons I call it an addiction: because the evidence is so clearly that it's not good for me, but yet I act and somehow hold onto the belief that it will fix things for me'*. He continues in L76: *'... it seems like a great idea every single time, even though I've been struggling with it for so long'*. Thus, for P1 the choice to use pornography despite the full awareness of negative consequences is one of the essential features of his addiction.

Subordinate theme 3: Undermined belief in one's ability to change

P1 considers that his pornography addiction controls and dominates his life. In L102 he says: *'... It felt like it was dominating everything in my life and I was like ok this is a problem and I want to stop and then I couldn't...'*

In the past, P1 engaged in other types of behaviour involving drugs and cigarettes, which he considered problematic. However, whilst he was able to stop these other types of behaviour, he considers overcoming his perceived addiction to pornography more challenging. His many attempts to stop were unsuccessful. The various forms of therapy he had and personal efforts have only resulted in reduced time spent watching pornography. P1 believes that pornography addiction is more difficult to overcome that the other types of addiction. In L107, he speaks about the limited effects of the resources used to overcome his problem: *'...It's been twenty years that I've been in therapy for this... and (...) I have done CBT, I've been working the twelve-step program (...). That means I have outreach resources, people I can talk to every day. I have a spiritual life based around getting support around this stuff. That hasn't stopped me using porn completely'*.

The feeling of being overwhelmed by the behaviour together with numerous failed attempts to stop undermined his belief in his ability to change. Being addicted for P1 means that there are no other options than to succumb to the behaviour and that he is condemned to it.

However, despite his limited belief in his self-efficacy, he finds it useful to see himself as an addict because it helps him understand who he is and provides him with some explanations for his behaviour. It is an important aspect of his identity. In L73 he says: *'When I first came into the process of trying to deal with this, being addicted was really useful'*. He does not see addiction as an excuse for his behaviour, but as a framework within which he finds some understanding for his experiences.

Subordinate theme 4: Challenging one's values

For P1 his involvement with pornography represents a huge challenge to his belief system in many areas. He acknowledges that his behaviour is not consistent with the values he holds about women. He would like to think he

respects them. However, the fact that he enjoys watching women being objectified and becomes aroused contradicts this belief. He says in L144: *'… So that kind of jars with what I believe, I think about women and how I feel about women and then how I actually behave. So that's been a real challenge to my beliefs'.* He also feels uncomfortable about the possibility of watching under-aged females, not only because that would be illegal, but also because *'… It feels a little bit uhh…'*, as he puts it in L40.

P1 expresses concerns about actors featured in pornographic content. He recognises the ambivalence of his attitude. On the one hand, he sees them as dehumanised performers, not real people. He says in L68: *'… Somehow in my mind, because it's on the computer, and they're not people there (…) it's just porn'.* On the other hand, he expresses concerns about the possibility that they might come from abusive backgrounds, or possibly exploited and mistreated by the pornography industry. This makes him wonder about his responsibilities towards others and whether his behaviour contributes to unscrupulous treatment of people performing in pornography. This is at odd with his values. Similarly, he wonders whether his behaviour contributes to the increasing influence of the industry, which makes other people more and more drawn to pornography, which he considers dangerous.

Finally, his perceived addiction to pornography challenges his beliefs about his responsibilities towards himself. Interestingly, he does not interpret his addiction as an excuse for his behaviour, but rather as a form of acknowledging his responsibility to himself.

Appendix 9: Occurrence of master themes and sub-themes across the study group

Master themes and sub-themes	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10
1. Attempt to cope with pain and affliction										
Responding to pain and suffering	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Seeking relief and comfort	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Deeper immersion in pain and suffering	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
2. Expression of constricted relatedness										
Solitary pleasure	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Living an alienated existence	✓		✓	✓				✓	✓	
3. Expression of a fragile sense of self										
Negative self-perception	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓
Feeling powerless	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
4. Expression of inauthentic existence										
Engaging in behaviour in spite of fearing its consequences	✓	✓				✓				
Living in confusion and self-deception	✓	✓	✓	✓						
Seeking a new way of being				✓				✓		✓
5. Appropriating the addiction narrative										
Finding understanding in the addiction discourse	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓	
Feeling misunderstood	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Fearing stigma	✓	✓					✓	✓		

Appendix 10: Overview of master-themes and related sub-themes with examples of supporting statements

Master theme and related sub-themes	Supporting statement	Participant / line number
1. Attempt to cope with pain and affliction		
1.1. Responding to pain and suffering	*'I've struggled with social anxiety for years… It really peaked when I was at university. I was super depressed, in my room all the time. My girlfriend and me lived in different cities, so I didn't have anybody close to me. Porn was quite comforting at the time. It was like… it sounds weird, but it… was like a level of closeness I was missing in life most of the time.'*	6: 62
1.2. Seeking relief and comfort	*'(…) watching porn and masturbating during the day and maybe after became my way to de-stress when things were overwhelming at work.'*	5: 35
1.3. Deeper immersion in pain and suffering	*'… It's just pain, man. It's all I see. It's just pain and hurt (…) in all the memories. Yeah, I was using it 'cause I (…) wanted excitement and escapism, but really in the back of my head I was just completely distraught and upset, man. When I look back at it, that's all I feel.'*	3: 135
2. Expression of constricted relatedness		
2.1. Solitary pleasure	*'And I know masturbating is a big part of my problem. Never do one without the other. And again, my wife could do something that would probably feel even better, but I prefer to just do it myself, to porn.'*	7: 45
2.2. Living an alienated existence	*'When I'm, when I'm in the binge, when I'll go home and fucking watch it for hours and the next day I'll be like fucking hell, it's time, I got loads of time, I'll watch it all day, I'll watch it for ages…'*	4: 66

3. Expression of a fragile sense of self

   3.1. Negative self-perception — *'I think my level of self-esteem and my level of self-hatred and my level of despair was so high that it felt like I had no other option.'* — 1: 77

   3.2. Feeling powerless — *'Sometimes it's really intense. Sometimes I wonder if it's even safe, like when I'm driving and I can't concentrate because I'm thinking a lot about sex.'* — 10: 62

4. Expression of inauthentic existence

   4.1. Engaging in behaviour in spite of fearing consequences — *'There's the risk of (uh) patients finding out, of course. Not just patients. My family, my friends and (uh) people I come into contact with through hobbies and… I doubt my cycling team mates would (uh), would see this as normal, as a normal way to be (uh)… yeah. There's also the threat of hackers finding this and (uh) using it against me in some way.'* — 2: 65

   4.2. Living in confusion and self-deception — *'I don't know if that's what they call it, but it's a good way of describing it: the double-life. Means that I (umm)… having, not being able to disclose parts of myself…'* — 4: 87

   4.3. Seeking a new way of being — *'I know deep inside that nothing beats a real person. No porn will give me the same thing (…). But I don't think I'm ready for that. I have to sort myself out with porn to begin with.'* — 10: 82

5. Appropriating the addiction narrative

   5.1. Finding understanding in the addiction discourse — *'It's really similar. Like watching porn at work, or maybe drinking at work would have similar consequences. I'd get fired for both. Well, for me it's porn. And trying to stop (…), then breaking and going back… It's basically the same thing in my opinion, to porn or to something else.'* — 9: 60

   5.2. Feeling misunderstood — *'People might think that watching porn and having porn addiction is just fun. But it's not. I mean… it's not fun when you think you can't stop, when you can't go*

through a day without watching porn or when you are scared to use the internet because you know that you would end up watching porn.'

5.3. Fearing stigma

'I have two adult children, (...) I would be so incredibly shamed if they found out. I know young people look at porn too, I mean (uh), more than other groups probably, you know that better than me. But to know your own dad looks… I don't think I could look either of them in the face… (long pause) and I can just imagine them thinking, like my wife, about how I like to look at girls in their twenties, their age… it would just be, be the end of our relationship really. I don't know how I could recover from that, from being seen like that.'

2: 72