The endless cycle of pornography addiction: Study among generation Z

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Article Info	Abstract
	This qualitative study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of Generation Z struggling with online pornography addiction within Indonesia's conservative yet digitally connected environment. The study responded to the rising prevalence of internet pornography consumption among this generation. This study employed a phenomenological approach to investigate subjective meanings and behavioral patterns. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with nine participants selected via purposive and snowball sampling. Analysis was conducted using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework, aided by QDA Miner Lite. Cognitive Dissonance Theory was used to understand participants lived experiences, particularly internal conflicts between their behaviors and the values they held. The analysis identified four main themes: 1) the momentum of triggering a desire to watch online pornography; 2) the contribution of online media in escalating pornography access; 3) pornography addiction as a regressive development; and 4) non-solutive compensation efforts and the cycle of pornography addiction. The research findings revealed that online pornography serves as an emotional escape and a socially embedded behavior influenced by peer dynamics and digital culture. The study recommends the development of empathy-based education and counseling programs that emphasize behavioral understanding rather than prohibitive measures.

INTRODUCTION

Online pornography has become a growing social issue in Indonesia, especially since the emergence of press freedom through Undang-Undang No. 40 Tahun 1999, which indirectly contributed to the proliferation of pornographic content in Indonesia (Soebagijo, 2008). The Ministry of Communication and Digital Affairs has addressed 233.552

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pornographic content, and this number continues to grow over time (Safitri & Setuningsih, 2025). The massive circulation of online pornographic content in Indonesia is also driven by the penetration of digital technology and the internet, which makes it easier for people to access pornography online.

This phenomenon has attracted the attention of various researchers over the past two decades because it has contributed to cultural changes among the younger generation, including in Indonesia (Tampubolon & Abidin, 2021). Although Undang-Undang No. 44 Tahun 2008 prohibits pornography in Indonesia (2008), the reality shows that such content remains easily accessible without restrictions on time or location.

Generation Z is highly adaptable to technological and internet developments, earning them the label of "digital natives," making them a group with high accessibility to online pornography (Munsch, 2021). A Barna Group survey shows that 57% of young adults aged 18–24 actively access pornographic content, compared to other generations: 37% of teenagers aged 13–17, Millennials aged 25–30 at 43%, Generation X at 41%, and Baby Boomers at just 17% (Barna, 2016). Based on these data, it can be concluded that access to pornographic content is dominated by Generation Z. So this study focuses on Generation Z because they have the highest consumption of pornographic content among other generations.

The activity of accessing online pornographic content by Generation Z is also influenced by their curiosity in exploring topics related to sexuality and seeking satisfaction to neutralize negative emotions through practices that are considered comfortable, inexpensive, and safe (Franc et al., 2018). According to a survey released by the Pew Research Center (in Tamir et al., 2020), Indonesia, as the most religious country in the world, ranks second globally in terms of pornography access. This stark contrast creates a significant irony for Indonesia.

Most previous research on the issue of online pornography in Indonesia has focused on reactive efforts to control online pornography addiction (Dawson et al., 2019; Litsou et al., 2020). This repressive approach has not explored the behavioral constructs of pornography addicts, particularly from the perspective of the perpetrators. However, Peraturan Pemerintah No. 78 Tahun 2021 Pasal 28, stipulates that pornography addicts are entitled to receive guidance, support, and rehabilitation in terms of social, physical, and mental health (2021).

In addition, previous studies have also focused more on the impact and potential risks of addiction to online pornography. These impacts include psychological aspects, where individuals are at risk of experiencing emotional disturbances, difficulty concentrating, and increased susceptibility to stress. Second, socially, pornography addicts tend to have difficulty forming interpersonal relationships, withdrawing from their environment, or becoming socially isolated. Furthermore, from a medical perspective, pornography can lead to signs of cognitive decline, sleep disorders, and difficulty distinguishing between right and wrong values (Agustina et al., 2022; Ainsworth-Masiello & Evans, 2021; Diana, 2018; Maimunah, 2019).

Unlike addiction to addictive substances, pornography addiction is rooted in a basic human need, namely sexual desire. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the behavior of consuming online pornography as a basis for developing educational and counseling programs that can be accepted voluntarily (Blake, 2019; Franc et al., 2018). However, research on the behavior of watching online pornography from the perspective and experience of the perpetrators is still very limited, especially in the Indonesian landscape.

Therefore, further exploration and study is still needed that specifically highlights the experiences of online pornography addicts, especially among Generation Z. Based on this rationale, this study was designed as a follow-up study to explore the issue of online pornography in Indonesia, which has been minimally studied, particularly in understanding the behavior of addicts who are part of Generation Z.

There is relevant research supporting this study, both conducted abroad and focusing on gender, that pornography is a complex and repetitive process for its users (Grubbs et al., 2019; Hanseder & Dantas, 2023; Tampubolon & Abidin, 2021). This study also poses a research question, namely (1) How is the habit of watching online pornography constructed in the daily lives of Generation Z?

The findings of this study can have a positive impact on social life because they provide an understanding of the construction of online pornography watching habits among Generation Z. Furthermore, the benefits of this study also have the potential to be used as a basis for developing discussion forums and services related to online pornography addiction that are effective and targeted, especially in Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Dynamics of Pornography and Its Implications for The Indonesian Society

Pornography has long been present in Indonesia, with its massive growth, especially after Indonesia entered the reform era. Since the beginning of the reform era, there has been freedom of the press through the enactment of Undang-Undang No. 40 Tahun 1999, which abolished the Press Publishing Business License (SIUPP), leading to the proliferation of various pornographic media established by various industries due to their promising profits. In his book, Soebagijo states that following this, pornographic tabloids began circulating in quantities of 10,000 to 80,000 copies per week, consistently selling out. In 2004, the Associated Press reported that Indonesia had become "The Next Heaven of Pornography" after Russia and Sweden. As predicted, in 2005, pornography spread significantly in Indonesia due to easy access, resulting in 1,705 children in the Jakarta metropolitan area consuming pornography through mobile phones, the internet, and other media (Soebagijo, 2008).

Pornography has been proven to have various negative impacts on anyone who accesses its content. These include threats to self-esteem and well-being, unhealthy lifestyles, decreased self-confidence, increased stress levels, and poor emotional health. Additionally, viewers of pornography are more likely to be influenced to imitate what they see (Ainsworth-Masiello & Evans, 2021). In fact, watching online pornography has a more significant negative impact than drugs. Consuming online pornography content can damage brain stimulation due to repeated exposure, which can harm five key areas of the brain responsible for planning, decision-making, and control (Diana, 2018).

Online Pornography as a Retrograde Development

In this era of globalization, the development of information media technology has brought benefits to the success of human civilization. The proportional sustainability of media technology always follows the development of human knowledge, so that modern civilization is closely related to humans and technology (Knutson & de Soysa, 2019).

The emergence of internet-based media technology has brought a myriad of positive implications in terms of ease of access to information, long-distance communication, and the fulfillment of democracy for its users on a massive scale (Szymkowiak et al., 2021). Therefore, the emergence of internet-based digital media has transformed the boundaries between society and media into a more personalized experience, differing from traditional mass media such as radio, magazines, and television.

However, on the other hand, it cannot be denied that the presence of digital media has enabled everyone to produce various types of content, especially negative content such as pornography, through the internet (Litsou et al., 2020). Pornography itself is a content that depicts sexual behavior through photos, videos, illustrations, and animations intended to stimulate sexual arousal in those who access the content (Stansvik, 2018). Furthermore, the proliferation of digital media has made the development of pornography increasingly accessible through smartphones, laptops, computers, and other digital devices facilitated by the internet. Therefore, online pornography can be interpreted as a regression, where this phenomenon represents a form of decline resulting from technological advancement.

Untill now, accessing pornographic content in Indonesia has become increasingly prevalent due to the ease with which various generations, particularly Generation Z, can access such content. This generation, also known as digital natives, was born between the mid-1990s and the late 2010s, a period marked by the rapid advancement of internet technology (Barcellos & Gil, 2019; Munsch, 2021), making them highly familiar with the use of technology and the internet. Exposure to technology from a young age has shaped Generation Z to possess high digital skills and ease in accessing various online channels, including websites and applications that may display pornographic content. As a result, Generation Z is highly vulnerable to repeated exposure and consumption of online pornography.

The Cycle of Pornography Addiction in Cognitive Dissonance Theory

The phenomenon of pornography addiction experienced by Generation Z cannot be separated from the tension between social norms and the increasingly open digital reality. This is reflected in Indonesia's religious cultural values, which view pornography as a deviant and taboo right. However, Generation Z, who were born alongside the digital technology ecosystem, have very easy access to pornographic content (Litsou et al., 2020). This reflects the inconsistency between an individual's internal values and their conscious behavior.

Cognitive dissonance theory is considered relevant to explain Generation Z's behavior in accessing pornographic content, which contradicts religious values, social norms, and self-image. Cognitive dissonance theory, developed by Festinger (1959), explains that individuals experience psychological discomfort when they have two or more conflicting cognitive elements, such as beliefs, norms, and behaviors. This discomfort drives individuals to reduce tension by seeking justification, adjusting attitudes, or changing

behaviors. This is reflected in the addiction patterns of Generation Z as consumers of online pornography, which are never resolved but instead continue to cycle within a complex cognitive loop (Burtăverde et al., 2021; Litsou et al., 2020; Palazzolo & Bettman, 2020).

Therefore, cognitive dissonance theory is used to help researchers explore the dynamics of Generation Z communication related to their experiences of consuming online pornography. This theory serves as a tool for analyzing the process by which Generation Z constructs meaning and patterns of problematic pornography consumption cycles.

Online Pornography from a Phenomenological Perspective

The effort to understand the phenomenon of enjoying online pornography based on the experiences of Generation Z is through the phenomenological method. The phenomenon experienced by Generation Z as accessors of such content is a unique direct experience in accordance with the basic principles of phenomenology stated by Husserl (2012), namely that every individual's conscious experience has a real essence.

Understanding of online pornography access should also be based on the perceptions of the individuals involved, in line with Moustakas (1994)' view that the perceptions of individuals experiencing the phenomenon should be the primary source of research. Based on the explanations from several phenomenological figures, it can be understood that the experience of accessing online pornography from a phenomenological perspective is a unique and distinctive event that is then understood through the experiences and perceptions of the individuals who experience it, without justifying the actions of the perpetrators.

METHODS

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach based on the constructivist and interpretive paradigms and adopted phenomenology as the research method. Phenomenology was chosen as the methodological foundation for this study because it is a method designed to understand, examine, and illustrate specific unique experiences that have been experienced by individuals or groups (Husserl, 2012; D. W. Smith, 2018). In this study, the phenomenological method was used as a guide to explore the meanings and experiences of Generation Z related to the activity of watching online pornographic content.

Setting and Participant

This study adopted a purposive sampling technique with convenience sampling selected based on the rationale that the topic raised was a sensitive one. This sampling

technique was based on non-probability criteria, whereby research participants were selected based on ease of access and their willingness to participate (Creswell, 2013).

We consider this sampling technique relevant because finding informants who enjoy watching pornography in Indonesia is not easy, given the social stigma attached to it. As an initial recruitment stage, the research team recruited participants based on personal connections of the team members to find individuals willing to share their experiences without feeling pressured. This aligns with the findings of Conner et al. (2009), who noted that such sampling techniques are highly relevant for research involving informants from marginalized groups or individuals subject to stigma.

This study successfully recruited nine participants from Generation Z who reside in various regions in Indonesia. This number refers to the ideal sample size in phenomenological research, which is between six and ten informants (Creswell, 2013).

Details of all participants in this study can be seen in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Research Participant

No.	Inital	Age	Gender
1.	V	21	Male
2.	M	21	Male
3.	Z	20	Female
4.	W	21	Male
5.	N	20	Male
6.	AM	21	Male
7.	R	21	Male
8.	F	19	Male
9	AD	22	Male

Source: Authors' Research Data (2023)

Based on the research participant table above, the determination of the number was also based on considerations of data saturation as explained by Patton (2002) that data saturation is a situation in which the author reaches a point of information saturation marked by the absence of new information obtained from the experiences recounted by informants.

Data Gathering Process

The data collected in this study came from semi-structured interviews with informants. This type of interview allows for ongoing discussion as follow-up questions arise based on the informant's answers (Creswell, 2013). This interaction allows the writing team to explore information in greater depth without being limited by the questions in the interview guide.

Interviews were conducted offline and online, taking into account the sensitive nature of the topic, so the writing team prioritized the comfort of the participants. The interview

sessions were conducted in a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. The questions asked of the informants ranged from their habits when watching pornography.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was based on the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method (Sapam & Jijina, 2020). The IPA analysis procedure, as described by J. A. Smith & Osborn (2008), includes reading and re-reading; initial noting; development of emergent themes; searching for connections across emergent themes; and searching for patterns across cases. First, reading and re-reading, where the research team carefully reviewed the interview transcripts by reading them repeatedly to ensure there were no misinterpretations in understanding the interview results.

Second, initial noting involves assigning codes based on the meaning contained in each word and sentence spoken by the informant. In doing so, the writing team used QDA Miner Lite software to facilitate the addition and sorting of codes. As a result, 158 initial codes were obtained. Based on the codes that emerged during the initial noting stage, the writing team then developed them to ensure that each code captured represented all the important information that emerged.

Next, to search for patterns across the cases or reduce the data, the team of authors again explored the relationships between each code that appeared until they successfully identified the main patterns or themes of the research findings. At this stage, the team of authors found 40 themes that would be further reduced.

All of these steps were carried out on all existing transcripts until data saturation was reached and the main themes resulting from the data reduction could be translated into thematic research findings. Ultimately, four main themes were identified as most relevant to answering the research question regarding the habits of watching online pornography constructed in the daily lives of Generation Z.

Data Validity

To ensure the validity of this study, the research team conducted member checking and data source triangulation. Member checking was carried out by returning the interview transcripts to the informants to ensure that the information obtained by the researchers was consistent with what the informants intended to convey. Data source triangulation was then conducted after the data analysis process was completed. This process involved experts and practitioners in the field of psychology. This data validity procedure aims to avoid the possibility of subjective bias that is likely to occur in a series of qualitative data analysis

processes (Creswell, 2013). The results of the triangulation were then elaborated in the section describing the research findings.

Research Ethics

The data collection process was carried out with the necessary permission, from the university level to the informants. During the interview stage, informants were informed about the purpose of this research and their rights as informants. All informants were also informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw if they felt uncomfortable during the interview process. Therefore, consent forms were provided in advance to all research participants to ensure the confidentiality of the personal data provided.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the authors present their research findings based on an exploration of Generation Z's experiences regarding how the habit of watching online pornography is constructed in their daily activities. Four main themes were identified to underpin this section, and all of these themes will be presented in the form of sub-chapters covering: 1) the momentum that triggers the desire to watch online pornography; 2) the contribution of online media in escalating access to pornography; 3) online pornography addiction as a form of regressive development; 4) non-solutive compensation and the cycle of online pornography addiction.

Each sub-theme is presented through findings in the form of descriptions of informants' experiences, followed by in-depth discussion and analysis as a discussion.

The Momentum That Triggers the Desire to Watch Online Pornography

The first finding shows that the desire to access online pornography among the informants did not arise randomly, but was triggered by specific moments in their daily lives. The informants' experiences reveal a pattern of main triggers identified in three causes. First, feelings of loneliness are the most dominant factor. One informant recounted that his status as a single person triggered feelings of loneliness, compounded by the absence of emotional outlets. The informant's statement is as follows:

> "Actually, I watch porn more often when I'm single because that situation makes me feel really lonely since there's no one of the opposite sex for me to channel my

affection and sexual desires to. In the end, watching porn becomes my escape, even though it's more about satisfying my sexual desires" (P001).

Second, daily routines filled with pressure and stress due to college and work are another trigger. One informant revealed that watching pornography—often followed by masturbation—was his go-to solution for feeling happy (P002). A similar experience was shared by the next informant:

"I often watch porn when I'm feeling stressed after a hectic day at college and I want to refresh myself. I usually indulge in masturbation, and in order to reach climax through masturbation, I have to watch porn first to get sexually aroused" (P003).

Furthermore, external factors such as the environment are the third trigger. One informant revealed that pornographic topics of conversation and jokes are commonplace among their circle of friends:

"By watching porn, I understand and can make jokes when my circle mentions pornographic things. But it's treated like a joke, and it turns out that porn can connect me with my friends" (P002)

These various trigger patterns indicate that accessing online pornography serves as a multifunctional coping mechanism for Generation Z. Feelings of stress and loneliness suggest that online pornography is a means of escape to alleviate negative emotions. This is in line with research by Testa et al. (2024), which states that one of the motives for accessing online pornography is to cope with negative emotions.

When informants acknowledge that this activity produces dopamine, which makes them feel happy, they are actually indirectly hinting at how the reward system in the brain works. Pornography becomes a shortcut to feeling instant comfort and pleasure (Benucci et al., 2024).

Another interesting finding relates to online pornography as social capital, which is another side of this phenomenon. Rather than being something secret and private, knowledge about pornography has become a means of gaining social affirmation in social circles, blurring the line between personal experience and social demands (Rodriguez-Amat & Belinskaya, 2023).

The Contribution of Online Media in Escalating Access to Pornography

Once the desire to access online pornography was triggered, various informants emphasized the important role of digital technology as a medium that not only provides facilities but also escalates the habit of accessing online pornography. In this case, ease of

access to online pornography is a major factor. One informant described this ease of access as follows:

> *"We can easily find millions of pornographic videos on the internet. Although blocked by the government, they can be easily accessed using a VPN. These sites have features that allow us to search for our favorite genres of pornography. The result? Of course, it becomes a 'fertile ground' for satisfying our desires because it is easy, cheap, and there are many options available"* (P001).

Furthermore, escalation also occurs through social media. Several informants admitted that accessing pornography through social media is more popular:

> *"Nowadays, accessing porn is easier using Twitter because you don't need to use a VPN, you just have to search for porn accounts. Usually, when I find a porn account, I can check its followers or likes, and there are so many. That's why it's my favorite thing about Twitter"* (P005, P008, P009).

Media studies perspectives explain that modern digital platforms offer accessibility, anonymity, and unlimited content variety, thereby actively shaping and intensifying user behavior (Miller & McBain, 2022). Findings indicating that pornography is expanding into social media platforms like X (Twitter) align with previous research highlighting the prevalence of pornographic content on such platforms (Cao, 2022). Such ease of access ultimately leads to online pornography being viewed as equivalent to accessing general entertainment content, as revealed in research by Fernandez et al. (2021).

Online Pornography Addiction as a Form of Regressive Development

The ease of access described above ultimately leads to addiction to online pornography. One informant recounted his simple experience, which became a habit:

> *"The process is, well, just staying in my room and making sure it's quiet, taking the time to scroll until I find the most suitable video, then watching and enjoying it. Yeah... usually because I enjoy watching the video so much, I continue with masturbation, and I can do that every day—that's why I'm addicted now"* (P004).

The privacy aspect of personal devices also plays an important role, as such habits are easy to keep secret. This was also mentioned by several informants:

> *"I don't think my friends know, because I keep this habit a secret. This secret is safe, because the account I use to access porn is anonymous, and no one knows that it's my account. So I just keep quiet, and don't admit anything I do. Because if people find out, I'll definitely feel embarrassed"* (P001, P005).

This process is a combination of stimuli, ease of behavior, and instant gratification, creating a strong pattern in the form of behavioral addiction (Mauer-Vakil & Bahji, 2020). This continues to repeat itself even though individuals are aware of the negative consequences. This condition confirms that the development of pornography in online media facilitates and accelerates the process of addiction.

Non-Solutive Compensation and the Cycle of Online Pornography Addiction

This constructed habit ends in an endless cycle, making it something that happens repeatedly. Several informants mentioned that they felt happy after watching pornography:

> *"For me, when I watch porn, I always masturbate at the same time. That way, I feel my dopamine hormones being released, so I feel really happy and satisfied afterwards. I feel refreshed afterwards. So, for me, it's a form of refreshment"* (P001, P003, P007).

However, that feeling of joy was quickly replaced by feelings of guilt and regret. Here are some informants sharing their experiences of those feelings:

> *"But afterwards, I felt really bad and worthless. Especially when I masturbated. I regretted why I kept doing it, and felt like there was no progress and no other pleasures that I can do. I just felt unhealthy afterwards"* (P001, P003, P007).

However, all of these negative feelings and compensatory behaviors were not enough to stop the habit. This was described by one informant:

> *"Watching pornography is indeed an endless cycle. Even though after watching it, I truly regret it and I try to keep myself busy so that I don't get stuck in regret. When I become stressed or lonely again, I go back to watch pornography because the momentary pleasure of watching pornography always makes me feel better"* (P003).

This cycle can be explained through the theory of Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Informants experience a conscious conflict between accessing online pornography and the belief that it is wrong, which leads to feelings of self-blame. These feelings of guilt are also reinforced by the normative culture of Indonesian society. In order to alleviate their guilt, they ultimately engage in acts of mortification or "atonement," such as increasing their religious practices (Qadri et al., 2023).

Because the root cause of the problem has not been addressed, this strategy will only be a failed compensation that fails to break the cycle of addiction. Changes to address addiction cannot be forced but require a process of unfreezing first, as outlined in change

theory (Solow & Perry, 2023). This unfreezing process involves replacing old habits with more positive activities to create readiness to stop and change.

Furthermore, illustrations depicting the overall findings of the study can be observed in the chart below.
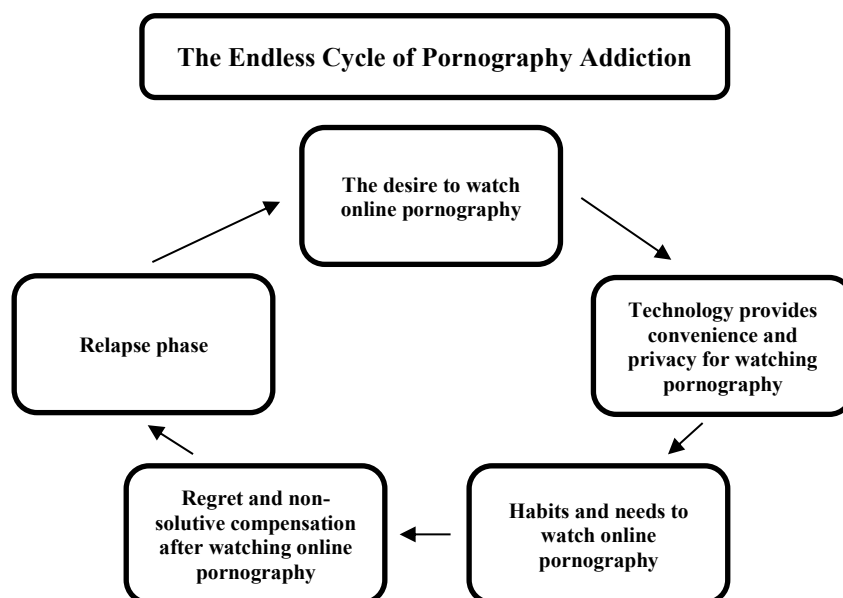

The Endless Cycle of Pornography Addiction

The desire to watch online pornography

Technology provides convenience and privacy for watching pornography

Habits and needs to watch online pornography

Regret and non-solutive compensation after watching online pornography

Relapse phase

Figure 1. The Construction of Pornography Addiction Cycle
Source: Authors' Research Data (2023)

Overall, these findings have explored the construction of online pornography addiction, which begins with triggers that incite the desire to view online pornography. This desire is then escalated by the ease offered by online media, such as privacy and ease of access, leading to patterns of addiction. Ultimately, these patterns of addiction become an endless cycle due to compensation that clashes with the informants' feelings of guilt and their desire to seek momentary pleasure again. This construction is at the core of the experiences of all research informants.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully identified the construction of online pornography viewing activities carried out by Generation Z. These activities become an endless cycle in which they realize that watching pornography is wrong, yet continue to repeat the activity to fulfill their biological needs. In short, Generation Z constructs their habit of accessing online pornography through the emergence of a desire to watch it, reinforced by technology that provides ease and privacy for viewing pornography, making accessing pornography a habit

and necessity in their lives. After accessing online pornography, they engage in short-term, non-solutions-oriented compensatory efforts, leading them to relapse and return to the desire to watch online pornography.

The results of this study are expected to serve as a basis for recommendations for conducting focus group discussions (FGDs) with communities that focus on the issue of pornography. The output of these FGDs is expected to create a counseling-based medium with the aim of encouraging addicts to be more open and to consider seeking help as a normal thing to do.

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