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Association of Problematic Pornography Use with Anxiety and Depressive Symptoms Among College Students Aged 18–25 Years in Bengaluru, Karnataka: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract:
Problematic pornography use (PPU) refers to a pattern of pornography use that is experienced as difficult to control and is associated with distress or impairment in daily functioning. During the college years (18–25), young adults experience transitions in autonomy, identity, intimate relationships, academic demands, and digital life. This narrative review discusses how problematic pornography use may be associated with anxiety and depressive symptoms among college students in Bengaluru, Karnataka, drawing on existing literature. Research indicates that compulsive or dysregulated use, rather than occasional use alone, is more consistently linked with psychological distress, lower self-regulation, sleep difficulties, loneliness, shame, and relationship concerns. Anxiety and depression may both precede and follow problematic use, suggesting bidirectional associations rather than a single causal pathway. Studies from India on college populations have examined internet use, mental health, and help-seeking, while specific research on PPU and its association with anxiety and depression among students in Bengaluru remains limited. The article highlights practical roles for family support, peer support, college counsellors, educators, and social workers, and recommends further local research that respects cultural sensitivity, privacy, and ethical safeguards. This article is a narrative review of published sources and does not report original data collected from students. Any future empirical study should follow institutional ethical review and use validated, age-appropriate measures.

Keywords: problematic pornography use; pornography; anxiety; depression; college students; young adults; mental health; Bengaluru; Karnataka

1. Introduction

The transition to college between ages 18 and 25 years is marked by increased independence, new academic and career pressures, changing living arrangements, exploration of romantic and sexual identity, and extensive engagement with digital media. For many young adults, college represents the first experience of managing time, relationships, and personal values with less direct supervision from family. These experiences can support growth, but they may also involve uncertainty, stress, and

emotional vulnerability. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) describes mental health during this period as influenced by individual, relational, educational, and wider social factors.

1.1 Understanding Problematic Pornography Use

Problematic pornography use (PPU) is generally described as a pattern in which a person feels unable to control their use despite attempts to reduce it, spends excessive time thinking about or using pornography, continues use despite negative consequences, and experiences distress, guilt, or impairment in academic, social, or occupational functioning. It is important to distinguish frequency of use from problematic use. Some individuals may use pornography frequently without reporting distress, while others may use it less frequently but experience significant loss of control, preoccupation, and emotional consequences.

In the ICD-11, the World Health Organization includes Compulsive Sexual Behaviour Disorder (CSBD) under impulse control disorders, which may include problematic pornography use when the pattern is persistent, difficult to control, and causes marked distress or impairment (WHO, 2019). This diagnosis requires careful clinical assessment and should not be applied based solely on moral discomfort or frequency. In research settings, PPU is commonly measured using self-report scales that assess loss of control, craving, emotional dysregulation, and functional impact, rather than moral judgement about sexuality.

1.2 Why College Students Aged 18–25 Years in Bengaluru Matter

College students in Bengaluru represent a diverse group in terms of language, family background, migration history, economic resources, gender, sexual orientation, and exposure to urban life. Bengaluru is a major educational and technology hub, with students often living away from family for the first time, navigating hostel or shared accommodation, academic competition, and wide access to high-speed internet and smartphones. These conditions create both opportunities for learning and support, and risks such as sleep disruption, social isolation, academic stress, and difficulty seeking help for sensitive concerns.

Anxiety and depressive symptoms are among the most common mental health concerns reported by college students in India and globally. Anxiety may include persistent worry, restlessness, difficulty concentrating, and physical symptoms such as rapid heartbeat. Depressive symptoms may include low mood, loss of interest, fatigue, feelings of worthlessness, sleep and appetite changes, and difficulty engaging in daily activities. When problematic pornography use co-occurs with anxiety and depression, it may affect academic performance, relationships, self-esteem, and help-seeking. Understanding these associations in the local context of Bengaluru is important for developing appropriate, non-judgemental support services.

2. Theoretical Understanding

2.1 Self-Regulation and Compensatory Use

Several theoretical perspectives help explain why some individuals develop problematic patterns. Self-regulation models suggest that difficulties in managing impulses, emotions, and stress may contribute to repeated engagement in a behaviour despite negative consequences. When a person experiences anxiety,

loneliness, or low mood, pornography may be used as a short-term strategy to reduce distress or avoid difficult feelings. While this may provide temporary relief, it may not address the underlying concern and may create additional distress such as guilt, shame, or secrecy, which can maintain the cycle.
Brand et al. (2019) proposed the Interaction of Person-Affect-Cognition-Execution (I-PACE) model for understanding specific internet-use disorders, including problematic pornography use. The model emphasizes interactions between predisposing personal characteristics (such as impulsivity, coping style), affective responses (such as stress reactivity), cognitive processes (such as craving or attentional bias), and executive functioning (such as inhibitory control). This model is useful because it does not attribute problematic use to a single cause, but considers how individual vulnerability and situational triggers interact over time.

2.2 The Social Environment

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological approach explains development through the different environments in which a person lives. For college students, these include the immediate settings of home, classroom and peer group, hostel, as well as connections between family and college and wider cultural and social conditions. For example, a student's ability to manage stress may be affected not only by family support but also by the college's approach to mental health, the expectations of friends and the messages they encounter online. This approach is useful because it encourages researchers and practitioners to consider several influences together rather than blaming the individual.

2.3 Emotional Vulnerability and Mental Health

Rosenberg's (1965) work on self-image and Beck's (1976) cognitive model of depression highlight connections between beliefs about the self, emotional experiences, and behaviour. Negative self-beliefs such as "I am not in control" or "I am unworthy" may increase vulnerability to both anxiety and depression. Problematic pornography use may interact with these beliefs through processes such as rumination, shame, and perceived failure to meet personal standards. At the same time, anxiety and depression may reduce perceived control and increase reliance on avoidant coping. These relationships are likely bidirectional and influenced by other factors such as sleep, substance use, loneliness, and relationship quality.

These perspectives provide a broad framework for examining problematic pornography use and its association with anxiety and depressive symptoms among college students in Bengaluru. They do not suggest that every student will respond in the same way. Rather, they help identify the relationships and settings that may support or challenge a young adult's well-being.

3. Family Relationships and Problematic Use

Family is often the first setting in which young adults learn whether their feelings are heard, their efforts are valued and their mistakes can be discussed safely. During the college transition, students may seek more independence while still needing guidance and emotional support. Parents and caregivers can support well-being by listening carefully, showing affection, explaining expectations fairly and recognising effort as well as achievement. When affection appears to depend only on marks, awards or obedience, young adults may feel that their worth is conditional, which may affect help-seeking.

3.1 Communication and Expectations

Academic and career expectations can be especially important in families where education is seen as a pathway to stability and social mobility. Parents may encourage high achievement because they want their children to have good opportunities. However, expectations that do not take account of a student's interests, abilities or emotional needs can create pressure. A more helpful approach is to discuss goals together, break large goals into manageable steps and treat setbacks as opportunities to review the plan.

3.2 Family Diversity

Families differ in structure, language, income, work schedules and available support. Some students live with extended family; others have parents who work long hours or live elsewhere due to migration to Bengaluru. These differences should not be treated as proof of poor support. The important questions are whether the young adult has dependable relationships, feels safe and has someone to approach when difficulties arise.

4. Peer Relationships, Belonging and Digital Culture

Friendships can give college students a sense of acceptance and belonging. Positive peer relationships can help students feel that their opinions matter and that they are not alone when facing difficulties. In Bengaluru's urban context, students are exposed to diverse peer cultures and to extensive online content. Online environments often present idealised images of relationships, success, appearance, and sexual performance, which may increase social comparison.

4.1 Social Exclusion and Online Pressure

Bullying, teasing, name-calling, spreading rumours and deliberate exclusion, both offline and online, can affect how young adults view themselves. Online harassment may be particularly difficult because hurtful content can be shared widely or remain visible after college hours. Students may also fear that reporting concerns about pornography use will lead to judgement. Colleges should have clear procedures for reporting harassment, protecting students and following up on concerns. Peer leaders and classroom discussions can encourage respect and inclusion, but they should complement—not replace—adult responsibility.

5. College Climate, Teachers and Academic Pressure

College is a major part of young adults' daily lives. The college environment includes teacher-student relationships, classroom rules, safety, peer interactions, opportunities to participate and the way achievement is recognised. A student who feels respected and supported may be more willing to seek help and learn from mistakes.

Podiya, Navaneetham, and Bhola (2025), in a systematic review of research on Indian school-going adolescents, reported that positive school-climate features—including supportive teacher relationships, peer support, connectedness and school belonging—were associated with better emotional health and academic outcomes. The review supports the value of environments where students feel safe and respected.

5.1 Marks, Competition and Self-Worth

Academic performance can become closely connected with self-concept and mental health when students receive the message that marks determine their value. In competitive settings, students may compare results and future plans with classmates. A low score can then feel like a judgement of the whole person rather than information about a particular assessment. Persistent pressure may also affect sleep, mood, motivation and willingness to try new tasks. Feedback should describe what the student did well, what needs improvement and what step can be taken next.

6. Social Media, Body Image and Digital Comparison

Digital platforms allow students to communicate, learn, create and maintain friendships. At the same time, social media and pornography often present selected images of appearance, popularity, and sexual performance. Because these posts usually show only part of a person's life or unrealistic scripts, comparing one's everyday experiences with them can produce an unfair picture of what others are really experiencing. Its influence may depend on the content viewed, time spent online, existing self-confidence, peer culture and whether online experiences are supportive or harmful.

7. Urban Experiences and the Context of Bengaluru

Urban Bengaluru includes students from varied social, linguistic, cultural and economic backgrounds. Colleges may differ in curriculum, fee structure, language of instruction, facilities, counselling access and expectations for academic performance. Students may travel different distances to college and may have different levels of access to tuition, sports, arts and digital devices. It is therefore important not to assume that all colleges or all students in Bengaluru share the same experiences.

Urban settings can offer educational opportunities, extracurricular activities and access to services. They can also involve long travel times, busy schedules, competition for academic places and unequal access to resources. Some students may experience pressure to speak a particular language, maintain certain appearance standards or pursue careers that are valued by family or society. These conditions can influence how students understand their abilities and place in the world.

8. Other Factors: Personality, Resources and Life Events

Psychosocial influences interact with each other. A student who experiences academic stress may cope more easily when they have a trusted friend, a supportive teacher and a calm place to study. The same academic challenge may feel much more difficult when the student is also facing loneliness, bullying or financial stress. A single event rarely explains a person's whole mental health. It is more useful to understand patterns of experience over time.

9. Implications for Parents, Colleges and Social Workers

9.1 Support for Parents and Caregivers

Parents can encourage healthy development by listening without immediate judgement, recognising effort and improvement, and asking young adults what they think before offering advice. Comparisons should be avoided. When discussing academic performance or personal concerns, it is useful to focus on specific strategies rather than personal labels.

9.2 College-Based Support

Colleges can promote well-being through anti-bullying procedures, inclusive classroom practices, fair discipline, accessible counselling and activities that recognise different abilities. Colleges should communicate that asking for help is a responsible action, not a sign of weakness. A supportive college climate requires cooperation among students, teachers, college leaders, parents and support staff.

9.3 Role of Social Workers and Counsellors

Social workers can help identify psychosocial concerns affecting students, such as academic stress, loneliness, relationship difficulties, sleep problems, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and dysregulated pornography use. They can offer individual support, facilitate group sessions on self-awareness and coping, guide parents and coordinate with teachers where appropriate. Referral to a qualified mental health professional may be needed when distress is persistent, severe or interferes with daily life.

10. Research Approach and Ethical Considerations for a Cross-Sectional Study in Bengaluru

A focused study on the association of problematic pornography use with anxiety and depressive symptoms among college students aged 18–25 years in Bengaluru could use a clear research question and an appropriate cross-sectional design. The research question could be: Is problematic pornography use associated with anxiety and depressive symptoms among college students aged 18–25 years in Bengaluru, after adjusting for relevant confounders such as sleep quality, perceived stress, loneliness, and social support? A cross-sectional study may examine patterns between problematic pornography use and anxiety and depressive symptoms at one point in time.

Researchers should define the target population (college students aged 18–25 years enrolled in colleges in Bengaluru), inclusion and exclusion criteria, and key terms before collecting data. Measures must be standardised, validated for young adults, and suitable for the language context. Suggested measures may include: Brief Pornography Screen (BPS) or Problematic Pornography Use Scale (PPUS) for PPU, GAD-7 for anxiety, PHQ-9 for depression, and additional scales for perceived stress, loneliness, sleep quality, and social support, used according to licensing conditions. Sampling should aim for representativeness, with stratified random sampling across types of colleges, streams, and gender. Sample size should be calculated based on expected prevalence. Data collection should ensure privacy and anonymity. Analysis may include descriptive statistics, correlation, and multivariable regression. Because data are collected at one point in time, results should be interpreted as associations, not proof of causation.

10.1 Ethics When Researching Sensitive Topics

Research involving sexuality and mental health among college students requires careful attention to consent, privacy, voluntary participation, and possible distress. Permission from college authorities does not replace the need to follow institutional ethical review board procedures and obtain informed consent from participants, who are adults aged 18 years and above. Students should understand that participation is voluntary, that they may skip any question they find uncomfortable, that they may withdraw at any time without penalty, and that choosing not to participate will not affect their marks or relationship with the college. A distress protocol should be in place: information about counselling services, helplines, and referral options should be provided to all participants.

10.2 Limits of the Present Article

This article is a narrative review, not a systematic review or an empirical study. It summarises selected published sources and applies them to the proposed Bengaluru research context. It does not claim to represent every relevant study, and it does not present new data from college students in Bengaluru. Its discussion identifies themes and questions for local research; it should not be read as proof that all college students in Bengaluru experience the same patterns or that problematic pornography use causes anxiety or depression.

11. Research Gaps and Recommendations

The sources reviewed offer useful but different kinds of evidence. Brand et al. (2019) provide a theoretical model for specific internet-use disorders, including problematic pornography use. Grubbs et al. (2020) highlight the importance of distinguishing moral incongruence from dysregulated use. Beck (1976) and Rosenberg (1965) provide frameworks for understanding anxiety, depression, and self-image. These works help organise the topic but do not directly measure college students in Bengaluru. Indian research has examined internet addiction and psychological distress among college students, but specific data on PPU and its association with anxiety and depression in Bengaluru are limited. Because many findings are correlational or descriptive, they should be interpreted as associations rather than proof of cause and effect.

11.1 Suggested Focus for Future Research in Bengaluru

A future cross-sectional study could ask: (1) What is the prevalence and pattern of problematic pornography use among college students aged 18–25 years in selected colleges in Bengaluru? (2) Is problematic pornography use associated with anxiety and depressive symptoms measured by validated scales? (3) How do factors such as perceived stress, loneliness, sleep quality, emotion regulation, moral incongruence, and social support influence these associations? (4) What forms of support do students consider useful and acceptable? These questions can be refined to fit the research design and available resources.

12. Conclusion

Problematic pornography use among college students aged 18–25 years in Bengaluru should be understood within a broader context of self-regulation, emotional well-being, peer and family relationships, college climate, and digital environment. Dysregulated or compulsive patterns, rather than occasional use alone, appear more consistently linked with anxiety and depressive symptoms, and associations are likely bidirectional, shaped by shared vulnerabilities such as emotion dysregulation, loneliness, and stress. These influences interact, and students respond differently depending on their circumstances, values, and available support.

For college students in Bengaluru, local research can help identify which influences matter most in particular settings and what support students find helpful and acceptable. Parents, teachers, counsellors and social workers all have a role in creating environments where young adults are respected, included and able to seek help without shame, and supported to develop coping skills, healthy relationships, and a sense of purpose beyond academic success.

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