The Relationship Between Blame, Maladaptive Guilt/ Shame, Couple Communication, and Relationship Satisfaction in Pornography Users

Joshua K. Otani
Utah State University, joshua.otani@usu.edu

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COUPLE COMMUNICATION, AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION IN

PORNOGRAPHY USERS

by

Joshua K. Otani

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Approved:

_____   _____
Ryan B. Seedall, Ph.D.   Spencer Bradshaw, Ph.D.
Major Professor   Committee Member

_____   _____
Jaclyn Craven, Ph.D.   D. Richard Cutler, Ph.D.
Committee Member   Vice Provost of Graduate
Studies

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ABSTRACT

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and Relationship Satisfaction in Pornography Users

by

Joshua K. Otani, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2024

Major Professor: Dr. Ryan Seedall
Department: Human Development and Family Studies

In this master's thesis, I conducted a quantitative study using data from 190 individuals in a committed couple relationship to better understand the relationship between blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame and couple communication, and blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame and relationship outcome. The first analysis revealed that general blame and general maladaptive guilt/ shame was significantly associated with less constructive communication, blame was significantly associated to higher self-demand/partner-withdraw behavior, and both maladaptive guilt/ shame and blame was significantly associated to higher partner-demand/self-withdraw behavior. The second analysis highlighted that maladaptive guilt/ shame was significantly associated with less couple satisfaction.

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PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The Relationship between Blame, Maladaptive Guilt/ Shame, Couple Communication,

and Relationship Satisfaction in Pornography Users

Joshua Otani

In this master's thesis, I conducted a quantitative study using data from 190 individuals in a committed couple relationship where at least one partner is dealing with problematic pornography use to better understand the relationship of blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame with couple communication patterns and couple satisfaction. All 190 individuals independently completed an online anonymous questionnaire consisting of various quantitative assessments measuring my study variables (e.g., blame, maladaptive guilt/ shame, couple communication, couple satisfaction, problematic pornography use).

I used an individual data analysis to examine how study variables related to individual outcomes. The first analysis revealed that general blame and general maladaptive guilt/ shame was significantly associated with less constructive communication, blame was significantly associated to higher self-demand/partner-withdraw behavior, and both maladaptive guilt/ shame and blame was significantly associated to higher partner-demand/self-withdraw behavior. The second analysis highlighted that maladaptive guilt/ shame was significantly associated with less couple satisfaction.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I initially decided to undertake a master's thesis because I wanted to gain the invaluable experience of carrying out a research project start to finish. What I very quickly came to realize was a master's thesis is more than writing a college or even graduate level paper; it would require edit after edit of revisions that often felt insurmountable. While I was still in the brainstorming phase and in the process of writing the literature review, there was a point that I spoke with my major professor, Dr. Ryan Seedall, about the possibility of me discontinuing doing a master's thesis. At the time, the deadline for deciding to do a master's thesis was quickly approaching and I was uncertain whether the amount of time and energy it requires was worth it, especially since doing a thesis was optional. After taking a momentary pause from writing and discussing the pros and cons with both my wife and Ryan, I decided to commit to doing a thesis.

I would like to first and foremost express my gratitude to Ryan, in whom I will be forever grateful for. To be honest, if it were not for Ryan's immense kindness, patience, advocacy, generosity, and mentorship, I would have decided not to continue writing my thesis. His quick responsiveness to emails and prompt revising of each thesis version provided me the necessary support and guidance I needed to complete my thesis. I am deeply grateful for Ryan's mentorship in teaching me about the intricacies of writing a thesis. First, he taught me the fundamentals of understanding the contents and meaning of each section. He then allotted plenty of practice (maybe too much at times 😜) in constructing each section. While I often hoped for fewer edits needed with each revision, Ryan taught me that rather than addressing each individual comment like a checklist item, it is important to consider the entire conceptual framework and how each piece fits

together. It only took me until working on the Discussion section that this principle clicked for me. Moving forward if I decide to get my doctorate, for my dissertation, I will be deliberate in spending more time and energy upfront fleshing out a thorough outline, making sure I have a solid conceptual framework in place before proceeding to write.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Spencer Bradshaw and Dr. Jaclyn Craven, who both willingly accepted positions to be on my thesis committee and graciously offered their time and energy to review my thesis drafts and attended both my proposal and defense thesis meetings.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Pornography is widespread in our society (Carroll et al., 2008; Hald et al., 2014; Regnerus et al., 2016). Pornography is defined as "material (text, picture, video, etc.) that (1) creates or elicits erotic feelings or thoughts and (2) contains explicit exposure or descriptions of sexual acts involving the genitals, such as vaginal or anal intercourse, oral sex, or masturbation" (Reid et al., 2011, p. 360). Pornography has the potential to bring up a variety of maladaptive feelings in couple relationships, including anger. Anger is not always negative. It can signal and be an impetus for change (Butler et al., 2017, 2019). However, anger can also be disruptive if it is turned inward (maladaptive guilt/ shame) or outward (blame) in a negative way (Butler et al., 2019). As a result, it is possible for blame (Adams & Robinson, 2001) and maladaptive guilt/ shame (Sniewski & Farvid, 2020) to exist in couple relationships who are experiencing problematic pornography use.

As mentioned above, blame as anger turned outward is when one falsely projects fault for their own mistakes onto others (Colman, 2009; Kaufmann et al., 2022) and maladaptive guilt/ shame as anger turned inwards is when one undergoes feelings of self-inadequacy and painful awareness of not being good enough (Brown, 2006). In this manner, both blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame have the potential to disrupt couple relationships (Andrews, 2023; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Volk et al., 2019; Yun et al., 2019). This includes disrupting relationship *processes* like couple communication (Eldridge & Baucom, 2012) as well as relationship satisfaction (Shuler et al., 2021).

In disrupting the process of communication, blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame contribute to common patterns of behaviors, such as demand/withdraw (Butler et al., 2019). Demand behaviors occur when one partner attempts to initiate change by nagging, criticizing, or complaining. Withdraw behaviors include avoiding, terminating, or leaving the interaction in some way (Christensen et al., 1987). Demand behaviors conceptually link more closely to blame (anger turned outward), while withdraw behaviors align with maladaptive guilt/ shame (anger turned inward). This pattern, where one partner demands while the other withdraws, is linked to greater relationship distress and marital dissatisfaction (Eldridge & Baucom, 2012), including a higher likelihood of divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 2000), infidelity (Balderrama-Durbin, et al., 2012), and intimate partner violence (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1998).

Although ultimately disruptive to couple relationships, blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame are often used in protective roles, with blame as a way to avoid unbearable emotional states (Cregeen, 2022) and maladaptive guilt/ shame as a way to prevent social rejection (Fessler, 2004) while also attempting to motivate change. Nevertheless, blame is one of the major predictors of relationship instability (Gottman & Gottman, 2008) and was associated with negative effects on partner mental health and success of the overall partnership (Dubin et al., 2021). Similarly, people who feel maladaptive guilt/ shame commonly have a preoccupation with their own distress at the expense of providing little value for improving relationships or interactions (Leith & Baumeister, 1998). Based on this, it is evident that maladaptive guilt/ shame harms relational satisfaction (Leith & Baumeister, 1998).

With the existing scholarly evidence that both blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame and blame adversely affect couple relationships, it is also relevant to consider the role of maladaptive guilt/ shame and blame within the therapeutic process. Previous research has highlighted that maladaptive guilt/ shame can lead to poorer treatment outcomes and premature therapy termination (Norder et al., 2022). Thus, maladaptive guilt/ shame can act as an impediment to individual and relationship change. Likewise, blame is also prevalent in distressed couples seeking therapy (Päivinen et al., 2016). Amongst couple types who typically sought out therapy were volatile and hostile couples (Gottman 1993, 1994). These couples were characterized by their negative interactions that included blame (Anderson et al., 2011). Hence, blame creates the risk of greater volatility in couple relationships. The higher the level of volatility in a couple, the greater the emotional reactivity and distress they experience (Butler & Gardner, 2003). On the other hand, in the absence of volatility, partners were more able be emotionally accessible and responsive to each other (Johnson & Greenberg, 1988). Thus, greater volatility—characterized by mutual blame—adversely affects therapy outcomes.

While we know a fair amount regarding blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame behaviors, there is still more we can understand regarding how blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame affect relationships, especially in the context of problematic pornography use. Currently in the research literature, there are relatively strong conceptual and empirical links that exist between maladaptive guilt/ shame and problematic pornography use (Sniewski et al., 2020). Nonetheless, less is known about the interplay of maladaptive guilt/ shame with blame and how they relate to both relationship process and outcome. In addition, there is a paucity of information on the role of blame within the context of

problematic pornography use (Volk et al., 2019). There is also very little known about couple communication processes in general for those who consider their use of pornography problematic. However, because pornography is a sensitive, multifaceted issue, it requires skillful mastery of the clinician to provide appropriate clinical assessment and treatment (Beard, 2011; Bloom et al., 2016; Walters & Spengler, 2016). Yet many clinicians are not adequately equipped with knowledge and resources for the treatment of problematic pornography use (Short et al., 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to help address some of these gaps in the literature by further examining the relationship of blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame with both relationship process (i.e., couple communication patterns) and relationship outcomes (i.e., general relationship satisfaction). Although not an explicitly clinical study, I hope to lay the foundation for greater clinical understanding by examining these variables within the context of individuals who are most likely to seek clinical services: those who use pornography and consider it problematic. This research represents a preliminary effort to fill the gaps highlighted above by identifying the role that maladaptive guilt/ shame and blame play in relationships dealing with problematic pornography use. In this manner, clinicians will be better able to provide optimal treatment for problematic pornography use by managing blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame behaviors and enhancing couple communication.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Viewing pornography is becoming increasingly widespread (Carroll et al., 2008; Hald et al., 2014; Regnerus et al., 2016). According to a 2014 survey, 46% of men and 16% of women between the ages of 18 and 39 intentionally view pornography in a given week (Regnerus et al., 2016). Between 2018 and 2023, the adult pornography website industry market size in the U.S. is projected to surpass one billion U.S. dollars (Statista, 2023). The online porn market in the US is estimated to experience a 58% growth increase compared to 2018 (Statista, 2023). With the appeal of greater accessibility, affordability, and anonymity, internet platforms have largely normalized online pornography (Carroll et al., 2008). Paradoxically, with the widespread viewing of pornography, discussing pornography remains a taboo topic (Sniewski & Farvid, 2020).

Nevertheless, with the rapid permeation of pornography in society, it is an even more pressing issue, as there are potential individual and relational implications. For instance, in a study of 569 heterosexual men, approximately 23% sought treatment for problematic pornography use (Gola et al., 2016). This is an indicator to clinicians that pornography use is a relevant topic requiring sufficient attention and deliberation. Across the board, people have differing beliefs and perceptions of pornography, its use, and effects (Grubbs et al., 2019, 2020; Kohut et al., 2017, 2018). These belief discrepancies exist in the scholarly literature, but also within couple relationships. For those who view pornography negatively in couple relationships, negative judgments could be directed from a partner towards the individual viewing pornography based on the extent of their

pornography usage (frequency, severity). As a result, this may contribute to the maladaptive guilt/ shame the pornography user experiences.

Conversely, it is also probable for the user to become defensive about their use and deflect blame onto others. Thus, amongst individuals and couples who view pornography as problematic, blame (Adams & Robinson, 2001) and maladaptive guilt/ shame (Sniewski & Farvid, 2020) are possible. Blame is when one falsely projects fault for their own mistakes onto others (Colman, 2009; Kaufmann et al., 2022). On the other hand, maladaptive guilt/ shame is when one undergoes feelings of self-inadequacy and painful awareness of not being good enough (Brown, 2006). Although guilt can be productive and lend itself to growth and change (Arimitsu, 2001; Tangney & Dearing, 2002), maladaptive guilt trends towards shame (Luby et al., 2009). Given the nature of blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame (Adams & Robinson, 2001, Sniewski & Farvid, 2020), it is plausible that such tendencies could shift the dynamics in which couples communicate and interact.

If this assumption is true, blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame could serve as a catalyst to influencing couple communication patterns (Christensen, 1988; Eldridge & Christensen, 2002; Heavey et al., 1993; Holley et al., 2013). For example, one especially common pattern in distressed relationships is demand/withdraw, where one partner criticizes or blames the other partner for the problem and pressures them to change (Holley et al., 2013), while the other partner passively distances from the situation and problem discussion (Eldridge & Christensen, 2002). The pursue/withdraw cycle is positively associated to couples' marital dissatisfaction and relationship distress (Eldridge & Baucom, 2012) and reflects couples' dissatisfaction (Huerta et al., 2022).

Understanding the functionality of blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame in couples where at least one partner views pornography could benefit clinicians by illuminating potentially useful intervention pathways to effectively treat problematic pornography use (Short et al., 2016). This paper will explore the relationship between blame, maladaptive guilt/ shame, and couple communication patterns in couples where at least one member experiences problematic pornography use.

Perceptions of Pornography

To completely understand the need for this study, it is important to further understand how perceptions regarding pornography vary. In a nutshell, it remains a controversial and polarizing topic. Some scholars emphasize the potentially positive effects of pornography (Kohut et al., 2017, 2018), while others highlight its potential negative outcomes (Grubbs et al., 2019, 2020). Studies focused on its positive outcomes typically highlight increased sexual diversity experiences, increased sexual gratification, partner satisfaction, and erotic climate within the relationship (Shuler et al., 2021). They also emphasize increased sexual frequency and knowledge, reduced sexual boredom, and increased partners' desire for sexual experimentation within their relationship (Grov et al., 2011; Kohut et al., 2017; Lofgren-Martensen & Mansson, 2010; Weinberg et al., 2010). Some evidence also exists that pornography can enhance couple communication and relationship quality (Kohut et al., 2017, 2018).

In contrast, many individuals experience pornography's negative effects. Maintaining a negative perception of pornography further exacerbates the psychological distress one may experience (Grubbs et al., 2019; Leonhardt et al., 2018; Perry, 2018).

This negative perception is also associated with higher levels of depression (Volk et al., 2019). In addition, those who viewed pornography negatively had decreased levels of happiness (Patterson & Price, 2012) and well-being (Levin et al., 2012). Some studies highlight life disruptions that potentially come from pornography, such as losing a job (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Bostwick & Bucci, 2008; Ford et al., 2012). In a sample of adolescents, there was a positive association with frequency of pornography consumption and higher self-objectification and body comparison (Maheux et al., 2021). This could pose a threat of skewing one's perception of their body image that could have negative implications.

Pornography viewing not only negatively affects individuals but romantic relationships as well (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Bostwick & Bucci, 2008; Ford et al., 2012). Within relationships, negative outcomes related to feelings of inadequacy, unrealistic expectations, and feelings of betrayal (Shuler et al., 2021) are possible. Women in a romantic relationship experienced negative effects on their body image self-consciousness in response to the influence of their own pornography use (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2021). Similarly, women were more susceptible to developing eating disorders if their male partners compared their thinness to the perceptions portrayed in pornography (Tylka & Calogero, 2019). Reinforcing these unrealistic expectations was the socializing effect, where men who viewed certain types of pornography tended to judge women to be more likely to engage in porn-like sex in some situations (Miller et al., 2019). Such changes in the perceptions of sexual norms could negatively impact men and women by altering men's perceptions of what is sexually normative, potentially leading to greater sexual dissatisfaction within relationships (Miller et al., 2019).

Moreover, both men and women who view pornography as a source of sexual information also have increased sexual risk, including unprotected sex (Wright et al., 2019a; 2019b). Lastly, men and women who regularly consumed pornography were conditioned to respond to pornographic depictions leading to a stronger preference of masturbating to pornography over sexual activity with one's own partner (Wright et al., 2021).

Problematic Pornography Use

While there is evidence to suggest that there can be positive effects related to pornography, the fact remains that a number of people view pornography negatively. More specifically, within the population who views pornography negatively, a number of people consider their pornography use as problematic and affirm that it adversely affects them and their relationships (Grubbs et al., 2019). For example, individuals who viewed their pornography use as problematic experienced greater levels of shame (Sniewski & Farvid, 2020). Next, partners who excessively use pornography to fulfill sexual desires could be problematic to both the sexual and relational satisfaction as it could displace other sexual activities within the relationship (Booth et al., 2021). Thus, there is a possibility for the partner to view the pornography user's use as an act of infidelity (Zitzman & Butler, 2009). With that said, situations that involve problematic pornography use in couples could alter communication patterns as well as relational satisfaction. Despite the importance of understanding interaction patterns in couples dealing with problematic pornography use, there is a lack of research in this area. More

research needs to examine how problematic pornography can disrupt relationship processes such as communication.

Many who view their pornography use as problematic and experience pornography's negative effects seek out therapy (Short et al., 2016; Twohig & Crosby, 2010). Up until now, clinicians have made efforts to treat problematic pornography with interventions such as acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT; Levin et al., 2017) and meditation (Sniewski et al., 2022). Despite these efforts, there still is an underwhelming amount of existing literature regarding the assessment and treatment of problematic pornography (Sniewski et al., 2018). One of the major issues for the treatment of problematic pornography is the lack of consensus on the criteria for problematic pornography use (Sniewski et al., 2018). Subsequently, clinicians struggle to create effective, standardized treatments for problematic pornography.

In recent years, 80% of individuals with compulsive sexual behavior disorder reported to have excessive or problematic pornography use (Kafka, 2010; Reid et al., 2011). The ICD-11 characterizes compulsive sexual behavior disorder as:

A persistent pattern of failure to control intense, repetitive sexual impulses or urges, resulting in repetitive sexual behavior over an extended period (e.g., six months or more) that causes marked distress or impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning. (CSBD; Kraus et al., 2018)

Although the diagnostic criteria is unclear, problematic pornography use is the condition in which pornography is the user's central life focus, there is a lack of usage control, there are recurring unsuccessful attempts to manage use, and users engage despite obtaining minimal or no satisfaction (World Health Organization, 2018). As a

result of the standardized treatment dilemma, current problematic pornography research studies' sample sizes are small, there is a lack of clinical controls, participant populations are homogenous, and majority of the research methods thus far are scattered, unverifiable and not replicable (Sniewski et al., 2018). Furthermore, many clinicians who saw patients for problematic pornography use felt incompetent to treat it (Short et al., 2016). Overall, there is a desperate need to understand the nature of problematic pornography use more fully in an effort to customize individual- and couple-based treatments that will yield the most optimal outcomes. This study is one preliminary effort to understand pornography use in the context of couple relationships.

Theoretical Model: Views of Self in Relation to Other (VSIRO)

A useful theoretical model to conceptualize the relationship between the negative effects of pornography and couple communication patterns is the View of Self in Relation to Other (VSIRO; Butler et al., 2018). The VSIRO is a dimensional model that conceptualizes how one views self in relation to the other as an organizing construct of systemic couple engagement (Butler et al., 2019). Within this framework, anger is an innate, vital human emotion that has signaling and motivational functions (Butler et al., 2017). During conflict, anger often provides the impetus for a person's emotional experience (Butler et al., 2019). Anger functions as a signal and is both protective and corrective for personal and relational adaptation (Butler et al., 2017). Throughout conflict, each partner may elicit a collapsed (i.e., anger turned inward—maladaptive guilt/ shame) or inflated (i.e., anger turned outward—blame) response (Butler et al., 2019). The next few sections will address the VSIRO model's components of blame and

maladaptive guilt/ shame in the context of couple communication patterns. VSIRO will be employed to examine the interplay between the blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame responses in couples where at least one individual view their pornography use as problematic.

Figure 1

VSIRO model

A Circumplex Model of Couple Relationship Configurations in Trauma Context with View of Self in Relation to Other (VSIRO) as the Organizing Energy
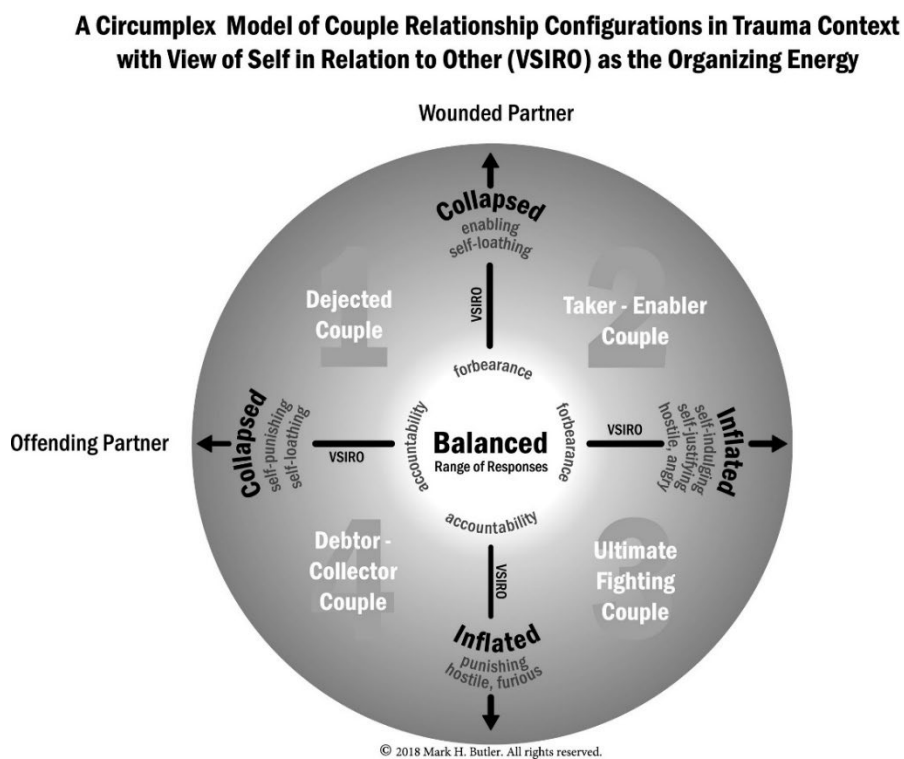
Anger Turned Outward – Blame

In the VSIRO theoretical model, blame is the inflated view of self and anger turned outward (Butler et al., 2019). When one's sense of acceptance and belonging is

threatened, one may seek to alleviate the pressure by deflecting blame onto others (Adams & Robinson, 2001; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Pornography users who manifest anger turned outward may use blame as a coping or defense mechanism (Adams & Robinson, 2001; Tangney & Dearing, 2002), especially amongst those high in moral disapproval of pornography (Volk et al., 2019), and will often avoid taking responsibility for their actions when faced with psychological distress (Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

Blame is employed as a defense strategy that can be observed in other situations that bring mental distress, such as PTSD (Forkus et al., 2020). In PTSD patients, blaming others was significantly associated with PTSD severity, depression, distress intolerance, and rumination (Forkus et al., 2020). Individuals who perceived themselves as having a pornography addiction had a greater propensity to divert blame onto others (Burke et al., 2002; Volk et al., 2019), or engage in blame transference (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Such blame reduction strategies may affect mental health outcomes as well as relationships (Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Volk et al., 2019; Yun et al., 2019). Thus, the negative effects of blame are fairly well established in the scholarly literature. As mentioned above, a relationship between blame and pornography use has also been identified, but more research is needed to understand this relationship further, including how blame in the context of pornography use relates to important individual and relationship outcomes. In terms of the relationship between blame and couple communication, blame works to control the partner, which manifests itself as demand/withdraw behaviors, where one partner uses blame in efforts to change the other while the other partner will withdraw (Christensen et al., 1987).

Anger Turned Inward – Maladaptive Guilt/ Shame

On the other hand, anger turned inward in the VSIRO theoretical model is representative of guilt and shame (Butler et al., 2019). Guilt and shame are portrayed as universal emotions (Orth et al., 2010). Over the past few decades, researchers have agreed on the different focuses between guilt and shame (Fedewa et al., 2005). Guilt focuses on a specific action, whereas shame focuses on one's self (Lewis, 1971, 1995; Miller, 1996; Lutwak & Ferrari, 1996; Pattison, 2000; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Guilt can be construed in two different ways: being described as adaptive or maladaptive (Luby et al., 2009). In comparison, shame is nearly always described as a negative experience (Brown, 2006). While there are agreeable differences of guilt and shame, there are considerable similarities specifically between maladaptive guilt and shame where they are both interpreted as being negative (Fedewa et al., 2005). With these similarities, the VSIRO theoretical model encapsulates both maladaptive guilt and shame to represent anger turned inward.

Adaptive Guilt vs Maladaptive Guilt. Guilt is the feeling associated with a violation of moral standards and the subsequent feelings of disapproval of one's own actions that leads to prosocial behavior (Stuewig et al., 2010). This is also known as "guilt reparation," or the tendency to seek repair for damage that has been done such as apologizing (Luby et al., 2009). Guilt-prone people more typically take responsibility and focus on reparation of interpersonal connections (Mascolo, 1995; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Additionally, guilt positively influences pro-environmental behavior and intentions (Hurst & Sintov, 2022). In this sense, guilt can be an adaptive emotion (Luby et al., 2009), leading to growth and productive change.

While some research would suggest guilt is perceived as an adaptive emotion and unrelated to psychological maladjustment (Arimitsu, 2001; Tangney & Dearing, 2002), guilt could also be construed as maladaptive (Luby et al., 2009). In the VSIRO theoretical model, anger turned inward is represented by maladaptive guilt; a collapsed view of self (Butler et al., 2019). Recent surveys convey some of the negative consequences of feelings of maladaptive guilt (Maliňáková et al., 2019). For example, some studies depict the role maladaptive guilt has in the development of depression (O'Connor et al., 1997; Luby et al., 2009; Quiles & Bybee, 1997). Other studies highlight the presence of maladaptive guilt tied to the process of loss and grief (Barr, 2012; Barr & Cacciatore, 2007), symptom internalization (Ferguson et al., 2000), experiencing negative stigma in cancer patients (Else-Quest et al., 2009), suicidality (Exline et al., 2000), PTSD (Lee et al., 2001), and abuse of addictive substances (Dearing et al., 2005). In addition, experiencing maladaptive guilt was associated with lower physical health (Maliňáková et al., 2019) and linked to negative experiences of illness in patients with chronic pain (e.g., spinal cord injuries; Conant, 1998); lower back pains (Serbic et al., 2016; Serbic & Pincus, 2014), hypercholesterolemia (Frich et al., 2007) and cancer (Abrams & Finesinger, 1953). Maladaptive guilt was also linked to the onset and course of inflammatory processes (Dickerson et al., 2004), increased cortisol levels (Gruenewald et al. 2004), and cardiovascular reactivity (Herrald & Tomaka, 2002).

Shame. Shame is defined as, "An intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are [inherently] flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging" (Brown, 2006). Similar to maladaptive guilt, shame in the VSIRO theoretical model is anger turned inward (Butler et al., 2019). Shame, a key emotional response,

represents a threatening of the 'social self' or experiences of social evaluation or social rejection (Dickerson et al., 2004). Many scholars identify it as one of the major engines that perpetuates the cycle of viewing pornography (Carboneau, 2018). Shameful feelings could lead one to believe that they are "unlovable" or "not good enough." When considering shame that results from viewing pornography, those that experience cognitive dissonance of viewing pornography in opposition to one's moral standing are confronted with outcomes of increased feelings of shame, and subsequent decreases in couple relationship satisfaction (Floyd et al., 2020).

Over time, carrying the weight of their shame can dampen one's sense of autonomy and self-control (Sniewski & Farvid, 2020). As such, shameful feelings lead to feelings of being trapped and increasing hopelessness (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Ironically, individuals may attempt to cope with these feelings of shame by again viewing pornography, thus perpetuating a vicious cycle (Andrews, 2023; Bradshaw et al., 2015). These feelings of being judged, misunderstood, or shamed also can lead to hiding and secrecy (Sniewski & Farvid, 2020). Chronic shame experiences may have mental health implications, with shame being associated with depressive symptomology (Lewis, 1971; Scheff, 2001), social anxiety (Gilbert & Trower, 1990; Schwarzer, 1986), and suicidal ideation (Mokros, 1995). Individuals who indulge in excessive pornography use have negative psychological, emotional, and social well-being (Chisholm & Gall, 2015). Self-blame was the strongest predictor of poor mental health outcomes, including symptoms of anxiety and depression (Cacciatore et al., 2013). Shame-related cognitive and affective states in HIV patients also predicted disease-relevant immunological and health outcomes (Dickerson et al., 2004). Thus, shame is a commonly felt emotion with a variety of

negative effects, including in the realm of problematic pornography use. While there seems to be a strong relationship between shame and pornography use, we still need to understand more about how the shame manifests itself in couple relationship process, including communication processes, which will be explained further below.

Couple Communication

Although some important scholarly work exists that aids understanding regarding the effects of blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame on individuals, less is known about the potentially negative effects of blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame on important relationship dynamics, like couple communication (Feeney et al., 1998; Gottman, 1994). Constructive communication is an umbrella term for positive behaviors that promote a collaborative approach to problem solving that in turn engenders trust and understanding (Crenshaw et al., 2017). Positive behaviors include offering suggestions instead of demands, compromising, perspective-taking, and expressing feelings (Crenshaw et al., 2017). Constructive communication is often strongly and positively associated with outcomes of marital satisfaction (Heavey et al., 1996; Litzinger & Gordon, 2007) and forgiveness in heterosexual couples (Fincham & Beach, 2002).

Conversely, demand/withdraw behavior is where one partner attempts to initiate change by nagging, criticizing, or complaining, while the other partner avoids, terminates, or withdraws from the interaction (Christensen et al., 1987). Demand/withdraw behavior correlates with greater relationship distress and marital dissatisfaction amongst both satisfied and unsatisfied couples (Eldridge & Baucom, 2012). Higher levels of demand/withdraw behavior are also associated with greater rates

of divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 2000), infidelity (Balderrama-Durbin et al., 2012), and intimate partner violence (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1998). As seen in intimate relationships, the partner who experienced maladaptive guilt/ shame would elicit physiological changes (lack of eye contact, drooped body posture) and emotional responses (withdrawal, isolation, dismissiveness; Andrews, 2023). In response, the other partner would notice the behavioral changes, thus shifting the couple dynamic (Andrews, 2023). In a study of couples with violent-distressed men, they reported less constructive communication, and more mutual blame and avoidance (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1998). A main theme in couples experiencing low sexual desire was shared experiences of blame and problematic communication patterns (Ling & Kasket, 2016). In addition, negative individual outcomes include increased depression (Holley et al., 2018; Rehman et al., 2010), alcoholism (Kelly et al., 2002), and decreased subjective well-being (Schrodt et al., 2014).

It is conceptually clear that both blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame have potential to disrupt the process variable of communication. In the broader scholarly literature, blaming others led to decreases in social support within families dealing with illness (Dohle et al., 2022). maladaptive guilt and shame facilitate feelings of anger, discouragement, and hurt and has the potential to lead to disengagement and withdrawal in relationships (Harper & Hoopes, 1990), which ultimately leads to less ideal relationship outcomes (e.g., couple satisfaction). Although there is a small amount of evidence regarding the relationship of maladaptive guilt/ shame and blame with couple communication, more research is needed generally. This is especially true when considering problematic pornography use.

Purpose of this Study

From the current literature, there is research to suggest that blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame play a crucial role in both individual and relational health (Butler et al., 2019; Volk et al., 2019). Maladaptive guilt and shame have been identified as an important factor within problematic pornography use (Sniewski & Farvid, 2020). Still, a greater understanding of the role of maladaptive guilt/ shame is essential, as therapists who worked with patients experiencing internalized maladaptive guilt/ shame reported this was a consistent predictor of poor treatment outcomes and premature therapy termination (Norder et al., 2022). This may be one reason why many clinicians lack the expertise in effectively treating problematic pornography use (Short et al., 2016).

Although a fairly strong conceptual and empirical link exists between maladaptive guilt/ shame and problematic pornography use, much less is known about the role of blame (Sniewski et al., 2020; Volk et al., 2019). Yet within the VSIRO model, blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame represent different manifestations of anger (anger turned outward vs anger turned inward). Thus, blame in some form may have important implications for communication dynamics in couples where at least one partner deals with problematic pornography use. In addition, very little research has examined the relationship between problematic pornography use and communication patterns in committed relationships. This is unfortunate as some findings suggest that the degree to which pornography affects a couple relationship is contingent on communication between partners (Newstrom & Harris, 2016). Finally, the VSIRO model has not yet been explicitly tested in any empirical way. This research represents a preliminary investigation of this conceptual model.

This study sought to identify the general blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame tendencies from individuals in a committed relationship who view their pornography use as problematic. More specifically, I sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: In people who use pornography and consider it problematic, what is the relationship of feelings of blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame to couple communication patterns (constructive communication, self-demand/partner-withdraw, partner-demand/self-withdraw)?

Hypothesis 1: Blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame will be associated with less constructive communication. Blame will be related to self-demand/partner-withdraw and maladaptive guilt/ shame will be correlated to partner-demand/self-withdraw.

RQ2: In people who use pornography and consider it problematic, what is the relationship of feelings of blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame to broader relationship outcomes (couple satisfaction)?

Hypothesis 2: Blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame will be linked to lower levels of couple satisfaction.

Ultimately, preserving and strengthening couples' couple satisfaction is the collaborative goal of both client(s) and clinician. Examining the relationships of blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame with couple communication patterns and relationship satisfaction provides greater clarity to how blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame impact couples in the context of pornography use. Furthermore, potential findings can better inform clinicians of how to treat problematic pornography within a couple dynamic.

Chapter III

Methods

Participants and Recruitment

In this cross-sectional study, participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk; Buhrmester et al., 2011). MTurk is a convenient crowdsourcing website for businesses who need assistance with on-demand tasks such as completing online questionnaires and surveys. In return, "crowdworkers" are compensated for their participation. As such, MTurk has been a viable recruitment method with potential for both its inexpensive and rapid data collection (Buhrmester et al., 2011). In addition, studies have shown that MTurk participants are slightly more demographically diverse than are standard Internet samples and are significantly more diverse than typical American college samples (Buhrmester et al., 2011).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To participate in the study, individuals were required to be at least 18 years old, in a committed couple relationship (engaged, living together, or married) for at least six months, reside in the United States, able to speak and read English, have viewed pornography at least monthly within the previous year, consider their pornography usage as problematic, have a HIT approval rate greater than 90, and have at least 100 HITs approved. This ensured that participants could legally consent, had couple communication dynamics that were well established, lived in the US, were capable of understanding and responding to the survey items, fit the sample description criteria, and

met a standard of quality for MTurk experience. Prospective participants who did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded from the study. Screener questions related to the inclusion criteria occurred at the beginning of the assessment packet. If anyone did not meet the inclusion criteria outlined in the screener questions, they were immediately thanked for their time and taken to the end of the survey and excluded from the study.

The initial sample included 450 participants. An initial examination of variable results showed that the direction of some of the relationships between variables were contradictory. Upon further examination, it became apparent that bots had likely infiltrated our sample, despite the inclusion of multiple attention checks and screener questions. The primary evidence for this came in the reverse scored items for the subscale of couple constructive communication. This subscale consists of nine items (Likert scored 1-9), three of which are reverse scored. In examining the correlations and reliabilities associated with the three reverse scored items, it became apparent that the bot responses did not account for the reverse scoring. The average of the three items *before* reverse scoring was highly positively correlated (> .50) to the average of the six items that were not reverse scored. To correct this, I compared the average of the three items after they had been reverse scored and the average of the six items that did not need to be reverse scored. I kept all respondents whose difference between the two averages was no more than $\pm$ 2.0. This was slightly above the one standard deviation above and below (SD ranged from 1.46-1.77 for the six non-reverse scored items). This yielded a new sample of 190 participants, with the psychometrics of variables (reliability and correlations) much more in the expected directions. In this final sample, participants were 33.6 years of age on average. In addition, 61.6% of respondents identified as male, 80.0% reported

that they considered their sexual orientation as heterosexual, 87.4% identified as white/Caucasian/euro-American, 88.9% as Christian, and 82.1% had completed at least a Bachelor's degree (See Tables 1a and 1b for complete demographic results).

Table 1a

Descriptive Statistics of Categorical Demographic Variables

Variable Name	*n* (%)
Gender Identity	
Man	117 (61.6)
Woman	73 (38.4)
TOTAL	190 (100)
Sexual Orientation	
Heterosexual	152 (80.0)
Bisexual	33 (17.4)
Gay/Lesbian	3 (1.6)
Missing data	2 (1.1)
TOTAL	190 (100)
Race / Ethnicity	
American Indian or Alaska Native	5 (2.6)
Asian American or Pacific Islander	10 (5.3)
African American / Black	2 (1.1)
Latino / Hispanic	2 (1.1)
Caucasian / White	166 (87.4)
Biracial / Multi-Racial	5 (2.6)
TOTAL	419 (100)
White / Caucasian / Euro-American	166 (87.4)
Under-Represented Minority	24 (12.6)
TOTAL	190 (100)
Religious Preference	
Christian	169 (88.9)
Jewish	10 (5.3)
Buddhist	1 (0.5)
Hindu	3 (1.6)
Muslim	2 (1.1)

Unitarian/Universalist	1 (0.5)
LDS/Mormon	0 (0.00)
None	3 (1.6)
Missing data	1 (0.5)
TOTAL	190 (100)

Highest Level of Education Completed

Less than High School	0 (0.0)
High School or Equivalent	4 (2.1)
Vocational / Technical School	0 (0.0)
Some College (no degree completed)	3 (1.6)
Associate's Degree	2 (1.1)
Bachelor's Degree	156 (82.1)
Graduate or Professional Degree	23 (12.1)
Other	0 (0.0)
Missing data	2 (1.1)
TOTAL	190 (100.0)

Employment Status

Full-Time	183 (96.3)
Part-Time	4 (2.1)
Homemaker	2 (0.48)
Unemployed, Looking for Work	1 (0.5)
Unemployed, Not Looking for Work	0 (0.0)
Retired	1 (0.5)
Full-Time Student	1 (0.5)
Disabled	0 (0.0)
TOTAL	190 (100)

Annual Income (Combined)

< $15,000	1 (0.5)
$15,000 - $29,999	12 (6.3)
$30,000 - $44,999	27 (14.2)
$45,000 - $49,999	27 (14.2)
$50,000 - $59,999	51 (26.8)
$60,000 - $74,999	20 (10.5)
$75,000 - $99,999	42 (22.1)
$100,000 - $149,999	10 (5.3)
$150,000 - $199,999	0 (0.0)
$200,000 <	0 (0.0)
TOTAL	190 (100)

Current Relationship Status

Heterosexual Relationship	180 (94.7)
Same-sex Relationship	8 (4.2)
Missing data	2 (1.1)

TOTAL		190 (100)	

Table 1b

Descriptive Statistics of Continuous Demographic Variables

Variable Name	*n*	*M* (*SD*)	Range
Age	189	33.60 (9.97)	18-70
Number of people in household	190	3.36 (0.72)	1-6

Procedure

Mturk users who agreed to participate were transferred to Qualtrics.com to complete the assessment packet. The packet contained screener questions to ensure that prospective participants qualified for the study, an informed consent, and basic demographic information (age, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, relationship type, employment, education, household size, income, religious preference, and religiosity). In addition, I further assessed the nature of participants' pornography use (i.e., severity of use). The rest of the assessment packet contained measures related to maladaptive guilt/ shame, blame, couple communication, and relationship satisfaction. Participants who completed at least 90% of the study items received $5 compensation for participation, which was in accordance with MTurk time/payment standards.

According to previous research gathered by MTurk developers, MTurk has provided a feasible and cost-efficient data collection method. Some have indicated that MTurk data can be lower quality for various reasons (Buhrmester et al., 2011; Paolacci et al., 2010). Nevertheless, there is little evidence to suggest poorer quality between data

collected online compared to data collected from subject pools (Gosling et al., 2004; Krantz & Dalal, 2000). As mentioned previously, quality assurance safeguards were included in the assessment packet to guard against automated bots, including several Instructional Manipulation Checks (IMCs) with "captcha" or "reverse-turing test" questions, questions that have verifiable answers, and attention checks (Mason & Suri, 2012). Finally, we also excluded repeated Internet Protocol Addresses and MTurk worker identification numbers with the intent to prevent duplicate responses.

Measures

For the following measures, the complete measures are included in the Appendix.

Predictor Variables

Blame. The Test of Self-Conscious Affect-3 Short Version (TOSCA-3 Short) is a scenario-based measure derived from the TOSCA-3, which originally included 5 positive scenarios and 11 negative scenarios. The TOSCA-3 Short dropped the 5 positive scenarios, maintaining its consistency with the TOSCA-3 ($\alpha = .94$ for shame and $\alpha = .93$ for guilt) and removed the Pride scale, which demonstrated the lowest reported reliability. Overall, the TOSCA-3 Short (Tangney et al., 2000) employs 11 negative scenarios (e.g., "You make plans to meet a friend for lunch. At 5 o'clock, you realize you stood him up.") in which the participants respond on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Not Likely; 5=Very Likely) of how likely they are to think, feel, or act in ways relating to *shame* (e.g., You would think: "I'm inconsiderate."), *ruminative guilt* (e.g., "You cannot apologize enough

for forgetting the appointment"), *guilt* (e.g., You think you should make it up to him as soon as possible.), *detachment/unconcern* (e.g., You would think: "Well, they'll understand"), and *externalization/blaming others* (e.g., You would think: "My boss distracted me just before lunch."). Potential scores range from 11 to 55. Tangney and Dearing (2002) reported reliability scores for heterosexual couples ranging from .66 - .80 for externalization/blaming. In this study, internal consistency was even higher, at .87.

  Maladaptive Guilt/ Shame. The Guilt and Shame Experience Scale (GSES; Maliňáková et al., 2019) is a self-reported instrument designed to assess experiences of general guilt and shame. The original measure consisted of ten items; however psychometric evaluation demonstrated that the eight-item measure had better characteristics (Maliňáková et al., 2019). This study uses the eight-item version, with an introduction question of "To what degree do you agree with the following statement," followed by eight-items scored on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (Not at all) to 4 (Significantly). The GSES is scored by summing all the scores, ranging from 8 to 32, with higher scores indicating higher levels of maladaptive guilt/ shame. In a previous study of heterosexual couples, Cronbach's alpha was 0.89 (Maliňáková et al., 2020). Internal consistency in this study was somewhat lower in this study, at .74.

  Previous research has identified two subscales of the GSES: guilt and shame. However, a preliminary factor analysis using this data did not support a factor structure related to guilt and shame. Rather, these findings seemed to support a single primary factor of negative feelings towards self, regardless of whether those feelings were anchored in maladaptive guilt or shame. Conceptually, there appear to be similarities between the two subscales. Sample shame items include, "I am losing hope that I will

ever be a good person," and "I experience moments when I cannot even look at myself".

Indicators of maladaptive guilt were, "I blame myself even for things that other people do

not think of," and "I feel the need to explain or apologize for the reasons of my actions."

Outcome Variables

Communication Patterns. The Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ;

Christensen et al., 1987) is a 35-item questionnaire that assesses couple communication

patterns in romantic couples. Each item is scored on a 9-point Likert scale, with

responses ranged from 1 (Very Unlikely) to 9 (Very Likely). For this study, we used the

2016 revised CPQ scoring (Crenshaw et al., 2017), which includes 23 of the original 35

items to form three subscales: Constructive Communication (CC; nine items), Self-

Demand/Partner-Withdraw (SDPW; seven items), and Partner-Demand/Self-Withdraw

(PDSW; seven items). The coefficient alphas for CC were men (α = .91) and women (α =

.89), and men (α = .90) and women (α = .84) for SDPW and PDSW (May et al., 2019).

For same-sex couples, the SDPW and PDSW scores were α = .70 (Kurdek, 2004).

Couple satisfaction. The Couples Satisfaction Index 16 (CSI-16; Funk & Rogge,

2007) is a 16-item, Likert (with items ranging from 0-5, 0-6, or 0-7) questionnaire that

measures couples' satisfaction (e.g., "I have a warm and comfortable relationship with

my partner"). Scores are summed on all items, ranging from 0 to 81 (cutoff = 51.5), with

higher scores indicating higher levels of relationship satisfaction. The CSI-16 has

demonstrated strong reliability (male α = 0.97, female α = 0.96) and is similar for same-

sex couples (α = 0.98) (Burns, 2022; Funk & Rogge, 2007). In this study, internal

consistency remained high, at .90.

Covariates and Demographic Variables

Severity of Pornography Use. I examined the severity of pornography use using the short version of The Problematic Pornography Consumption Scale (PPCS-6; Bőthe et al., 2021) which is based on the PCCS-18 (Bőthe et al., 2018). The PCCS-18 draws from the proposed six-component addiction model (Griffiths, 2005) of salience, tolerance, mood modification, relapse, withdrawal, and conflict. The PCCS-6 is comprised of these six factors, with one item per factor. Each item was scored on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = never; 7 = all the time) over the past six months. Cronbach's alpha for the PCCS-6 measure is .72 for heterosexual couples (Alidost et al., 2022).

Demographics. Basic demographic factors of age, gender identity, income, and religiosity were gathered and controlled for.

Analytic Strategy

Based on the proposed measurements, this cross-sectional study used a path analysis to answer my research questions. A path analysis is a statistical tool that can account for multiple interrelated variables (predictor, process, and outcome) at a time (Olsen & Kenny, 2006). For the purposes of my study, a path analysis is a suitable fit, as I examined two models, one examining the relationship of the predictor variables of blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame on multiple process variables related to couple communication (the subscales of constructive communication, self-demand/partner-withdraw, partner-demand/self-withdraw), and the other examining outcome related variables related to couple satisfaction.

In addition, for both models, I also considered the influence of covariate variables (severity of pornography use, basic demographic variables). I included age, gender identity, income, and religiosity as demographic variables in the analysis. To understand further the relationship between core study variables and problematic pornographic use, I also included interactions between each of the core study variables (blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame) with severity of pornography use. If these were not significant, they were removed from later analyses. However, I retained severity of pornography use as a covariate in all analyses. To increase parsimony, non-significant demographic variables and the interactions of pornography severity and the core study variables of blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame were removed from the final analysis.

Using a path analysis has several benefits, including: 1) analyzing more complex theoretical/conceptual models with more than one outcome variable than multiple regression (relevant to RQ1), 2) providing the comparison of different models to determine fit statistics, and 3) while not being able to prove causality, disproving a model that postulates causal relationship among variables (Streiner, 2005). In both analyses, I chose to use a just-identified model, with the number of known values equaling the number of free parameters, yielding zero degrees of freedom (Raykov et al., 2013). Although one of the strengths of path analysis and structural equation modeling is accounting for fit statistics, I simply wanted to investigate the paths and not the residual error and variance. Thus, I decided to use a just-identified model, where the model can be estimated but the model fit cannot be assessed.

Figure 2a

Model 1
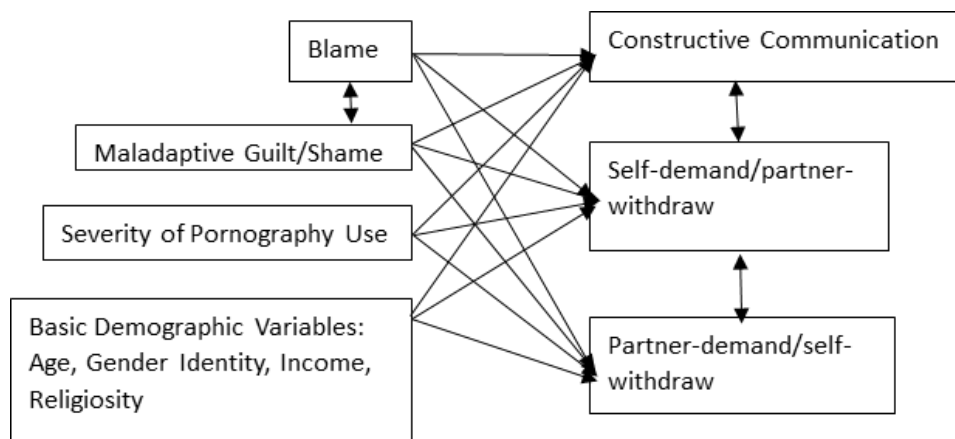
Figure 2b

Model 2
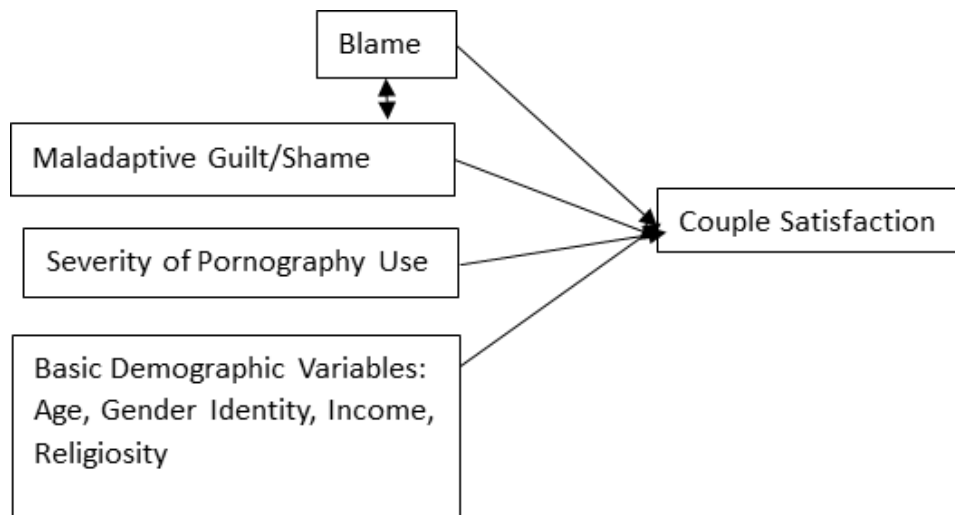
Table 2

Psychometric Properties of Main Study Variables

Variable Name	*n*	*M*	*SD*	α	Range Potential	Range Actual
TOSCA-3 Short Version	184	33.31	7.13	.87	11.00 – 55.00	13.00 – 52.00
The Guilt and Shame Experience Scale (GSES) tot	188	21.14	4.08	.74	4.00 - 32.00	8.00 – 30.00
Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQCC)	183	51.60	8.99	.80	9.00 - 81.00	32.00 – 81.00
Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQSDPW)	185	33.55	8.40	.84	7.00 - 63.00	10.00 – 51.00
Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQPDSW)	187	34.24	8.69	.85	7.00 - 63.00	9.00 – 53.00
Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-16)	182	57.10	10.51	.90	0.00 - 80.00	20.00 – 81.00
Short Problematic Pornography Consumption Scale (PPCS-6)	189	28.58	5.32	.78	6.00 – 42.00	13.00 – 40.00

Chapter IV

Results

In recent years, pornography use levels have been increasing (Carroll et al., 2008; Hald et al., 2014; Regnerus et al., 2016). Specifically, problematic pornography use has become an increasingly relevant issue for clinicians (Gola et al., 2016). Yet, clinicians report that they lack sufficient knowledge and expertise regarding problematic pornography treatment (Short et al., 2016). In particular, there is a lack of literature on the effects of blame and maladaptive/ shame on relational outcomes (Feeney et al., 1998; Gottman, 1994). Hence, the purpose of this research study was to investigate the relationship between blame, maladaptive guilt/ shame, couple communication, and relationship satisfaction in pornography users. Inspecting these relationships could serve to maintain relational outcomes (couples' satisfaction) and to increase clinicians' understanding of the issue to more effectively treat problematic pornography in the couple context. The remainder of this section will summarize the core study findings, organized by research question.

Research Question 1

In this research question, I was seeking to understand more about a potential interaction between blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame with couple communication patterns (constructive communication, self-demand/partner-withdraw, partner-demand/self-withdraw) in people who use pornography and consider it problematic. With respect to constructive communication, findings revealed a significant main effect of

blame (b = -.45; p < .001) and maladaptive guilt/ shame (b = -.40; p < .001),

demonstrating that higher levels of both blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame were

associated with lower constructive communication. With respect to self-demand, partner-

withdraw, findings revealed a significant main effect of blame (b = .67; p < .001),

demonstrating that higher levels of blame were associated with higher levels of self-

demand, partner-withdraw. With respect to partner-demand, self-withdraw, findings

revealed a significant main effect of blame (b = .60; p < .001) and maladaptive guilt/

shame (b = .46; p < .001), demonstrating that higher levels of both blame and

maladaptive guilt/ shame were associated with partner-demand, self-withdraw. These

results provided preliminary confirmation of the hypothesis, as blame and shame were

associated with less constructive communication, blame was related with self-

demand/partner-withdraw, and shame was correlated to partner-demand/self-withdraw. In

addition, there was an unexpected relationship between blame and partner-demand/self-

withdraw, suggesting that blame is also linked to self-withdraw behaviors.

Research Question 2

In this research question, I was looking at examining the association between

blame and maladaptive guilt/shame within a broad relationship outcome (couple

satisfaction) in people who use pornography and consider it problematic. All

demographic variables and interactions included in the original analysis were non-

significant, so they were removed from the final analysis. Findings revealed a significant

main effect of maladaptive guilt/ shame (b = -.47; p < .001), demonstrating that higher

levels of maladaptive guilt/ shame were associated with lower levels of couple

satisfaction. From these results, our hypothesis was partially confirmed, as only

maladaptive guilt/ shame was associated with lower levels of couple satisfaction.

Figure 3a

Path Analysis Model of Associations between Predictor Variables and Process Variables
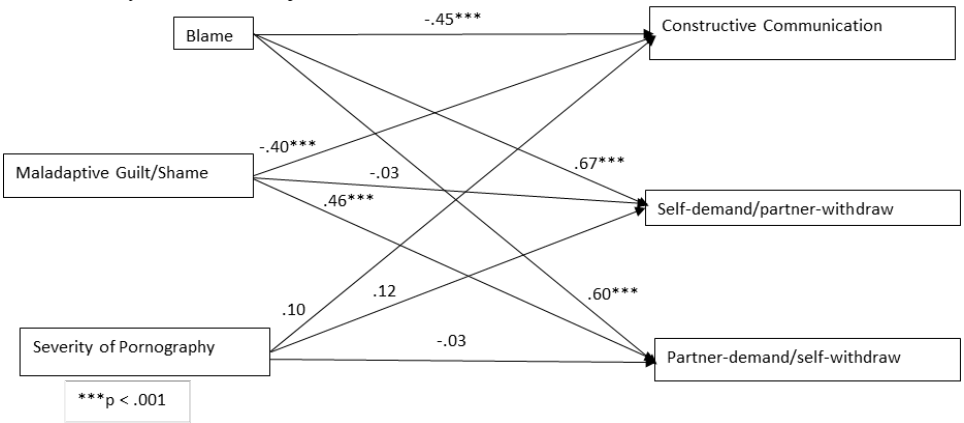
Figure 3b

Path Analysis Model of Associations between Predictor Variables and Relational Outcome Variable
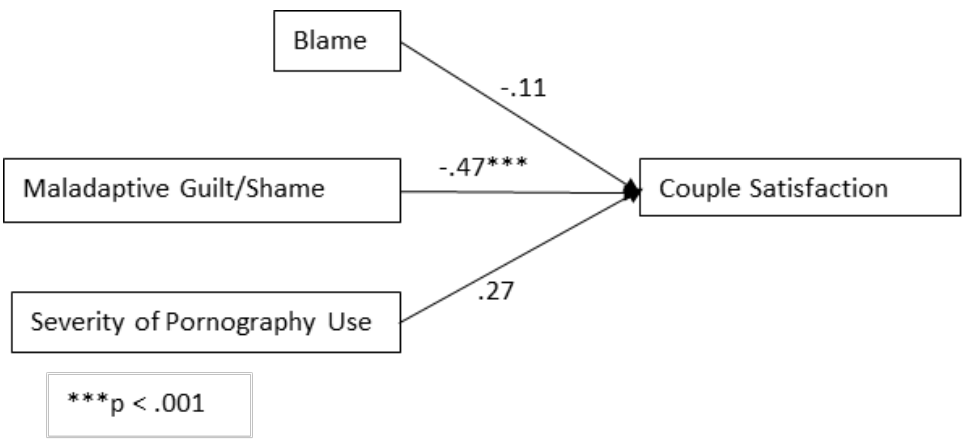
Chapter V

Discussion

This research study examined the relationship between blame, maladaptive guilt/ shame, couple communication patterns (partner-demand/self-withdraw, self-demand/partner-withdraw) and relational outcomes (couple satisfaction), specifically in couples where at least one partner viewed pornography and considered it problematic. The findings from the study mostly supported my proposed hypotheses, with (a) higher levels of both blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame associated with lower constructive communication, (b) higher levels of blame associated with higher levels of the self-demand, partner-withdraw pattern, (c) higher levels of maladaptive guilt/ shame associated with the partner-demand, self-withdraw pattern, and (d) higher levels of maladaptive guilt/ shame associated with lower levels of couple satisfaction. Contrary to my hypotheses, blame was also associated with the partner-demand, self-withdraw pattern, and blame was not significantly associated with lower couple satisfaction. In addition, severity of pornography use was not significantly associated with the outcomes in either analysis, most likely because all participants found their pornography problematic. The non-significant interactions in the initial analyses also convey that the core study variables (maladaptive guilt/ shame and blame) did not change based on the severity of pornography use.

As mentioned in my review of literature, the VSIRO model (i.e., view of self in relation to others) was developed to delineate couple patterns of engagement (balanced vs imbalanced; Butler et al., 2019). Within this model, the goal is a "balance of self, other,

and relationship regard—an ethical dynamic characterized by each partner's benevolent, beneficent relationship 'ministry' of both self and other accountability and forbearance" (Butler et al., 2019, p. 1337). Simply stated, a balanced sense of self in relation to other fosters an egalitarian position in couple engagement that is an "essential prerequisite to effective and ethical relational work" (Butler et al., 2019, p. 1334). This is necessary for couples dealing with problematic pornography use, where there is problematic couple engagement (imbalance of accountability and forbearance).

When accountability and forbearance are not reciprocal in couple relationships, an imbalance in relational responsibility and accountability results, leading to less patience and forgiving, thereby producing "dysfunctional patterns of engagement leading either to dead-end impasses or to individually harmful and relationally corrosive interaction" (Butler et al., 2019, p. 1337). My findings provide empirical insight into the VSIRO model, which I will outline in the upcoming sections.

Blame (Anger Turned Outward) and Couple Process

One of VSIRO's core elements that emerges when there is an imbalance of accountability and forbearance is blame (anger turned outwards; Butler et al., 2019). My findings highlighted that blame was negatively related to constructive communication while also being related to two forms of demand-withdraw patterns (self-demand, partner-withdraw and partner-demand, self-withdraw). Although not fully expected, this makes some conceptual sense. When a partner fears a lack of reciprocity of accountability and forbearance, they may resort to using blame, the overall tendency to criticize, insult, or provoke their partner (e.g., demand behavior). They might also ignore,

becoming avoidant and dismissive of their partner (withdraw behavior; Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1998).

This may represent a person's attempt to gain control over their situation through exerting power over their partner (Christensen et al., 1987; Holley et al., 2018). As one example, a person might use blame as a control tactic (expressing their fear externally through anger), in a desperate attempt to regain a partner's compassion and mercy. In response, they themselves may divert taking responsibility and be less patient and forgiving. On the flip side, if the person engages in withdraw behavior, they may also be acting from a place of fear that their need for the partner's compassion and mercy will not be met. With that said, the withdraw behavior can then be interpreted as an attempt to punish the partner and express anger, but in a more passive-aggressive way. Ultimately, blame is a double-edged sword (demand and withdraw behaviors) that is utilized as a mechanism of control and manipulation over their partner when they experience fear that their needs (partner's compassion and mercy) will not be met.

When looking specifically at partners in couple relationships who are dealing with problematic pornography use, they may think, "My partner will not be patient and forgiving of my problematic pornography use." Out of this fear, the partner with problematic pornography use may tend to blame (demand and withdraw behaviors) their partner in attempts to regain control over the fear of an absence of a partner's compassion and mercy for their actions. This can be problematic to couple communication dynamics, where neither partner is able to have constructive communication (Christensen et al., 1987; Butler et al., 2019).

Maladaptive Guilt/ Shame (Anger Turned Inward) and Couple Process

The next core element in the VSIRO model that emerges when there is an imbalance of accountability and forbearance is maladaptive guilt/ shame (anger turned inward; Butler et al., 2019). Underneath the fear that the partner will not reciprocate accountability and forbearance is maladaptive guilt/ shame. Based on this fear, the partner may internally vocalize thoughts like "Since my partner does not reciprocate accountability and forbearance, this means that they do not love me and think that I am worthless." This self-deprecating belief fuels maladaptive guilt/ shame, which at its core attacks and challenges one's identity, where one may internalize beliefs that they are "unlovable" and worthless" (Brown, 2006). When one has a negative concept of self, they may often self-isolate and withdraw from others (Dickerson et al., 2004). What they may be telling themselves is, "Since my partner does not love and accept me, I am unlovable and unworthy, therefore I will withdraw."

In couple relationships where at least one partner is struggling with problematic pornography use, the one viewing pornography may fear losing their partner's compassion and mercy. This fear can appear as maladaptive guilt/ shame, where they feel that their partner may not be accepting of them (Andrews, 2023; Bradshaw et al., 2015). As a result, the partner experiencing maladaptive guilt/ shame may gradually withdraw and become distant from their partner from not feeling worthy of their partner, and their partner might consistently seek greater engagement. This then might disrupt couple communication by resulting in the self-demand, partner withdraw pattern (Butler et al., 2019; Christensen et al., 1987). Thus, in this scenario, neither partner's needs for compassion and mercy are met.

Blame, Maladaptive Guilt/ Shame, and Couple Satisfaction

Both blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame are disruptive to couple relationships (Butler et al. 2019). While blame is capable of metaphorically inflicting scratches and bruises on a couple relationship where problematic pornography is involved, maladaptive guilt/ shame cuts deep, laced with a deadly poison that eats away at an individual's identity (Brown, 2006). Rather than simply challenging the action of "What you did was wrong", maladaptive guilt/ shame says "*You* are wrong." This can have devastating effects on an individual, given that personal well-being is rooted in a sense of identity and self (Neff, 2011). As individual well-being influences couple satisfaction (Falconier et al., 2014), maladaptive guilt/ shame can be particularly toxic to couple relationships. The belief here is that "If I am not doing well, then my relationship is not doing well."

In couple relationships where at least one partner is dealing with problematic pornography use, is it typical for both blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame to exist. However, when accounting for couple satisfaction, my findings suggest that blame may not be quite as relevant as maladaptive guilt/ shame, as couple satisfaction is more strongly linked to maladaptive guilt/ shame. A partner may say "My problematic pornography use makes me feel like I am the problem, as a result it is difficult to genuinely feel happiness and joy in my couple relationship." Overall, they are unable to experience individual and couple satisfaction because their sense of self and overall identity are deflated.

Potential Clinical Implications

This research study, while not explicitly a clinical study, sought to provide a greater clinical understanding of the study variables within the framework of individuals who engage in pornography use and consider their usage problematic. While the sample of 190 participants in the study was not formally a clinical sample, 78.4% had attended therapy for their pornography use, and all reported viewing it as problematic. Thus, these findings have potential implications for clinical work with those in relationships who view their pornography as problematic.

Whether working with individuals, couples, and/or families, marriage and family therapists undertake a systemic approach. Rather than pathologizing and labeling the individual as the "problem," they view the interaction patterns as dysfunctional. Thus, to effectively treat and improve the relationship interaction patterns, an integral part in a therapist's work with clients is identifying, understanding, and exploring negative interaction cycles (e.g. demand-withdraw; Johnson, 2019). With the linkage that both blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame have with dysfunctional couple communication (demand and withdraw behaviors), it is imperative that therapists are keenly aware of what may be fueling the blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame. Perhaps there is an underlying fear that their partner will not reciprocate compassion and mercy. As a result, this fear may perpetuate negative communication patterns, which may lead to decreased couple satisfaction. By identifying the primary and core emotions, therapists can help clients access and experience greater healing in themselves and in their relationships.

Kraus and Sweeney (2019) created an algorithm decision-making tree for clinicians treating problematic pornography use. In it includes differential diagnoses

between problematic pornography use, substance use disorder, pornography problems due to moral incongruence, and compulsive sexual behavior disorder (Kraus & Sweeney, 2019). In addition to the steps taken to make these differential diagnoses, based on the proposed implications of blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame, clinicians could do well with considering how the presence of blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame would affect the diagnosing and ruling out process. For example, an individual who comes in for an intake who struggles with excessive pornography use may have an intense fear that they have forfeited their partner's compassion and mercy. This fear may very well perpetuate the pornography use as a coping mechanism due to the fear and feeling of maladaptive guilt/ shame. This could be an indicator to a clinician that there may be underlying concerns that need to be addressed in the client's treatment. Furthermore, in differentiating problematic pornography use, internet addiction, and internet infidelity, many couples, particularly those with higher religious affiliation, view pornography use as a form of cheating (Stubleski & Hertlein, 2012). For these couples who hold this view, blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame have potential implications in couple's therapy and for clinicians in the differential diagnoses decision-making process. By addressing and treating the underlying concerns, this could improve an individual's sense of well-being and relationship satisfaction.

Limitations and Implications for Further Research

As with all studies, this is not without limitations that should be noted and can inform future research. The first notable limitation was the suspected bot responses in the Amazon MTurk survey. These bots were detected in a preliminary analysis in the

reverse-score itemed responses in the couple communication subscale for constructive communication. Nevertheless, I am not able to fully know how potential bot-initiated responses may have affected this research. Somewhat relatedly, because I used a convenience sample of Amazon MTurk workers, findings cannot necessarily be generalized to the broader population. In addition, there was a relative lack of diversity regarding race, religion, and education. In the sample, 87.4% of the sample was Caucasian/white, 88.9% considered themselves Christian, and 82.1% had received at least a Bachelor's degree. There was some diversity in sexual orientation, with 20% not considering themselves as heterosexual. Additionally, 4.2% claimed to currently be in a same-sex relationship. Despite some diversity in these areas, greater sexual orientation and relationship status diversity would be useful for future studies. Utilizing a more diverse sample in the future will help move forward our understanding of blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame as elements of the VSIRO model that affect individuals and couples. As the generalizability and sampling increases, the reliability (precision of measures) and validity (accuracy) increase as well (Kreiter & Zaidi, 2020).

With only maladaptive guilt/ shame being relevant to couple satisfaction but not blame, this sparks the question of how much being involved in therapy (78.4% had attended therapy for their pornography use) might have influenced the differing results (blame not linked to couple satisfaction). With the majority of the sample seeking therapy, it is possible this means the participants are more likely to see it as "their issue" (maladaptive guilt/ shame) than those who might avoid therapy because it is "someone else's problem, not mine" (blame). In other words, I hope that future research will explore therapy further, including the type and timing, to understand how it might relate

to maladaptive guilt/ shame and blame. Another limitation is that this study did not survey both partners in a relationship. Because of the preliminary nature of the study, I felt it appropriate to get information from individuals who felt that their pornography use was problematic about their couple relationship. However, in the future, I recommend that studies use dyadic data that will allow them to explore research questions related to mutual influence that will further enhance our understanding of the VSIRO model.

In addition, as blame was not significantly associated with couple satisfaction, blame could potentially have affected couple satisfaction indirectly. I hope that future research can look at indirect effects by using one path analysis model instead of two separate models.

Part of this could be exploring the four problematic couple configurations—a dejected couple, a taker-enabler couple, an ultimate fighting couple, and a debtor-collector couple (Butler et al., 2019)—more fully. This way, the components of blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame could be measured amongst different couple constellations, and in addition to measuring demand-withdraw communication behaviors, other potentially maladaptive interactional patterns (e.g., demand-demand and withdraw-withdraw) could also be measured. As this study was a preliminary study for the VSIRO model, this future study would enhance other further empirical examination of VSIRO.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, there is utility from our research findings on blame (anger turned outwards) and maladaptive guilt/ shame (anger turned inwards). The findings from this research study augment an expanding body of literature on the

relationship of blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame with both relationship process (i.e., couple communications patterns) and relationship outcomes (i.e., general relationship satisfaction). Of importance was how the study demonstrated that (a) general blame and maladaptive guilt/ shame were negatively correlated with constructive communication, (b) blame was positively correlated with the self-demand/partner-withdraw pattern, (c) both maladaptive guilt/ shame and blame were positively correlated with the partner-demand/self-withdraw pattern, and (d) maladaptive guilt/ shame was negatively correlated with couple satisfaction. These findings provide an initial empirical validation of some of the core elements of the VSIRO model, providing a foundation for future research to build upon. With this, I hope this model can begin to be an important reference for even more clinicians treating problematic pornography within the context of couple relationships.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A (Screener Assessment Questions)

Please indicate your age in whole years:

Have you been in a committed relationship (dating, living together, engaged, married) for at least six months? (Y/N)

Do you currently reside in the United States? (Y/N)

Are you able to read and write English easily and accurately? (Y/N)

Have you viewed pornography every month within the last year? (Y/N)

Do you consider your pornography use to be problematic? (Y/N)

Appendix B (Basic Demographic Questions)

Which of the following best describes your racial background? Select all that apply.

American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian American or Pacific Islander	African American (Black)	Latino/Hispanic	Caucasian /White	Bi-Racial/Multi-racial (please specify):	Other (please specify):

What is your gender identity?

Male	Female	Trans	Non-binary	Other (please specify):

What is your sexual orientation?

Heterosexual	Gay/Lesbian	Bisexual	Other (please specify):

Are you in a:

Heterosexual relationship	Same-sex relationship

Which statement best describes your employment status?

Employed (FT) please specify	Employed (PT) please specify	Homemaker	Unemployed, looking for work	Unemployed, not looking for work	Retired	Full-time student	Disabled

How much education have you completed?

Less than high school	High school or equivalent	Vocational/technical school	Some college/no degree completed	Associate's degree	Bachelor's degree	Graduate or professional degree	Other (please specify):

How many people are in your household? (including yourself):

How much do all the people in your household make, combined (before tax deductions)?

Under $15k	$15k-$29k	$30k-$44,999	$45k-$49k	$50k-$59k	$60k-$74,999	$75k-$99k	$100k-$149k	$150k-$199k	Over $200k

What is your religious preference?

Christian (please specify denomination)	Jewish	Muslim	Buddhist	LDS/ Mormon	Unitarian/Universalist	Hindu	Other (please specify):	None

How religious are you?

(1) Not At All Religious	(2) Slightly Religious	(3) Somewhat Religious	(4) Very Religious

How much influence does religion have upon your life?

(1) Not At All Influential	(2) Slightly Influential	(3) Somewhat Influential	(4) Very Influential

How often do you attend church?

(1) Never	(2) Once or twice a year	(3) Once every 2 or 3 months	(4) Once a month	(5) Two or three times a month	(6) Once a week or more

Appendix C (Predictor Variables)

TOSCA-3 Short Version

Below are situations that people are likely to encounter in day-to-day life, followed by several common reactions to those situations. As you read each scenario, try to imagine yourself in that situation. Then indicate how likely you would be to react in each of the ways described. We ask you to rate all responses because people may feel or react more than one way to the same situation, or they may react different ways at different times.

	Very Unlikely				Very Likely

You make plans to meet a friend for lunch. At 5 o'clock, you realize you stood him up. You would think: "My boss distracted me just before lunch."

1   2   3   4   5

You break something at work and then hide it. You would think: "A lot of things aren't made very well these days."

1   2   3   4   5

At work, you wait until the last minute to plan a project, and it turns out badly. You would think: "There are never enough hours in the day."

1   2   3   4   5

You make a mistake at work and find out a co-worker is blamed for the error. You would think the company did not like the co-worker.

1   2   3   4   5

While playing around, you throw a ball and it hits your friend in the face. You would think maybe your friend needs more practice at catching.

1   2   3   4   5

You are driving down the road, and hit a small animal. You would think the animal shouldn't have been on the road.

1   2   3   4   5

You walk out of an exam thinking you did extremely well. Then you find out you did poorly. You would think: "The instructor doesn't like me."

1   2   3   4   5

While out with a group of friends, you make fun of a friend who's not there. You would think that perhaps that friend should have been there to defend himself/herself.

1   2   3   4   5

You make a big mistake on an important project at work. People were depending on you, and your boss criticizes you. You would think your boss should have been clearer about what was expected of you.

1   2   3   4   5

You are taking care of your friend's dog while they are on vacation and the dog runs away. You would think

1   2   3   4   5

that your friend must not take very good care of their

dog or it wouldn't have run away.

You attend your co-worker's housewarming party, and

you spill red wine on their new cream-colored carpet,

but you think no one notices. You think your co-worker   1   2   3   4   5

should have expected some accidents at such a big

party.

The Guilt and Shame Experience Scale (GSES)

To what degree do you agree with the following statement?

	Not at all	A little bit	Somewhat	Significantly
I feel guilty, even though I do not know exactly where it is coming from.	1	2	3	4
If I do anything wrong, I have to think about it all the time.	1	2	3	4
There are moments when I would rather sink without trace.	1	2	3	4
When I do something wrong, I feel an exaggerated feeling of guilt.	1	2	3	4
I am losing hope that I will ever be a good person.	1	2	3	4
I blame myself even for things that other people do not think of.	1	2	3	4
I experience moments when I cannot even look at myself.	1	2	3	4
I feel the need to explain or apologize for the reasons of my actions.	1	2	3	4

Subscales:

Items 1,3,5 and 7 belong to the Shame subscale.

Items 2,4,6 and 8 belong to the Guilt subscale.

Appendix D (Process Variables)

Communication Patterns Questionnaire

Directions: We are interested in how you and your partner typically deal with problems in your relationship. Please rate each item on a scale of 1 (= very unlikely) to 9 (= very likely).

A. WHEN SOME PROBLEM IN MY RELATIONSHIP ARISES,

	Very Unlikely							Very Likely	
Mutual Avoidance Both my partner and I avoid discussing the problem. (RS)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Mutual Discussion. Both my partner and I try to discuss the problem.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Discussion/Avoidance

I try to start a discussion while my partner tries to avoid a discussion.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
My partner tries to start a discussion while I try to avoid a discussion.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

B. DURING A DISCUSSION OF A RELATIONSHIP PROBLEM,

	Very Unlikely							Very Likely	
Mutual Expression Both my partner and I express our feelings to each other.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Mutual Negotiation. Both my partner and I suggest possible solutions and compromises.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Demand/Withdraw

I nag and demand while my partner   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses

to discuss the matter further.

My partner nags and demands while I   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

withdraw, become silent, or refuse

to discuss the matter further.

B. DURING A DISCUSSION OF A RELATIONSHIP PROBLEM,

	Very Unlikely							Very Likely

<u>Criticize/Defend</u>

I criticize while my partner   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

defends himself or herself.

My partner criticizes while I   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

defend myself.

<u>Pressure/Resist</u>

I pressure my partner to take some action   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

or stop some action, while my partner resists.

My partner pressures me to take some action   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

or stop some action, while I resist.

<u>Threat/Back down</u>

I threaten negative consequences   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

and my partner gives in or backs down.

My partner threatens negative consequences 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

and I give in or back down.

Verbal Aggression

I call my partner names, swear at	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

my partner, or attack my partner's character.

My partner calls me names, swears at	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

me, or attacks my character.

C. AFTER A DISCUSSION OF A RELATIONSHIP PROBLEM,

	Very Unlikely						Very Likely	
Mutual Understanding Both my partner	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

and I feel understood by each other.

Mutual Withdrawal Both my partner and	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

I withdraw from each other. (RS)

Mutual Resolution Both my partner and I feel	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

that the problem has been solved.

Mutual Withholding Neither I nor my partner	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

is giving to the other. (RS)

Mutual Reconciliation Both my partner and I	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

try to be especially nice to each other.

Pressure/Resist

I pressure my partner to apologize or	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

promise to do better, while my partner resists.

My partner pressures me to apologize or

promise to do better, while I resist.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Appendix F (Outcome Variables)

Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-16)

Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.

Extremely Unhappy	Fairly Unhappy	A Little Unhappy	Happy	Very Happy	Extremely Happy
0	1	2	3	4	5

	All the time	Most of the time	More often than not	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
In general, how often do you think things between you and your partner are going well?	5	4	3	2	1	0

	Not at all TRUE	A little TRUE	Some-what TRUE	Mostly TRUE	Almost Completely TRUE	Completely TRUE
Our relationship is strong	0	1	2	3	4	5
My relationship with my partner makes me happy	0	1	2	3	4	5
I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner	0	1	2	3	4	5
I really feel like **part of a team** with my partner	0	1	2	3	4	5

	A little	Some-what	Mostly	Almost Completely	Completely

	Not at all					
How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?	0	1	2	3	4	5
How well does your partner meet your needs?	0	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?	0	1	2	3	4	5
In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?	0	1	2	3	4	5

For each of the following items, select the answer that best describes *how you feel about your relationship*. Base your responses on your first impressions and immediate feelings about the item.

INTERESTING	5	4	3	2	1	0	BORING
BAD	0	1	2	3	4	5	GOOD
FULL	5	4	3	2	1	0	EMPTY
STURDY	5	4	3	2	1	0	FRAGILE
DISCOURAGING	0	1	2	3	4	5	HOPEFUL
ENJOYABLE	5	4	3	2	1	0	MISERABLE

Appendix E (Covariates)

Short Problematic Pornography Consumption Scale (PPCS-6)

"Pornography is defined as material (text, picture, video, etc.) that (1) creates or elicits sexual feelings or thoughts and (2) contains explicit exposure or descriptions of sexual acts involving the genitals, such as vaginal or anal intercourse, oral sex, or masturbation."

Please think back to the past six months and indicate on the following 7-point scale how often or to what extent the statements apply to you. There is no right or wrong answer. Please indicate the answer that most applies to you.

1 – Never	2 – Rarely	3 – Occasion ally	4 – Sometimes	5 – Often	6 – Very often	7 – All the time

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. I felt that porn is an important part of my life.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
2. I released my tension by watching porn.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
3. I neglected other leisure activities as a result of watching porn.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
4. I felt that I had to watch more and more porn for satisfaction.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
5. When I vowed not to watch porn anymore, I could only do it for a short period of time.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
6. I became stressed when something prevented me from watching porn.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

Appendix F: IRB Certificate of Exemption
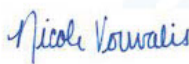
Research UtahStateUniversity

Certificate of Exemption

From: Melanie Domenech Rodríguez, Ph.D.
           Chair, Institutional Review Board

           Nicole Vouvalis, J.D.
           Director of Human Research Protections

To: Ryan Seedall
Date: 2023-06-27
Protocol #:   13273
Title: The Relationship between Blame, Shame, Couple Communication, and Relational
Outcomes in Pornography Users

Your proposal has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board and is approved under Exempt procedure(s) Exemption 2 (based on the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations for the protection of human research subjects, 45 CFR Part 46, as amended to include provisions of the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, January 21, 2019):

> Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation (including recording) of public behavior if the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained.

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file for the period of approval specified in the protocol. The expiration date matches your project completion date set in the Procedures section of your protocol. It is eligible for up to five years of exemption, at which point, it will be closed and a new exemption will need to be requested.

Any change affecting human subjects, including extension of the expiration date, must be approved by the IRB **prior** to implementation by submitting an Amendment request. Injuries or any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board. If Non-USU Personnel will complete work on this project, they may not begin until an External Researcher Agreement or Reliance Agreement has been fully executed by USU and the appropriate Non-USU entity, regardless of the protocol approval status here at USU.

Prior to involving human subjects, properly executed informed consent must be obtained from each subject or from an authorized representative, and documentation of informed consent must be kept on file for at least three years after the project ends. Each subject must be furnished with a copy of the informed consent document for their personal records.

Upon receipt of this memo, you may begin your research. If you have questions, please call the IRB office at (435) 797-1821 or email to irb@usu.edu. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

435.797.1821 | 1450 Old Main Hill | Logan, UT 84322 | MAIN 155 | irb@usu.edu | FWA#00003308

Appendix G: Study Letter of Information

The Relationship between Blame, Shame, Couple Communication, and Relationship Outcomes in Pornography Users

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Ryan Seedall, Associate Professor in the Human Development and Family Studies department, and Joshua Otani, student at Utah State University. The purpose of this research is to understand more about couple communication patterns and pornography use. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

You have been asked to take part in this research study because you are at least 18 years old, are in a committed couple relationship (engaged, living together, or married) for at least six months, reside in the United States, can speak and read English easily and accurately, have viewed pornography at least monthly within the last year, view your pornography usage as problematic, have a HIT approval rate greater than 90, and have at least 100 HITs approved. This form includes detailed information on the research to help you decide whether to participate. Please read it carefully and ask any questions you have before you agree to participate.

Procedures

If you agree to participate and meet the conditions above, you will complete the online assessment packet consisting of demographic surveys and other assessments that ask you about couple communication patterns and pornography use. We are interested in *your* thoughts, feelings, and experiences, so please choose a location and time that allow your responses to be private from other people.

The survey should take approximately 20-25 minutes to complete. We anticipate that approximately 300 people will participate in this study. Please note that there are questions in the survey that may not be related to what we are assessing; these may be prompts where we tell you to pick a specific response to a statement or reply to a factual question. These help us ensure the integrity of our data. If you answer them incorrectly, you will be taken to the end of the survey, and you will not be compensated because you did not successfully meet our quality control criteria.

Risks

This is a minimal risk research study. That means that the risks of participating are no more likely or serious than those you encounter in everyday activities. The foreseeable risks or discomforts include a minimal risk of loss of confidentiality and mild discomfort in answering questions regarding your mental and relationship health. Should you experience any of these risks, we encourage you to use the contact numbers for national counseling and support services that are provided at the end of the survey.

Benefits

There is no direct benefit to you as a result of participating in this study. More generally, your responses will help us learn more about families and help us find ways to improve our efforts to strengthen relationships.

Confidentiality

The anonymity/confidentiality of your responses is subject to Amazon MTurk's security standards. Your responses are collected through Qualtrics, an online survey platform, where your data will be kept confidential. We do not ask for names nor specific identifying information in the first survey. We do ask for demographic information such as gender and age. Information is securely stored in a restricted-access folder on Qualtrics' server and later in a restricted-access folder on Box.com, an encrypted, cloud-based storage system. Any data reports or analyses will consist of aggregated information. No identifying information will be collected.

Research
Utah State University

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Protocol # 13273
IRB Exemption Date: Jun 27, 2023
Consent Document Expires: July 31, 2023

v.10.3

It is unlikely, but possible, that others (Utah State University or state or federal officials) may require us to share information to ensure that the research was conducted safely and appropriately. We will only share your information if law or policy requires us to do so. We work to ensure confidentiality to the degree permitted by technology. It is possible, although unlikely, that unauthorized individuals could gain access to your responses because you are responding online. Additionally, should you choose to email the requester, your name, MTurk worker ID, and email address will be seen by the requester and could be theoretically linked with your responses – and you do so at your own risk.

Voluntary Participation & Withdrawal
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate now and change your mind midway through the survey, you may exit the survey at any time. However, please be aware that you will not receive compensation unless you complete 90% of the survey and submit it at the end for the compensation code.

Payment
For your participation in this research study, you will receive $5.00. You may only participate once. Compensation will only occur if you meet eligibility criteria, give your informed consent, complete 90% survey items, satisfy our quality-control items within the survey, and enter in the generated MTurk code following completion of the survey.

IRB Review
The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human research participants at Utah State University has reviewed and approved this study. If you have questions about the research study itself, please contact the Principal Investigator at (435) 797-7433 or ryan.seedall@usu.edu. If you have questions about your rights or would simply like to speak with someone *other* than the research team about questions or concerns, please contact the IRB Director at (435) 797-0567 or irb@usu.edu.

Ryan Seedall, PhD
Principal Investigator
(435) 797-7433; ryan.seedall@usu.edu

Joshua Otani
Student Investigator
joshua.otani@usu.edu

Informed Consent
By continuing to the survey, you agree to participate in this study. You indicate that you understand the risks and benefits of participation, and that you know what you will be asked to do. You also agree that you have asked any questions you might have and are clear on how to stop your participation in the study if you choose to do so. Please be sure to retain a copy of this form for your records.

I verify that clicking 'I AGREE' below indicates that I have read and understood this consent form and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described.