



REVIEW ARTICLE / DERLEME YAZISI

Treatment of Problematic Pornography Use: A Systematic Review

Sorunlu Pornografi Kullanımının Tedavisi: Sistemik Gözden Geçirme

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Abstract:

This study examined various intervention methods for problematic pornography use. Problematic pornography use refers to the inability of individuals who identify as problematic pornography viewers to control their behavioral impulses, which causes problems in their daily functioning. Since there is no clear definition of pornography addiction in the literature and pornography addiction is not classified as a disorder under the category of behavioral addiction, it is difficult to measure and assess pornography addiction. Conversely, new research on pornography addiction treatment is emerging. For this systematic review, studies on PsychINFO, ScienceDirect, Wiley Online Library, Web of Science, and PubMed databases were screened using the following keywords: addiction behavior, sexual addiction, pornography addiction, problematic pornography use, pornography treatment, and systematic review. Using the PRISMA guideline, 76 articles were retrieved and seven of them were included here that met the selection criteria based on their theory, method, context, and findings that allowed comparison concerning the effectiveness of their intervention programs used for problematic pornography use.

Keywords: Addiction behavior, sexual addiction, pornography addiction, problematic pornography use, pornography treatment, systematic review

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Öz:

Bu çalışmada, sorunlu pornografi kullanımına yönelik çeşitli müdahale yöntemleri incelenmiştir. Sorunlu pornografi kullanımı, kendilerini sorunlu pornografi izleyen kişiler olarak tanımlayan bireylerin davranışsal dürtülerini kontrol edememe sorununu ifade eder ve bu da günlük işleyişlerinde sorunlara neden olur. Literatürde pornografi bağımlılığının net bir tanımı olmadığından ve pornografi bağımlılığı davranışsal bağımlılık kategorisi altında bir bozukluk olarak sınıflandırılmadığından, pornografi bağımlılığının ölçülmesi ve değerlendirilmesi zordur. Buna karşılık, pornografi bağımlılığı müdahaleleri üzerine araştırmalar ortaya çıkmaktadır. Bu sistematik incelemede PsychINFO, ScienceDirect, Wiley Online Library, Web of Science ve PubMed veri tabanlarındaki çalışmalar şu anahtar kelimeler kullanılarak taranmıştır: bağımlılık davranışı, cinsel bağımlılık, pornografi bağımlılığı, sorunlu pornografi kullanımı, pornografi tedavisi ve sistematik inceleme. PRISMA kılavuzu kullanılarak 76 makaleye ulaşılmış ve bunlardan seçim kriterlerini karşılayan yedi tanesi buraya dahil edilmiştir. Teorilerine, yöntemlerine, bağlamlarına ve sorunlu pornografi kullanımı için kullanılan müdahale programlarının etkinliği ile ilgili karşılaştırmaya izin veren bulgularına dayanarak bu seçim yapılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bağımlılık davranışı, cinsel bağımlılık, pornografi bağımlılığı, sorunlu pornografi kullanımı, pornografi tedavisi, sistematik inceleme

Introduction

The legitimacy of "pornography addiction" remains a matter of debate, particularly due to its non-recognition as an official diagnosis by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). Despite the affordability, accessibility, and the potential for anonymous engagement of therapy, these characteristics complicate the treatment landscape. Limited research is dedicated to treatments specifically targeting problematic pornography use, accompanied by a lack of comprehensive understanding and diagnosis of the issue. The available literature emphasizes a variety of treatment interventions utilizing diverse theoretical approaches and modalities to address problematic internet pornography viewing. Several theoretical conceptualizations differ that offer explanations for the development of pornography use. To describe the development and maintenance of problematic pornography use as a construct, the following categories have been utilized to classify problematic pornography use as a disorder: a) Obsessive-compulsive spectrum disorder, b) Addictive disorder, and c) Impulse control disorders.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

According to the American Psychiatric Association, it is a form of anxiety disorder (APA, 2013), sexual compulsivity is described as a presentation of an obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) (Coleman, 1990). OCD is known to be intruded upon by one's cognitions and images, attempting to reduce one's anxiety or compulsions by habitual reactionary responses. Using the OCD approach to explain sexual compulsivity, involves behaviors that are driven by dysphoric anxiety about irrational sexual obsessions (Coleman, 1990). In this formulation, sexually compulsive behaviors are used to reduce anxiety. The time spent fantasizing about compulsive behavior characterizes sexual obsessions.

Addictive disorder

According to Orford (1985), behaviors that drive craving may be viewed similarly to addiction as a behavioral condition, in which they do not necessarily involve addictive substances. In the literature, problematic pornography use has focused on sexual behaviors, but it is in line with the above depiction. On the other hand, whether problematic pornography use is an addiction or not is a debated topic. Like problematic pornography use,

compulsive behaviors (e.g., pathologic gambling) are considered under the behavioral category of 'addictions,' and they have been classified as impulse-control disorders according to the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2000). The National Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity 2013 describes sexual addiction and sexual compulsivity as "engaging in persistent and escalating patterns of sexual behavior acted out despite increasing negative consequences to self and others". The Society for the Advancement of Sexual Health (SASH), which specializes in sexual addiction treatment, also addresses sexual issues within the context of chemical dependency and other therapeutic interventions.

Impulse Control Disorder

An impulse-control disorder approach has been suggested as the best fit for problematic pornography use. Excessive sexual behaviors, which include problematic pornography use suggested to be classified under an impulse-control disorder model (APA, 2000; Barth & Kinder, 1987). It was purported that "sexual risk-taking" (Kalichman & Rompa, 2001), "sexual sensation seeking" (Kalichman & Rompa, 1995), and "sexual impulsivity" constructs (Hoyle, Fefjar, & Miller, 2000) have significant similarities.

Literature Review on Psychosocial Intervention

The literature on psychosocial interventions for pornography addiction has seen a surge since the 1970s, with an escalating need due to internet accessibility by the late 1990s (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000). The concept of "pornography addiction" has emerged in clinical discourse, prompting ongoing debates about its legitimacy and the absence of diagnostic criteria for treatment procedures. While the DSM-V doesn't recognize "pornography addiction" as a psychological disorder, the World Health Organization (ICD-11) includes "compulsive sexual behavior disorder," incorporating "compulsive pornography" under problematic pornography use (APA, 2013; WHO, 2019). The definition of pornography addiction varies, with terms like "compulsive pornography viewing" and "hypersexual disorder" used (Cooper et al., 2004). Studies indicate prevalent pornography consumption globally, with an average of 115 million daily visitors to a popular site in 2019 (Pornhub, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic,

this figure increased by 11.6% (Pornhub, 2020). While widespread across age groups, university-aged men show a higher prevalence. Effects on individuals include reduced sexual satisfaction, relationship dynamics, and life satisfaction. As noted by Prause and Pfaus (2015) “erectile problems may occur when real-life sexual stimulation does not match the broad content visual sexual stimuli (p. 91)”.

Research emphasizes the need for systematic reviews of psychometric tools, such as the “Pornographic Consumption Scale” and “Problematic Pornographic Use Scale,” developed to assess problematic pornography use. The term “problematic pornography use” is favored over “addiction” due to the lack of formal diagnostic criteria. Despite not being classified as a behavioral addiction, research on preventing pornography addiction is growing, while studies on treatment efficacy are relatively limited. Future studies should explore the long-term effectiveness of treatments and analyze differences in treatment components.

This study seeks to assess the effectiveness of intervention programs targeting problematic pornography use through a systematic review, using the following questions:

1. How were research models and participant groups identified in studies investigating the effectiveness of intervention programs for problematic pornography use?
2. What organization structure was employed for the intervention programs (e.g., number of sessions) targeting problematic pornography use, and what content did they encompass?
3. What measurement tools were employed in studies assessing the effectiveness of programs designed to prevent problematic pornography use?
4. What evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of intervention programs utilized for addressing problematic pornography use?

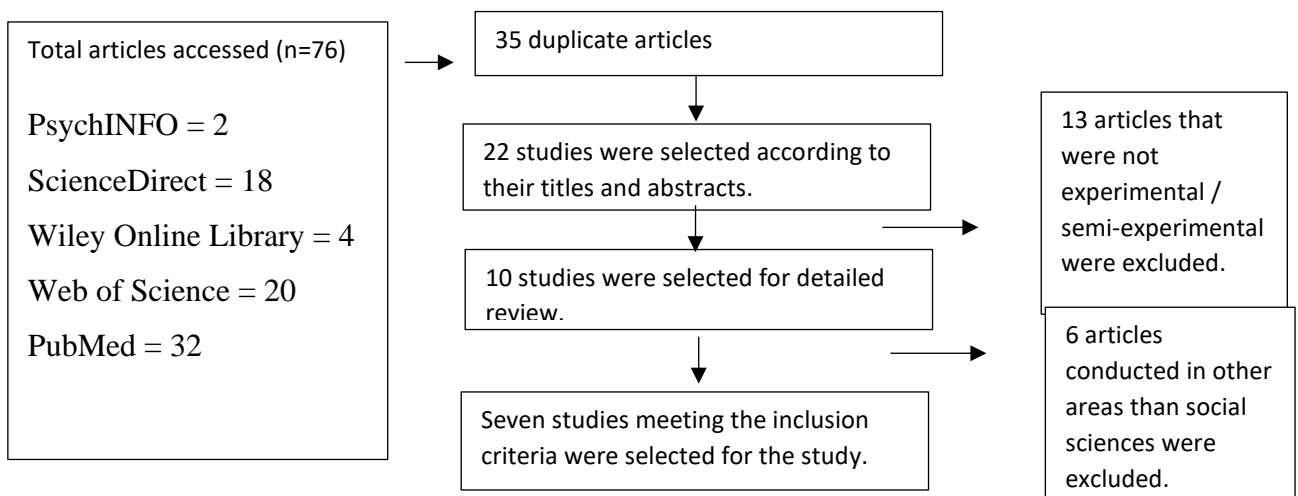
Methods

This is a systematic literature review study that examined the findings of prevention programs on problematic pornography views. Systematic literature review articles can be classified based on their domain, theory, and method. This study examines problematic pornography viewing in the domain of mental health, which uses psychoeducational programs as prevention methods. The goal is to provide the reader an understanding of the topic with their contribution and/or limitations, which may offer background for future research. Within the scope of this research, seven research articles were selected to be analyzed. Two of the selected articles included here were conducted in New Zealand and the others were conducted in the United States of America. This systematic review used the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher, Libertai, Tetzlaff, Altman, & PRISMA Group, 2009).

Selection of Study Sample

This systematic review utilized the databases PsychINFO, ScienceDirect, Wiley Online Library, Web of Science, and PubMed, with keywords including pornography addiction, problematic pornography use, pornography treatment, psychoeducation, and review. Articles from 2010 to 2022 were selected to capture the latest research on treatment and prevention efficacy. The inclusion criteria focused on studies providing recent information on problematic pornography use, while exclusion criteria encompassed studies with inaccessible summaries, non-English or non-Turkish publications, and non-experimental designs. From the initial 76 articles, seven were chosen based on the purpose and selection criteria for detailed examination and analysis, following the PRISMA scheme as depicted in Table.

Figure 1: PRISMA schema



Measurement Tools

The measurement tools and scales used to determine the effect of the treatment programs (i.e., among the studies that evaluated problematic pornography viewing) are presented in Table 1, along with the descriptive characteristics of selected studies.

Results

Problematic online pornography use, stemming from an inability to control its consumption, leads to negative cognitions and emotions, subsequently impacting one's overall quality of life and functioning (Bridges and Minarcik, 2012; Minarcik, 2016). Existing literature notes the use of both group and single-case designs in psychosocial intervention modalities. Various theoretical approaches, which include Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), cognitive-behavioral therapy, and mindfulness-based meditation practices, are employed to define and treat internet pornography addiction. Treatment interventions are conceptualized and described within these frameworks. While experimental treatment trials on pornography viewing are limited, seven studies examined which follow specific designs and procedures:

Twohig and Crosby (2010) employed ACT, a third-wave cognitive behavioral intervention that focuses on addressing inner experiences like emotions, cognitions, and sensations using behavior change strategies. In their study, ACT served as the treatment for six males reporting problematic internet pornography consumption. The researchers publicized the intervention program on campus and in public spaces, inviting interested individuals to contact them via telephone or email. Initial interviews included an evaluation session, and participants were tasked with completing a Self-Monitoring measure on issues related to pornography viewing. Subsequently, participants received cards indicating the frequency of watching pornographic content and engaging in masturbation, with daily responses sent via email. The intervention comprised eight sessions lasting 1.5 hours each, with participants answering ACT therapy evaluation questions before each session. One week after program completion, participants assessed the intervention, and three months later, they completed self-evaluation scales. Treatment resulted in an 85% reduction in pornography consumption post-treatment, sustained with an 83% reduction during a subsequent 3-month follow-up.

Crosby and Twohig (2016) conducted a study comparing a 12-session individual ACT protocol for problematic online pornography use with twenty-eight males, including a waitlist and control condition. The assessment involved self-reported pornography consumption, standardized evaluation of compulsive sexual behavior and relevant cognitions, and pre-and post-treatment quality of life measures, with a 3-month follow-up. Results indicated a substantial reduction (93%) in those receiving ACT compared to a 21% reduction in the waitlist condition. A 2-hour interview three months post-treatment assessed the effectiveness of ACT using a pre-test and post-test research design.

The third study included here was conducted by Orzack, Voluse, Wolf, and Hennen in 2006. The authors used a 12-step substance addiction treatment program for treating sexual addictions, employing group treatments to address problematic pornography use. Intervention programs

included a combination of Readiness to Change (RtC), Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), and Motivational Interviewing (MI) interventions. Closed-group therapy treatment for men with problematic Internet-enabled sexual behavior (IESB) continued for 16 weeks in five groups (n=35) and the member's average age was 44.5 in this empirically based outcome study. The following three scales were used to track participants' improvement: The Orzack Time Intensity Survey, the BASIS-32, and the BDI. Closed-group treatment was implemented for 16 weeks. The findings indicated a significant enhancement in the quality of life and a reduction in depressive symptoms among participants who underwent the group treatment intervention. Additionally, individuals in the "anxiety" cluster showed positive responses to the treatment, those in the "mood" cluster responded favorably, while those in the "AD and ADHD" cluster did not show a positive response.

Moreover, there is a scarcity of studies concentrating on individual interventions, such as case study designs, that conceptualize problematic pornography use. The fourth study in this review, conducted by McGahan and Bridges in 2010, utilized cognitive-behavioral therapy within a single-case study design involving a 23-year-old White male seeking treatment for his pornography use. The therapist implemented a functional analysis of the client's pornography use, guiding a nine-session treatment spanned over three months. The treatment protocol encompassed psychoeducation, identification of triggers, challenging cognitive distortions, exploring alternative activities, and environmental control by minimizing tempting materials. Due to treatment, the client stopped porn use completely as assessed in their two-month check in.

In 2016, a fifth study by Minarcik examined the effectiveness of a 12-session CBT, initially developed in 2012 by Bridges and Minarcik, for reducing problematic pornography use in men with "pornography addiction." Twelve participants were randomly assigned different baseline durations before treatment. While primary measures included daily pornography use, self-reported addiction levels, sexual thoughts, compulsivity, hypersexual behaviors, and craving, secondary measures focused on sexual cognitions, mood, relationship satisfaction, and OCD symptoms. Weekly pornography use consistently decreased according to self-reported daily monitoring forms, with reliable and clinically significant reductions in sexual cognitions, hypersexual behavior, compulsivity, and craving from treatment. The cognitive-behavioral protocol successfully reduced problematic pornography use by enhancing behavioral repertoire, and coping strategies, and addressing reinforcing factors. The treatment considered both positive reinforcement (pleasure-seeking) and negative reinforcement (escaping negative emotions) aspects of pornography use. It incorporated motivational components, psychoeducation, behavioral and cognitive strategies, relationship enrichment methods, and relapse prevention instruction.

The sixth study by Sniewski, Krägeloh, Farvid, and Carter (2022) used a standard two-stage AB design. In this study, the effect of meditation on pornography was examined using mixed and experimental methods, and participants were asked to record their daily pornographic content viewing time. Using meditation as an intervention (i.e.,

guided meditation through audio recording twice per day), the authors performed a randomized multi-base design. Twelve males with 'self-perceived problematic pornography use' participated in the study. Participants recorded their pornography use daily and completed the Problematic Pornography Consumption Scale (PPCS) as a pre and post-test. Participants were instructed to maintain a daily record of the time spent on daily pornography viewing. They submitted weekly updates in a spreadsheet to the primary researcher. The spreadsheet documented weekly totals for both the daily duration of pornography viewing and the daily number of meditation sessions during the intervention phase of the study. Post-study interviews provided important descriptive information assessing the outcome. Moreover, results indicated that due to meditation 'self-perceived problematic pornography use' was reduced. Their reported perceived impacts indicate decreased rumination, guilt, and shame after watching pornography and enhanced self-acceptance. Test results highlight significant improvement for seven participants out of eleven. Further exploration addressing the limitation of this study concerning meditation as a potentially effective intervention is needed (Sniewski, Krägeloh, Farvid, & Carter, 2022). The PPCS showed that results improved for participants who completed the study.

The last study, conducted by Sniewski and Farvid (2019), utilized semi-structured interviews created by the researchers and incorporated a Pornography Usage Diary. Lately, there has been increased attention on sexual addiction and compulsivity research on self-perceived problematic pornography use (SPPPU). Heterosexual men who perceive their pornography use as problematic face limited and supportive treatment alternatives. The study sought to offer a more profound understanding of men's personal, subjective, and contemplative encounters during the intervention of six cases of men experiencing mindfulness-based intervention training for 'self-perceived problematic pornography use.' Employing a mixed research method involving interviews, daily logs, journals, and guided meditations, findings indicate that the structure and context of interventions may influence their efficacy. In comparison to abstinence practices, the results indicate that setting treatment objectives focused on self-acceptance and embracing the use of pornography may be more attainable.

Discussions

Articles included in this review show that there is a range of assessment tools used to evaluate problematic pornography. Apart from the Pornography Consumption Scale which was originally developed by Böthe et al. in 2018 and is reviewed here, there is no other quantitative measurement tool used to assess pornography use. Other studies have used semi-structured interview forms, the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire to measure the effectiveness of therapy (Hayes et al., 2004), Face-to-face ACT Progress Interviews (Twohig et al., 2006), the Penn Conscience Inventory (Abramowitz et al. et al., 2002), the Obsessive Compulsive Inventory (Foa et al., 1998) and, Sexual Compulsiveness Scale (Kalichman & Rompa, 1995), Thought Action Scale (Shafran, Thordarson, & Rachman, 1996) and the Thought Control Scale (Wells and Davies, 1994) as measurement tools.

Overall, pornography as a construct is complex without stigmatizing the behavior. In order to measure the construct thoroughly, the Pornographic Consumption

Scale (COPS – G; Hatch et al., 2020) was developed as an assessment tool. Psychometric Development of the Problematic Pornographic Use Scale (PPUS; Kor et al., 2014) is another tool developed to help distinguish pornography addiction from other behavioral addictions such as gambling and Internet use. The lack of consensus in the literature regarding the diagnosis, definition, and classification of problematic pornography content is believed to influence the selection of measurement tools. Fernandez and Griffiths (2021) highlight that existing measurement tools for problematic pornography use mainly focus on the behavioral addiction dimension. Thus, it is necessary to define pornography as a construct so that it has thoroughly defined distinctive criteria with regards to what it is and when it becomes problematic. Moreover, the authors note a scarcity of empirical studies addressing this aspect.

The studies by Twohig and Crosby (2010) and Crosby and Twohig (2016) explored the use of ACT as an intervention method in the systematic review's scope. They addressed problematic pornographic content viewing and compulsive sexual behaviors, utilizing methods such as motivational interviewing, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and emotion-focused therapy. However, these studies employed non-empirical procedures to address issues in general functioning, which linked to pornographic content viewing. Acceptance-based interventions like ACT targeted behavior change through internal experiences, emphasizing psychological flexibility. Mindfulness-based interventions in studies by Sniewski and Farvid (2019) and Sniewski et al. (2022) were found to be promising in addressing problematic pornographic content viewing and hypersexuality. Awareness was considered crucial for behavior change in cases of hypersexuality (Reid and Woolley, 2006). The absence of problematic pornographic content viewing in the DSM-V criteria indicates shortcomings in treatment methods for both researchers and clinicians. Developing intervention programs based on existing contributions could alleviate these uncertainties.

Engaging in problematic pornography, casual sex, and multiple partners is linked to decreased well-being and increased shame (Poulsen, Busby, & Galovan, 2013; Duffy, Dawson, & Das Nair, 2016). To mitigate risks, participation in psychoeducation and group counseling programs addressing problematic pornography use is recommended. This study highlights the lack of interventions for this issue in Turkey due to regulations with regards to internet accessibility, suggesting a need for further research. Limitations include the absence of DSM-V recognition for problematic pornography use, differences in diagnostic classifications, and a shortage of randomized controlled studies.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

There were no human or animal participants in this study, and therefore, it did not require ethical approval.

Publication Permission

Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Materials

Not applicable.

Conflict Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest with regard to this manuscript.

Financing

Not applicable.

Authors' Contributions

NGY and Hİİ proposed the main idea of the research, while Hİİ and EU were involved in reviewing and discussing the literature. NGY and Hİİ contributed to drafting the article and revising its content. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the article.

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