

# School counselors' preparedness to intervene in adolescent pornography addiction in Malaysia: Challenges and implications



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**Abstract** In the present day, adolescent sexual issues, including pornography addiction and risky sexual behaviors, have become increasingly concerning in Malaysia. These challenges place considerable pressure on school counselors, who must navigate sensitive and complex aspects of adolescent sexuality within a cultural context that often discourages open discussion of such matters. This study aims to explore the readiness of school counselors in addressing adolescent sexuality challenges. Adopting a qualitative research approach through the case study method, the study involved seven Secondary Guidance and Counseling Teachers (GBKSM) selected using purposive sampling. In-depth individual interviews were conducted with a structured interview protocol to obtain detailed insights into their professional experiences. Data were analyzed using NVivo software to identify emerging patterns, and thematic analysis was employed to interpret the qualitative findings. The study generated three interrelated themes to answer the research questions: (1) the increase in sexual issues among school adolescents, (2) the challenges of counseling in addressing sexual matters, and (3) the impact of counselors' unpreparedness on their professional psychology. Overall, the findings revealed that most counselors felt unprepared to handle adolescent sexuality issues, often experiencing discomfort and reluctance to discuss sexual matters openly with clients. This lack of readiness stemmed from several key factors, including insufficient training in sexuality education, the absence of specific procedures or guidelines for managing related cases, limited support and collaboration from other stakeholders, and the persistence of negative social stigma surrounding sexuality. Therefore, this study highlights several important implications for practice and policy, particularly emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive professional training across counseling specialties to strengthen counselors' competence, self-efficacy, and readiness in addressing pornography addiction and broader sexuality issues among adolescents.

**Keywords:** ethical challenge, youth development, sexuality education, counseling interventions, professional competence, qualitative study

## 1. Introduction

Recent studies indicate a rise in risky sexual behaviors among adolescents (Liu et al., 2023), which is a concern, as it has contributed to serious social issues in Malaysia (Mahmud, 2020; Minhat et al., 2021). Several factors, such as lack of parental communication and control, peer influence, high curiosity, and external factors, such as early exposure to pornography via digital media, have been identified as major contributors to the increase in unhealthy behaviors among teenagers (McKellar & Sillence, 2020). Although exposure to pornography among adolescents can sometimes be viewed as a normal part of sexual exploration or development (Adarsh & Sahoo, 2023), a review of the literature shows that early exposure to uncontrolled and excessive pornography during adolescence can significantly impact their sexual attitudes and behaviors (Setyawati et al., 2020; Luthfiyatin et al., 2020; Tri et al., 2022; Faisal et al., 2022; Pathmendra et al., 2023; Salsabila & Sari, 2023; Kostopoulou, 2023; Ramdhani & Asfari, 2023). Minhat et al. (2021) argued that issues related to risky sexual behavior among secondary school adolescents aged 13-17 in Malaysia are becoming increasingly worrisome, involving challenges such as premarital sex, rising cases of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unplanned pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and baby dumping (Hamid & Fallon, 2020). This highlights the need for comprehensive support, prevention, and treatment efforts through counseling interventions (Ahn et al., 2020), with school counselors playing a crucial role in helping students navigate these complex issues (Yendi, 2020; Ibnu et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, a major challenge in sexual counseling is the shortage of well-trained counselors (Emelianchik-Key et al., 2022). While clients often seek treatment by counseling approaches to address personal issues, including those related to their sexual health and identity, reports show that counselors still avoid sexuality issues and are unwilling or unable to discuss them



openly (Bungener et al., 2022). For example, Hazariah et al. (2022) reported that, in Malaysia, sexual information is still not officially communicated to adolescents, although unwanted teenage pregnancies and the practice of "baby abandonment" have become serious public health issues. This shows that discussing sexuality in counseling practices in Malaysia faces multiple challenges rooted in various factors, including cultural, societal, and religious norms (Haladin et al., 2022), as well as personal beliefs about sex (Joe et al., 2023). This is because, within Eastern cultures, where most of the population is Muslim, sexuality remains a sensitive and taboo subject (Muhamad et al., 2021; Ying et al., 2022; Kamaludin et al., 2022), while discussing it openly can meet with resistance or rejection (Ansari et al., 2024). Shafirir & Balahur (2022) argued that this cultural stigma can impact the comfort of both counselors and clients, as they believe that discussing sexual matters is inappropriate and unprofessional, which eventually leads to missed opportunities to address important aspects of the client's life (Kelder et al., 2023).

Studies have identified a lack of knowledge and skills as a key factor in counselors' reluctance to discuss sexual issues with clients (Litam & Speciale, 2021). Research by Brand et al. (2022) revealed that talking about sexuality with clients remains difficult and embarrassing for most mental health professionals, primarily because of insufficient competence or skills to handle these topics properly (Litam & Speciale, 2021). In his research on child sexual abuse, Cuğ (2022) reported that school counselors often feel unprepared and hesitant to intervene because they lack the necessary skills and counseling procedures for managing these cases. Similarly, Liu et al. (2022) highlighted that the absence of LGBT-related knowledge among counselors is a barrier to effective communication and intervention with LGBT clients. Furthermore, Goli et al. (2022) reported that school counselors lack the skills and knowledge to address sexual behaviors among adolescents with intellectual disabilities. In such cases, Gregory & Paylo (2020) noted that many counselors tend to ignore sexual issues during therapy. This approach can lead to feelings of shame and depression in clients (Ratanashevorn et al., 2024), as they feel that their concerns are dismissed and unworthy of discussion (Berger-Merom et al., 2022), which may indirectly harm the therapeutic process. In summary, a lack of knowledge and skills contributes to counselors' hesitance to engage in conversations about sexual issues, potentially causing significant and multidimensional psychological effects on clients (AVCI & Yildirim, 2023).

Thus, counselors must possess essential skills and be prepared to proactively discuss sexuality issues, as clients may hesitate to initiate such conversations due to discomfort or fear of the counselor's attitudes or beliefs (Manninen et al., 2021; Emond et al., 2021). Furthermore, research indicates that counselors often experience psychological stress, including anxiety, fatigue, depression, and professional dissatisfaction, especially when they are not adequately prepared to address this topic (Avi & Yildirim, 2023; Tsani et al., 2023; Moore et al., 2024). Therefore, this study contributes to the critical discourse on the challenges that counselors face and highlights the need for comprehensive training to enhance their ability to handle sexual issues effectively. Specifically, this research aims to explore counselors' perceptions of the rise in sexuality issues among adolescents caused by pornography addiction in school settings. It critically examines the institutional, psychological, and practical challenges that may impede their effectiveness in supporting affected students.

**2. Materials and methods**

*2.1. Study design*

To achieve the research goal of gaining a deep understanding of the experiences and perspectives of school counselors intervening in pornography addiction issues among adolescents in the current context, we conducted a qualitative case study. The reason for choosing this methodology is its ability to provide a detailed and comprehensive view of a complex phenomenon (Pyo et al., 2023), as well as to facilitate exploration by allowing researchers to engage participants in a natural research environment (Chowdhury & Shil, 2021). It enables the collection of more detailed information (Knott et al., 2022) about the challenges counselors face in managing pornography addiction issues among adolescents, gathered through reflective interviews as the primary data source.

*2.2. Participants*

Participants were chosen via a purposive sampling method, which is a common approach in qualitative research. The criteria included at least one year of experience as a full-time guide and counseling teacher at a school that addresses adolescent sexual issues, especially pornography addiction. They were recruited via email lists and snowball sampling, resulting in seven GBKSMs from seven different schools in Selangor as research participants. All the participants were asked to provide voluntary consent without coercion. The participant demographics are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Demographics of the participant sample (N = 7).

Age (year)	Ina	Amir	Ann	Yati	Zura	Wani	Ila
	50	35	40	32	42	44	43
Status	Full-time school counselor						
School counselor Experience (years)	25	8	12	5	16	19	10



### 2.3. Ethical considerations for participants

This study was conducted after obtaining official permission from the Education Policy Planning and Research Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia (KPM), to ensure compliance with established procedures. This study aimed to understand the challenges faced by full-time counseling teachers in the State of Selangor. Before the research began, all the full-time counseling teachers involved were provided with complete information about the research's purpose, procedures, and rights, and they were asked to provide their voluntary written consent. To protect confidentiality, all collected data were kept secure, and participants' identities were concealed. Moreover, and more importantly, all collected data will be used solely for academic and professional development and will not be used for any other purpose without participants' consent.

### 2.4. Data collection

The data collection process involved in-depth interviews with open-ended questions, followed by more detailed inquiries to better understand counseling teachers' experiences and perspectives regarding their counseling practices. It started in October 2023 and was completed by May 2024. The interviews were conducted online via Google Meet, with each session lasting 30–50 minutes. All the participants took turns as scheduled, considering their availability and busy schedules as counseling teachers. Additionally, observations were conducted as a complementary data source to enhance data validity.

### 2.5. Data analysis

After the interviews, the researcher transcribed the recordings into text. The researcher then read the transcriptions multiple times to deepen the understanding of the participants' experiences. Next, a coding process was performed at three levels: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. NVIVO software was used to identify emerging themes and subthemes from the data. To remain objective and ensure that the data collection and interpretation remained transparent, honest, and free from personal bias that could affect the research's validity, the researcher connected the identified themes to the research questions and literature. Additionally, the researcher used the continuous comparison method to compare data from the verbatim interviews across participants.

### 2.6. Trustworthiness

The reliability of qualitative data is often questioned (Haq et al., 2023); therefore, we employed four key strategies introduced by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure reliability and minimize potential bias in this study. These include credibility, dependence, confirmability, and transferability (Riazi et al., 2023). In this study, credibility was established through triangulation, which involves comparing data from different sources and methods to verify the consistency of the findings. The researcher asked participants to rate the accuracy of the data, followed by reviews from experts, supervisors, and peers to maintain data integrity and authenticity. Additionally, this study was conducted systematically and designed to be replicable, yielding similar results in the same context, as each step, from data collection methods and participant selection criteria to analysis procedures, was carefully documented. Moreover, the researcher ensured that conclusions were grounded in objective data rather than interpretation by thoroughly documenting the entire data collection and analysis process. All the data used, including interview transcripts and related documents, were retained to allow others to verify the research process and outcomes. Finally, to support transferability, this study provided a detailed description of the research context—covering participant characteristics and relevant sociocultural factors, enabling other researchers to determine whether the findings can be applied in different settings or with similar populations.

## 3. Results

Data analysis revealed three main interconnected themes to answer the research questions: the rise in sexual issues among school adolescents, the challenges counselors face when addressing sexual issues, and the effects of unpreparedness on the psychology of school counselors. We detail each theme and its subthemes below.

### 3.1. Counselors' perceptions of the increase in sexuality issues among adolescents in school settings

This section discusses the first thematic category analysis, which concerns counselors' perceptions of the rise in sexual and pornography issues among adolescents. The research findings show that all seven participants acknowledge the common problem of pornography or sexual addiction among students, supported by several statements such as *"If you follow the current trend, it is indeed increasing"* (GBKSM5/Zura/04:02), *"it is indeed an increase"* (GBKSM6/Wani/05:11), and *"this is a fact and true, I am currently facing the issue of pornography addiction in school that is increasing"* (GBKSM4/Yati/04:41).

The situation is indeed becoming more serious. *"In my opinion, the issue of pornography among teenagers is worsening. Early on, perhaps approximately 2015 or 2016, there were already concerns about this. However, it may not have been publicized at that time. Now, in 2024, ten years later, the problem is becoming increasingly apparent"* (GBKSM7/Ila/04:03). *"The situation is getting more serious now that we understand who can be affected"* (GBKSM2/Amir/04:23). *"I think it is terrible now,*

and it is becoming increasingly concerning" (GBKSM1/Ina/01:23). The next participant expressed, "In my opinion regarding this pornography issue, based on the basis of my experience as a counsellor at this school, we can say that the situation is growing more troubling. Pornography is indeed a serious concern among students" (GBKSM4/Yati/03:28). It has even become a habit among teenagers, as Zura stated: "Pornography addiction seems to have become a habit among our teenagers" (GBKSM5/Zura/04:02). Ann also agreed that this situation is increasingly worrying because it spreads rapidly across digital platforms, making it harder to limit its presence in teenagers' daily lives. "This issue is indeed becoming more contagious" (GBKSM3/Ann/02:37). It can be concluded that discussions about pornography and sexuality are becoming more common and are recognized by participants as a new norm and a pressing issue, as they have significantly altered teenagers' views on sexuality.

### 3.2. Challenges in counseling adolescent sexual issues

The thematic analysis of the interview results revealed that counseling teachers face several challenges when conducting counseling sessions on sensitive sexual issues. These challenges include (a) lack of readiness; (b) low counselor self-efficacy; (c) lack of exposure and training; (d) absence of specific interventions; (e) counselors' attitudes and personalities; and (f) lack of collaborative support.

#### 3.2.1. Lack of readiness

The findings of this study provide a clear picture that the readiness of the counsellor is a crucial factor in pornography addiction counseling, which affects the effectiveness of the session and the overall therapeutic relationship with the client, as stated by Wani: "the readiness of the counsellor is critical; otherwise, it would be difficult for us to help these children" (GBKSM6/Wani/27:32). However, the findings of the research show that almost all participants reported a lack of readiness of the counsellor when conducting pornography addiction counseling sessions. This experience of unpreparedness was shared by several participants, such as "In terms of readiness, we are not prepared and less confident when we accept such issues, because it is like I accept this issue but it is a female student, so I pass it to a female friend from the same unit to handle it" (GBKSM2/Amir/06:37). In addition, "Yes, that is true. Sometimes we feel ready, but when faced with an issue in a new session, we feel unprepared." (GBKSM4/Yati/21:24).

The same opinion was also given by Ina: "I think in this pornography case, the counselor is not prepared" (GBKSM1/Ina/25:27). In line with this statement, Zura also thought "in fact, many counselors today are still shy about saying sexual words, so I think many are still not prepared" (GBKSM5/Zura/22:38). She made this statement on the basis of her perception of a counselor's ability to use sexual vocabulary as one indicator of their level of readiness to face challenges related to counseling pornography addiction. A similar statement was acknowledged "and not all counselors are prepared to discuss this issue, as I said earlier, this issue is quite sensitive" (GBKSM7/Ila/15:55). In short, when counselors can use appropriate sexual language, it reflects their comfort with the topic and their ability to create an open and nonjudgmental environment for clients.

On the other hand, Wani said that, regardless of the reason given, the counselor must try to be prepared, "there may be those who try to reject issues such as sexual or pornography when they are present in the session, but as counselors, I feel we need to be prepared anytime, anywhere, and for any problem. Try to settle the problem; the counseling session will try to help even if it may not be maximal" (GBKSM6/Wani/19:37). This is because the feeling of not being prepared can hinder the effectiveness of the counseling session and can harm the therapeutic relationship. This statement is supported by the statement of Ann, who found that there are still counselors who try to help clients even though they feel less prepared "but if we ask about the readiness of other counselors who have not had any intervention, it seems that they are less prepared because regarding to sexual issues, they seem to panic, but they say they do what they can because that is all the knowledge I have" (GBKSM3/Ann/36:12). Therefore, counselors need to be well prepared, as it affects the dynamics of the counseling session as a whole.

#### 3.2.2. Low counselor self-efficacy

Counselors frequently voiced concerns regarding their low sense of self-efficacy in handling pornography and sexual addiction issues. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's confidence in his or her ability to perform a task successfully or achieve a goal in a particular situation. The concept of self-efficacy in this study focuses on confidence in the skills and strategies needed by counsellors to achieve objectives in handling pornography addiction issues. The research findings prove that the self-efficacy of counselors significantly influences the central theme, namely, their willingness to engage in sensitive sessions such as pornography and sexual addiction, as evidenced by the statements "counselors' self-confidence also influences their willingness to handle cases like this" (GBKSM1/Ina/23:03) and "the fact that they were not ready was actually because the counselors themselves lacked self-confidence in handling this issue" (GBKSM7/Ila/15:55).

In the context of basic counseling skills, counselors may have high self-confidence but not the same level of self-efficacy when dealing with specific issues, such as pornography and sexual addiction. Therefore, although the two concepts are

interrelated, self-efficacy is more specific to the ability to handle particular tasks effectively. This is clearly illustrated through the following GBKSM, who shared. *"I mean, maybe everyone is confident, but we do not know how effective it is. Is individual counseling without specific interventions effective for solving all cases or changing student behavior? I do not think all counselors believe in its ability"* (GBKSM3/Ann/35:41).

This statement echoes the views expressed by Wani, who emphasized that, as certified counselors, counseling teachers are usually committed to managing various cases, including sensitive and complex cases such as pornography addiction cases. However, they may struggle with feelings of insecurity about being effective due to a lack of experience and specific skills. *"There are cases, and they are increasing, but I feel like this counseling teacher, as I mentioned earlier; when there is any issue, the counsellor will do his best to handle the session, but owing to the lack of experience and skills of the counsellor, he does not feel confident that he will be effective in handling the case"* (GBKSM6/Wani/23:27).

In this regard, other GBKSMs also gave similar views about their own experiences regarding confidence in their ability to handle pornography addiction counseling sessions, such as the following excerpts: i) *"We are less confident when we handle issues like that"* (GBKSM2/Amir/06:37), ii) *"That is why, when we want to talk about confidence, we often feel very unsure about handling this addiction case"* (GBKSM4/Yati/18:23). Overall, self-efficacy is essential for counselors involved with pornography addiction issues because it influences their willingness to engage in building therapeutic relationships that promote healing in clients involved with this issue. Several of the GBKSM statements above underscore the importance of exposure and ongoing training to increase counselors' confidence in managing challenging cases like this.

### 3.2.3. Lack of exposure and training

Counselors also described having limited exposure to and training in programs that improve their skills, confidence, and readiness in providing practical assistance to clients with sexual issues. All the participants acknowledged that the counselors' unpreparedness in handling this case stemmed from a lack of confidence in their skills, which was influenced by insufficient exposure and training. The following are counsellors' views on the lack of exposure and training received by counselling teachers. Based on Amir's experience, he often discusses with other guidance and counseling teachers in finding an appropriate approach to address this issue *"to be honest, we usually discuss with other GBKs to find an appropriate way because school counsellors like us lack exposure and preparation to deal with these issues"* (GBKSM2/Amir/07:13) because, according to him, people always think that schools address only ordinary issues such as attendance and truancy *"after all, most people think that this school has ordinary issues such as attendance, truancy and others, when in fact this case could be more challenging, but we do not have enough exposure or resources to deal with all the cases that exist"* (GBKSM2/Amir/09:39).

Furthermore, he emphasized the lack of specific training available: *"Exposure is truly lacking for the issue of pornography addiction and sexual behavior; there is no specific training"* (GBKSM2/Amir/11:19), especially the training provided by the ministry. As a result, the counseling teachers under the Ministry of Education have to find the necessary training themselves *"as far as I know, there is no training from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Education's guidance and counseling unit relies heavily on their own initiative; if they want to learn, they have to find it themselves"* (GBKSM2/Amir/13:24). A similar statement was also given by Ila: *"From what I know such a course is not provided very often, maybe once a year or so, but this is also a course in the form of awareness talks only, that too was the initiative of guidance and counseling teachers themselves who planned the program"* (GBKSM7/Ila/15:11). Yati also demonstrated the courage to give an honest opinion regarding the lack of specific training provided to counseling teachers on the basis of her and her friends' experiences, stating *"I have never gone to any courses or workshops related to this issue"* (GBKSM4/Yati/16:31). Several other participants also firmly stated that the Ministry of Education did not provide specific training or exposure, but they admitted to having attended general awareness programs related to this issue. The statement can be referred to in the following brief scenario. *"It seems that there are no sexually related courses provided; there are many mental health ones. However, it appears that there are programs similar to this exposure for counseling teachers, but they are generally integrated into other interventions rather than being specifically targeted"* (GBKSM6/Wani/13:27).

The statement regarding the lack of specific training focused on pornography and sexual issues was also stated by Zura: *"Hmm, as far as I remember, there was no specific course. Nevertheless, during my service, I have attended such seminars. For example, awareness related to pornography or sexual issues, I have attended seminars like this three times, but few"* (GBKSM5/Zura/25:08). A similar statement also came from Ina and Ann, who stated *"I have never attended an intervention course, but only exposure workshops"* (GBKSM/Ina/06:00): *"If the training is teaching specifically about this issue, we do not have to take the initiative ourselves. However, in regard to intervention in general, the district education office has given briefings to teachers"* (GBKSM3/Ann/20:43). Therefore, it can be concluded that counseling teachers do not receive adequate training in sexual cases. As a result, counselors lack essential skills and fail to address problems effectively. Furthermore, without proper training, counselors may not be able to provide appropriate interventions, which impacts the quality of guidance and support provided to students. Therefore, exposure and specific training related to pornography and sexual addiction issues are highly expected by counseling teachers because they need to master specific interventions and strategies to help students deal with these issues effectively. By improving their skills, counselors will be better equipped to address the complexity of these issues and have a more meaningful impact on the lives of their students.

### 3.2.4. Lack of specific interventions

Another common concern expressed by counselors was the inadequacy of specific interventions. Specific interventions are crucial for ensuring that counselors can provide effective treatment to support clients in their recovery journey. As previously described, counselors' willingness to help clients is strongly influenced by the level of skills they possess, one of which is mastering specific interventions that can provide counselors with a deeper understanding of issues related to pornography addiction, including the causes, effects, and dynamics of the best treatment. However, the analysis of this qualitative study's findings revealed that almost all counselors lacked training in specific sexuality-related interventions provided by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE). Amir admitted that he had never heard of any guidelines or particular interventions provided by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) regarding pornography addiction, "*exposure is lacking for issues of pornography addiction and sexual behavior, there is no specific training*". (GBKSM2/Amir/11:19), and he describes this as the reality that many counselors do not have specific techniques that they can use in this treatment process, "*we truly do not have specific techniques that we can use*" (GBKSM2/Amir/08:48). As a result, they must take the initiative to explore various approaches themselves, even if they are not sure of their effectiveness.

Moreover, the statement from Ann also shows that there is no specific intervention provided by the District Education Office (PPD) to address this issue, except for general interventions: "*never, it is just a general intervention, so I have to look for myself and I have to pay for a specific intervention*" (GBKSM3/Ann/21:59). Hence, counsellors need to take the initiative to seek knowledge on their own. The same opinion was expressed by Yati: "*there has never been a specific intervention training and I think my friends have never done it either, unless they go and pay it by themselves, thus far it has only been general workshops to provide awareness exposure like that, and there is nothing specific, only general*" (GBKSM5/Yati/25:23, 26:20). This shows the need for school counsellors to be proactive in their professional development in addition to expecting the support offered by PPD through specific guidance, as expressed by Ila: "*For a specific intervention, counsellors themselves have to be good at finding information, I mean their initiative to increase their knowledge, and their skills usually*" (GBKSM7/Ila/15:11).

Therefore, it can be concluded that school counselors require specific intervention guidelines to assist them in managing sexual sessions, enabling them to provide effective and focused treatment. Without these guidelines, they risk providing less satisfactory services in their clients' recovery owing to a lack of a clear understanding of relevant procedures. This concern was expressed by Wani: "*Because they do not know the case procedures, they will not know how to handle them. I want to say that counselors need to know the case handling procedures because each case is different; we need to know the basic procedures, for example, mental health or addiction, where do we refer to a specialist, and the documents that need to be prepared*" (GBKSM6/Wani/36:35). On the other hand, Ina also expressed "*that is why counselors need to master techniques*" (GBKSM1/Ina/09:26) because otherwise, "*around here counselors are back to being conservative counselors, going back to the old method of just talking, that is why we have reached the point where we need tools*" (GBKSM1/Ina/12:24). In short, specific guidelines can help counselors navigate these challenges more effectively and provide better support for their clients. Conversely, the absence of particular intervention guidelines highlights a significant gap in counselor professional development in this critical area.

### 3.2.5. Counselors' attitudes and personalities

The findings also reveal the importance of counselors' attitudes and personalities. All the participants agreed that the attitudes and personalities of counselors strongly influence their willingness to manage pornography addiction cases. Several codes that reflect this point are described in the following explanation. First, counselors highlighted the need for responsibility and ethical commitment, as expressed by Ina: "*There are counselors who lack trust, who do not see the task of helping clients as their responsibility. When we do it carelessly, we will see that there is a real case. Nevertheless, the counselors will say there is no case because they do not want to take responsibility, they do not want to be bothered and feel that it is their responsibility to help the client*" (GBKSM1/Ina/24:57). She made this statement because she saw that there are still some counselors who do not respond to the problems faced by clients as their primary responsibility, especially those involving issues that they consider sensitive. She also stated that maintaining counseling ethics is essential for maintaining client trustworthiness, especially when sensitive topics such as sexuality are considered, "*it depends on the counselor's personality and trust in the counselor because these are sensitive cases, so we have to be good at it, counselors have to implement ethics*" (GBKSM1/Ina/23:02). This means that trustworthiness is an essential element that counselors must respect as part of their professional behavior.

Next, the counselors highlighted the value of the counselor's motivation and personal initiative. Amir and Ann believed that the counselor's motivation and perseverance play essential roles in their willingness to attend courses or workshops related to sexual issues, even if they have to pay for it themselves "*yes, that is right, because it all depends on the personality of the counselors themselves; if the counselors are good and diligent, they will attend the workshop even if it is not funded, but if the counselors are average, they will not make any effort on their own*" (GBKSM2/Amir/13:44) and "*the counselors must have a high level of curiosity, for example, in this case they will ask where do I solve this case? I have to study. If curiosity is high, even*

if PPD does not provide any training, we will find it ourselves, even if we have to pay for the course; if not, search on Google. TikTok, or Facebook, we have all kinds of resources now" (GBKSM3/Ann/38:55). Therefore, it is understandable that a high level of curiosity is essential for counselors because it shows the counselor's desire to improve their skills for the benefit of their clients, even though the ministry provides no formal training. Ann added, "That is why curiosity is important so that we have the desire to learn, even though we are two days away from retirement" (GBKSM3/Ann/39:59). Another counsellor said, "Maybe I have never attended a course, but I learn from every issue I handle" (GBKSM5/Zura/27:05), which means that she still tries to gain knowledge and improve her skills through direct experience with every case she faces.

However, in another statement, Ila said, "In my opinion, not all counselors have the initiative to seek out knowledge or additional skills themselves. Not all counselors are working toward this goal, and not all counselors are willing to discuss this issue. As I said earlier, this issue is quite sensitive. So when you say lack of knowledge, it means that you are not prepared" (GBKMS7/Ila/15:55), which shows that the lack of initiative in seeking out knowledge and additional skills also contributes to the low level of readiness among counselors. In this regard, Yati stated that continuous self-improvement is also crucial for keeping up with new challenges. She opined, "In my opinion, we need to upgrade ourselves, because like people say, if boy runs fast, the teacher has to run twice as fast as the boy, right?" (GBKSM4/Yati/29:51). On the basis of her statement, we can conclude that counselors need to continuously improve their skills and knowledge by trying to keep up with the latest issues affecting adolescents because changes in adolescent behavior patterns require counselors to strengthen their competencies to remain relevant to current challenges. Therefore, the lack of specific competencies regarding pornography can significantly impact the counselor's ability to discuss sexuality issues during counseling sessions confidently.

Counselors who lack expertise will feel uncomfortable and unsure about how to handle sensitive topics, making them hesitant and even refusing to delve into the discussion on this topic, as acknowledged by Wani: "Yes, that's right, there may be those who try to reject issues like sexual or pornography when they come up in the session" (GBKSM6/Wani/19:37). Another participant also stated, "for me, the readiness of the counsellor must depend on his competence, his experience, and his courage. No need to cover up, things like this need to be said directly, Let's not cover up sexual words with students and be honest about how we speak. However, in reality, many counselors today are still shy about saying sexual words, so I think many are still not prepared" (GBKMS5/Zura/22:38). According to her statement, although experience is an added value, the readiness to handle sensitive cases is more influenced by the courage and self-confidence of counselors.

### 3.2.6. Lack of collaborative support

The final finding that illustrates the challenges in counseling adolescent sexual issues is the lack of collaborative and systematic support. In this context, collaborative and systematic support refers to the structured support provided by the responsible party to help counselors address the challenges of counseling pornography and sexual issues. The majority of participants highlighted the lack of official support from the Ministry of Education. There have been difficulties in obtaining exposure, training, and specific interventions related to this issue. The validity of this point is evidenced by the statements made by each school counselor below.

In a: "I think apart from training, the monitoring factor is very important. Currently, there is a lack of monitoring by school counselors; even within schools, administrators do not know what counselors' duties are. The same is true for the current PPD, who is in charge of the counselor's student affairs section; they do not just handle counseling; they handle all sorts of things. It is enough that we lack monitoring; we lack knowledge; no one wants to see it. This means that we carry out our duties on the basis of our Trust. Some counselors lack trust; they do not see the task of helping clients as their responsibility". She also emphasized the lack of monitoring provided that "there is no monitoring, causing many counselors not to carry out their duties, even though issues involving sexual matters are already serious and have reached a chronic level" (GBKSM1/Ina/24:23 & 25:27).

Amir: "In the counseling section, there is a little bit of exposure, but not much. That also depends on the school counselors, whether they want to attend or not; it is up to them because it is not mandatory." For specific guidelines or interventions from the Ministry of Education itself, I haven't heard anything yet, and I'm not sure about other regions. What I have heard is from outside, not from the Ministry of Education" (GBKSM2/Amir/04:52 & 05:50).

Ann: "This is exactly what I think, it is just that few counselors have the initiative to learn, PPD does not provide support with up-to-date exposure and training, so what's the point?" (GBKSM3/Ann/47:18).

Yati: "For drug abuse training, it is all common, and it appears that many counselors have received training about it, right, why can't we do it for sexual issues? Wherever we go, sexual issues are happening. Do not compare it to the past when it might still be difficult to find problems like this, but today it is different; with technological advancements, our teenagers are also exposed to the risk of new problems" (GBKSM4/Yati/27:57).

Zura: "In conclusion, the Ministry of Education needs to increase the capacity of counselors to handle cases of pornography or sexual issues, as all of this is very important to keep our teenagers safe. If this issue is not taken seriously, it will lead to a series of other bigger issues, such as the issue of adultery, having children out of wedlock, and so on" (GBKSM5/Zura/35:42).

Wani: *"The workshop is always done by KPM and PPD, more about rebuilding self-motivation, increasing people's awareness about using gadgets, that is what they say, but it never involves sexual or pornography issues"* (GBKSM6/Wani/14:44).

It is evident that counsellors in school settings very much need support from all parties, as they are encountering a rising number of sexual and pornography addiction issues: *"Yes, throughout my service, we were rarely given special training, too little, we had to find suitable programs ourselves because we felt there was a need there, even though there are some intensive programs within the psychology course, but that is the problem. Sometimes we ask for it, but it is hard to get it because they have a certain quota, so school counselors may not be a priority for other departments"* (GBKSM1 11:22). Hence, the absence of cooperation and support from relevant stakeholders can have negative consequences for counselors' willingness to manage this issue effectively.

### 3.3. The impact of unpreparedness on counselor psychology

Based on the basis of the interview transcripts of the seven school counselors involved, this study identified several impacts of unpreparedness in conducting pornography and sexual addiction counseling on counselors' psychological well-being. The following detailed discussion highlights the three most reported impacts: (a) panic; (b) burnout and stress; and (c) fear.

#### 3.3.1. Panic

One of the most commonly reported impacts by counselors is the feeling of panic, as explained by Amir: *"Sometimes we do not know what to do, we panic when this issue arises, because there is a lack of training and exposure"* (GBKSM2/Amir/12:44). Ila also expressed the same feeling *"from my perspective, actually, sometimes when we get an issue like this we panic too because it used to be a unique case, issues like this rarely arose in the past compared to now"* (GBKSM7/Ila/16:19). The feeling of panic and uncertainty was also shared by another counselor: *"In my experience, like in this recent case, I also feel like you mentioned, I panicked and asked myself what to do? Because at that time the client was talking about something severe and something beyond our comprehension and at that time I could not even think, I admit I panicked"* (GBKSM4/Zura/18:59). Similarly, Wani admitted, *"as I mentioned earlier, they may feel shocked or panicked and unsure about handling cases like this. However, I am sure they will still try their best, if they decide to ask questions, that is good so that we can help each other out a little"* (GBKSM6/Wani/20:14). Therefore, it can be concluded that unpreparedness in conducting pornography and sexual addiction counseling significantly contributes to feelings of panic and uncertainty among counselors.

#### 3.3.2. Burnout and stress

One of the participants reported experiencing burnout and stress due to the increase in critical issues among students *"counselors are becoming burnout and stressed because they are unable to deal with the increasing critical issues among students, they only deliver lectures and do not engage any specific intervention and yes, there is a need to increase training and exposure so that counselors are more confident and prepared and do not panic when faced with sexual issues, because they are too afraid of sensitive issues"* (GBKSM3/Ann/47:18 & 48:15). Her statement illustrates the pressure that School counsellors feel because there is no clear, specific, and sufficient intervention strategy to address complex situations when sensitive issues are presented in the sessions.

#### 3.3.3. Fear

The research findings also show the emergence of expressions of fear by school counsellors when listening to the confession of a client who has a sexual misconduct problem. As Yati stated, *"Because I was afraid of the confession of a client who engaged in sodomy in the school area. Therefore, I had to invite a friend to discuss what is the next step that we need to do"* (GBKSM4/Yati/18:59). In another statement, Ina also expressed concerns regarding the broader implications of dealing with pornography addiction cases *"to be honest, sometimes we are afraid of this issue, because it involves a chain of cases. When one case emerges, others follow, like a tsunami wave"* (GBKSM1/Ina/13:38), she also added *"as a counselor who is faced with this issue, I was thinking this is completely wrong, how can we help these students who are addicted with an environment that is not supportive"* (GBKSM1/Ina/17:34). Overall, it is reasonable that counselors express fear and anxiety in dealing with cases of pornography and sexual addiction because these issues often occur in succession and can have serious consequences for students.

## 4. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of evidence affirming that counselors do not see themselves as sufficiently prepared to manage adolescent clients with sexual problems. In the context of this study, counselors' readiness refers to their readiness to address, discuss, and organize topics related to sexuality, sexual health, and the effects of pornography on individuals effectively. Analysis of the interview data revealed that all the research participants (7/7) stated that, along with their school counselor colleagues, they felt unprepared to address the issue. This statement is evident in one

of the *counselors' statements*: "Not all counselors are prepared to discuss this issue. As I said earlier, this issue is quite sensitive" (GBKSM7/Ila/15:55). Therefore, it can be inferred that there are still school counselors (GBKSM) who are not prepared to address sexuality issues with adolescent clients, which is attributable to several counseling challenges that they face, including (i) their low self-efficacy regarding sexual issues, particularly pornography addiction; (ii) a lack of exposure and training received; (iii) a lack of specific interventions that can be used as a guide; (iv) the influence of the counselor's attitude and personality; and (v) a lack of systematic support.

On the basis of the first theme of this study's findings, counselors' reluctance to address sexual issues in schools stems mainly from their low self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1994), self-efficacy is defined as a person's belief in their ability to achieve desired performance levels, and it plays a crucial role in initiating and sustaining human behavior. In this context, counselor self-efficacy refers to counselors' confidence in their ability to perform effectively in their counseling roles. Additionally, previous studies conducted in various populations have shown that counselors tend to avoid discussing sexual issues with clients because of their low self-efficacy. For example, Nicoletta's (2023) research revealed that 94% of psychotherapists rarely addressed sexuality in therapy and struggled to discuss the topic even when clients were present. Similar findings have been reported by several other studies (Bloom et al., 2016; Cruz et al., 2017; Moore, 2018; Zeglin et al., 2019; Mercer & Dermer, 2020; Miller & Byers, 2020). In conclusion, low counselor self-efficacy remains a significant concern in both this research and previous studies.

One of the main reasons for low self-efficacy and preparedness among counselors is inadequate training in sexual education. As highlighted by Alavi-Arjas et al. (2024), many counselors feel unprepared to address sexual and reproductive issues due to insufficient training during their education. This study's findings confirm those of previous studies, which show that counselors often lack confidence and readiness to handle pornography addiction issues because of their limited skills and knowledge (Harris & Hays, 2008; Miller & Byers, 2008; Bloom et al., 2016; Thompson, 2021). This makes addiction and sexuality counseling an important part of counselor education (McGrath et al., 2020; Litam & Speciale, 2021; Dupkoski et al., 2021; Emelianchik et al., 2022). In conclusion, the results support the Hierarchy of Readiness Theory (Thompson, 2004), which suggests that targeted training can help develop counselors' skills and understanding, increasing their confidence and willingness to address complex topics. Therefore, it is vital to increase awareness and offer more specialized training for counselors on this subject, enabling them to approach it more effectively and confidently (Litam & Speciale, 2021; Dupkoski et al., 2021; Buehler, 2021; Thompson, 2021; Emond et al., 2021; Gregory, 2022; Emelianchik et al., 2022; Cardona et al., 2022; Abbott et al., 2022; Rodenkirch, 2023; Nicoletta, 2023; Blausey, 2023).

Furthermore, research participants reported a lack of specific interventions. This finding emphasizes the need for targeted interventions for counselors in Malaysia to address pornography and sexual issues, as previously noted by Suhaime et al. (2023). However, the development of these interventions is hindered by limited resources adapted to the local context. Tan et al. (2022) suggested that this limitation stems from societal norms that discourage open discussion about pornography and sexual behavior. This contributes to the fear of judgment from the community (Razak & Amat, 2024) and fosters limited community support (Huang et al., 2020). Nevertheless, efforts to develop interventions are ongoing among a few experts, such as Ali et al. (2024) development of Islamic Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (iCBT) to assist clients struggling with pornography addiction. In summary, having clear guidelines would help counselors address these challenges more effectively and provide better support to their clients. Conversely, the lack of specific intervention guidelines reveals a significant gap in counselors' professional development in this critical area.

Another challenge to effective sexual or pornography counseling lies in the attitudes held by the counselors themselves. Goli et al. (2022) reported that many school counselors see discussing sexuality, especially with adolescents, as unnecessary and risky due to potential safety issues, ethical dilemmas, and confusion (Avci & Yildirim, 2023), along with discomfort, trust, and other treatment challenges (Giordano et al., 2022). More specifically, Sparks (2020) explained that the words "unprepared" and "confused" were used by research participants to describe their first encounters with clients struggling with problematic pornography use. Other researchers believe that counselors' personal beliefs and attitudes about sex hinder their ability to work with clients on sexuality issues, particularly in conservative countries such as Malaysia, where most counselors are raised in an Eastern cultural environment (Muhamad et al., 2021; Ying et al., 2022; Kamaludin et al., 2022). A study conducted by Zakariah & Baharuddin (2011) explored the challenges faced by counselors in Malaysia regarding cybersex addiction and reported that, despite the increasing number of cases, studies on this topic remain limited, mainly because it is regarded as a sensitive issue and is rarely discussed openly, especially in the cultural and religious context of Malaysia, where it is considered taboo. Therefore, it is clear that the key element for effective therapy is unconditional positive regard, where counselors need to set aside biased feelings and reconcile their beliefs with the reality of the client's experience (Rogers, 1951). Furthermore, counselors' personal beliefs and biases can significantly influence their willingness to engage with clients on topics such as pornography addiction and sexuality (Bloom et al., 2016; Blount et al., 2017; Sparks et al., 2020; Droubay & Butters, 2020; Grubbs et al., 2020). As a result, an attitude of openness and transparent acceptance by counselors is essential to facilitate discussions on these sensitive topics, helping clients explore their values and assumptions, which can lead to greater self-awareness and healthier attitudes toward sexuality.

Finally, the findings of this qualitative study emphasize the importance of collaborative support and cooperation as key components in helping counselors provide effective services for adolescents dealing with pornography and sexual addiction. This finding aligns with the results of a study conducted by Ramdani et al. (2022), which called for collaborative efforts involving school counselors, community organizations, and other professionals. They believe that guidance and counseling services offered by school counselors cannot be provided alone but require collaboration within a cooperative framework, allowing counselors to utilize additional resources to support their service delivery. Furthermore, Cavaiola et al. (2021) argued that not all groups in society trust formal treatment to address this issue, and they suggested that counselors consider collaborating with community leaders or other agencies with similar responsibilities. In the context of this research's findings, the communities and agencies mentioned by the participants include i. the Ministry of Education Malaysia (KPM), ii. Ministry of Communications and Multimedia Malaysia (KKMM), iii. Ministry of Health Malaysia (KKM), iv. Rehabilitation centers or psychological clinics for adolescents, v. parents and families, and finally, vi. Teachers and school administration.

Importantly, the lack of readiness among counselors to address issues related to pornography and sexuality not only harms clients (Bloom et al., 2016; Sparks, 2020; Gibbons et al., 2020; Litam & Speciale, 2021; Markert et al., 2023) but also has several negative effects on counselors themselves, as shown in the qualitative findings of this study. The interview results revealed that school counselors often experienced feelings of panic, burnout, and fear when dealing with this issue. These findings support the outcomes of Thompson's (2021) research, which identified a consistent relationship between the anxiety experienced by counselors and their self-efficacy regarding sexual counseling interventions, showing that lower anxiety levels are linked to higher self-efficacy. Similarly, Bryant (2024) examined how education and therapy readiness impact perceived burnout among counselors and reported that higher levels of education and therapy readiness are negatively associated with burnout, suggesting that more prepared counselors are less likely to burn out. Conversely, insufficient training and therapy readiness can lead to increased burnout, as counselors struggle to meet the demands of their roles. In summary, counselors' lack of preparation in managing these issues increases pressure on them, ultimately affecting both the quality of counseling interventions and their mental health.

In conclusion, this study has several important implications for the field of counseling and counselors themselves. Specifically, this research highlights the need for more comprehensive professional training for counselors in addressing sexual and pornography issues. By enhancing counselors' understanding and skills in this area, they will be better equipped to help clients overcome pornography addiction. Additionally, this study explains that the stigma surrounding sexual issues often prevents counselors from providing effective services. Therefore, changing counselors' attitudes toward this issue can improve the quality of the counseling services offered to individuals struggling with this problem.

## 5. Conclusions

This study aims to examine how prepared Malaysian school counselors intervene in adolescent pornography addiction cases and the various challenges they face in doing so. Although school counselors generally possess basic counseling knowledge and skills, they face significant difficulties in providing effective support for adolescent sexual issues. These challenges are due mainly to limited training, a lack of specific intervention methods and support, and social stigma surrounding sexuality topics. This study emphasizes the need for more comprehensive counseling training focused on pornography and adolescent sexuality in Malaysia's counseling education programs and highlights the importance of collaborative support from all involved stakeholders.

Although this study offers valuable insights into the current state of school counselor preparedness, several limitations should be considered. First, the study involved only a sample of school counselors from a specific area in Malaysia, which may not be representative of the situation across the country. Additionally, it focuses solely on counselors' perceptions without considering the views of other stakeholders, such as students, parents, or teachers, who also play crucial roles in addressing this issue. Future research should expand on this study by including a larger, more diverse sample and incorporating perspectives from other involved parties. Moreover, additional studies should evaluate the effectiveness of specific training and intervention programs that help counselors address issues related to pornography and adolescent sexuality.

Overall, the practical implications of this study help raise awareness of the urgent need to better support school counselors in handling the complexities of adolescent sexuality counseling. The findings provide valuable insights for educational policymakers and schools to develop more comprehensive policies and for counselors to receive the support they need to address this sensitive issue professionally. Finally, this study makes a significant contribution to the counseling field both in Malaysia and internationally by offering a deeper understanding of how prepared school counselors deal with pornography addiction.

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## 6. Declarations

### 6.1. Ethical considerations

This research adheres to the ethics principles established by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia, and was conducted carefully to minimize any harm or discomfort to participants. This study was ethically approved by the UKM Human Research Ethics Committee, with reference number UKM.FND.600-8/1/P88307.

### 6.2. Use of artificial intelligence (AI)

The authors declare that the generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools ChatGPT and Grammarly were used exclusively for language editing and grammatical improvement during the preparation of this manuscript. The use of AI did not influence the scientific content, study design, data analysis, data interpretation, results, or conclusions of the manuscript. Full responsibility for the content remains with the authors.

### 6.3. Conflict of Interest

The authors state that they have no potential conflicts of interest regarding the research, writing, or publication of this article.

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