Relationship between Problematic Internet Use and Risk of Addiction to Online Pornography among Undergraduate Students in Selected Universities in Kenya

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of problematic internet use (PIU) in the risk of addiction to online pornography among undergraduate students in universities in Kenya. Free and unlimited internet access in universities exposes undergraduate students to online pornography, yet little is known about how PIU relates to the risk of addiction to online pornography. The study was guided by Bandura's theory and used an *ex post facto* research design. The target population was 97,284 undergraduate students in four universities in Nairobi and Meru Counties, Kenya; the accessible population was 18,911 second- and third-year students. The sample comprised 391 undergraduates, 16 peer counsellors and four student counsellors, a total of 411 participants. Data were collected using a questionnaire (students), an in-depth interview schedule (student counsellors) and focus group discussions (peer counsellors; four groups of four participants). The universities were selected purposively, while respondents were selected through purposive and simple random sampling. The instruments were pre-tested at one similar university and modified accordingly; the reliability coefficient for online pornography items was 0.782. Quantitative data (317 returned questionnaires; response rate 81.1%) were analysed in SPSS version 28, using frequencies, percentages, means, the chi-square test and the independent-samples *t*-test. Qualitative data were coded and analysed thematically. PIU was significantly associated with risk of addiction to online pornography, $\chi^2(1, N = 317) = 5.43$, $p = .020$, and students with PIU had higher risk scores ($M = 11.7$, $SD = 5.5$) than those without ($M = 9.9$, $SD = 4.2$), $t(315) = -3.25$, $p = .001$. Qualitative findings indicated that curiosity, the search for information on sexuality, idleness, and the privacy and anonymity of online access contributed to online pornography use. The study recommends that government, university management and counsellors develop preventive measures addressing undergraduate students' internet use.

Keywords: *addiction risk, problematic internet use, online pornography, undergraduate students, Kenya*

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1.0 Introduction

Addiction to online pornography is a growing concern among undergraduate university students. Berhanu (2023) described it as excessive, uncontrollable viewing, accompanied by preoccupation with sexual thoughts and restlessness when attempting to stop, which interferes with an individual's psychological, academic and social wellbeing. The concept remains contested: pornography addiction is not listed as a distinct disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013), and definitions vary widely across studies (Duffy et al., 2016). This study therefore refers to the *risk* of addiction to online pornography rather than to clinically diagnosed addiction.

Internet use has expanded from a research tool to a mass user community and now supports a wide range of commercial and social activities. The spread of smartphones has made information easier to access and has deepened internet penetration. Globally, the internet is used for e-mail, WhatsApp, web browsing, films and social media, and learning institutions increasingly use it to strengthen research and teaching (Sánchez-Fernández et al., 2023). It is widely used in Africa and Kenya and has been adopted by most universities to enhance learning (Waithaka, 2013). As in many other countries, Kenyan institutions of higher learning provide free and unlimited internet to students and staff.

Although the internet is highly valuable, studies indicate that problematic internet use (PIU) may lead to addiction risks such as online pornography use (Pathmendra et al., 2023 and Muhandia et al., 2025). Students aged 19 to 24 years are reported to be more susceptible to such risks (Paulus et al., 2024). Because universities provide internet connectivity, young people spend many hours online, which predisposes them to addiction risks. Paulus et al. (2024) further argued that an unsatisfactory transition into adulthood can lead to low self-esteem, leaving young people lacking confidence in interpersonal relationships yet confident interacting through the internet.

Arjunan and Edward (2016), in a study of internet dependency among university entrants in India, reported that students were likely to develop addiction risks because, in addition to free and unlimited internet access, they experienced freedom from parental control and were unrestricted in their online activities.

Addiction risks may be manifested in behavioural responses (Harper & Hodgins, 2016), and individuals who engage in online pornography have also been reported to misuse drugs and other substances. Sounter and Kerretts (2012) found that young people in Kenya used the internet for academic purposes and for socialising, and noted that it was difficult to distinguish behavioural changes resulting from PIU from those resulting from other influences such as peer pressure. They further observed that individuals could become addicted to specific online behaviours, including online pornography, and concluded that the internet provides an environment for such activities that may influence users' behaviour negatively and create a risk of addiction. These mixed findings call for further research. This study therefore examined whether PIU contributes to the risk of addiction to online pornography among undergraduate students in universities in Meru and Nairobi Counties.

Literature Review

Internet pornography has been defined as the downloading of videos and pictures depicting sexual activity for the purpose of viewing them (Berhanu, 2023). Alexandraki et al. (2018) studied internet pornography viewing preference as a risk factor for adolescent internet addiction and found that viewing internet pornography increased the risk of internet addiction over time; they attributed the increase in online pornography use to the availability of internet connectivity and technologies. Young people are the group most likely to engage in online pornography, which has been attributed to their developmental stage of exploration: they are beginning to form romantic relationships and are looking for

information, which increases the risk of addiction as they spend more time online. Alexandraki et al. (2018) reported that the internet offers easy access to information for those seeking to learn about sexual matters or obtain related services. This is consistent with Paulus et al. (2024), who noted that pornography and sexually explicit material can be accessed and viewed through the internet. Excessive internet use may also lead to addiction to online pornography where access is easy, affordable and anonymous. In a meta-analysis, Chen et al. (2022) found a positive association between the quantity and severity of pornography use.

In a review of research on adolescents, Owens et al. (2012) concluded that the growth of internet-enabled technology had substantially changed how adolescents encounter sexually explicit content. The internet is no longer confined to desktop computers; it is now accessible through smartphones, laptops, game consoles and other devices, and as the internet has advanced, access to pornography has become easy and universal. Technical barriers appear to offer limited protection: Przybylski and Nash (2018) found that caregivers' use of internet filtering had inconsistent and practically insignificant links with young people's reports of encountering online sexual material.

"The spread of smartphones has made information easier to access and has deepened internet penetration"

In an examination of the psychological factors associated with PIU, Thakrar (2021) and Matara et al., (2025) concluded that students received unsolicited sexual material through the internet. The students most prone to viewing pornography were those who used the internet frequently and were comfortable with the technology. The study found that curiosity motivated students to watch pornography, which could lead to addiction, and that students who became addicted developed negative attitudes and behaviours towards members of the opposite sex. Wamathai et al. (2014) similarly reported that male university students in Kenya viewed pornography mainly to satisfy curiosity and to seek information about sexuality. University students frequent sexually explicit sites because of the accessibility, affordability and anonymity involved, and some search for information about sex because young people now receive little sex education, which in the past was provided by elders.

The Communications Authority of Kenya (2015) reported that online pornography was widespread in Kenya, as in other parts of the world, which was attributed to the accessibility and availability of internet connectivity and technologies. It further indicated that college students had higher levels of access to pornography, attributed to the developmental stage at which students move from adolescence to adulthood and must make choices about sexuality. It also acknowledged that university students access the internet more than any other group because universities invest in technologies to enhance learning. University students can therefore easily access pornographic material and, through media exposure, may learn and imitate the behaviours portrayed. Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory similarly holds that people learn by observing and imitating the behaviour of models; in this case, the models may be the pornographic material viewed. Exposure to pornographic material may foster more permissive attitudes towards unsafe sex and high-risk sexual behaviours such as having multiple partners, anal sex, and consuming alcohol and drugs during sex (Chepkorir, 2025). Exposure to violent pornography may also lead to sexually hostile behaviour. Chepkorir (2025) further suggested that young men who engage in online pornography may develop negative attitudes towards women, affecting their involvement in sexuality and healthy interpersonal relationships.

Scott (2017) studied aggression and depression factors in pornography use among college-aged

individuals and reported that those who engaged in online pornography showed higher levels of sexual aggression. Existing Kenyan studies, such as Wamathai et al. (2014), have examined the prevalence of and reasons for pornography viewing, but the role of PIU in the risk of addiction to online pornography has received little attention. To address this gap, the present study examined the role of PIU in the risk of addiction to online pornography among undergraduate students in universities in Nairobi and Meru Counties, Kenya.

2.0 Materials and Methods

The study adopted an *ex post facto* research design. The target population was 97,284 undergraduate students in four universities in Meru and Nairobi Counties, Kenya, and the accessible population was 18,911 second- and third-year students. Student counsellors and peer counsellors were also included. The four universities were selected purposively, and respondents were selected through purposive and simple random sampling. The sample comprised 391 undergraduate students, 16 peer counsellors and four student counsellors, a total of 411 participants.

Three instruments were used: a questionnaire for students, an in-depth interview schedule for student counsellors, and focus group discussions with peer counsellors (four groups of four participants each). The instruments were pre-tested in one additional university with characteristics similar to those of the sampled universities, selected purposively, and were modified accordingly. The reliability coefficient for the online pornography items was 0.782.

Risk of addiction to online pornography was measured with five items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = lowest, 5 = highest). A mean of 2.5 to 5.0 was taken to signify a high extent of involvement and a mean below 2.5 a low extent. For item-level analysis, scores of 4 or 5 were classified as high and scores of 1 to 3 as low.

Quantitative data were analysed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) using frequencies, percentages and means. The chi-square test was used to test the null hypothesis (H_0) that PIU has no statistically significant role in the risk of addiction to online pornography, and an independent-samples *t*-test was used to compare online pornography risk scores of students with and without PIU. Qualitative data were coded and analysed thematically.

3.0 Results and Discussion

Response rate

Of the 391 questionnaires administered to students, 317 were returned and analysed, a response rate of 81.1%.

Risk of addiction to online pornography

Table 1
Risk of Addiction to Online Pornography (N = 317)

Item	*N*	*M*	*SD*	Low *f*	Low %	High *f*	High %
I always get preoccupied with sexual thoughts	317	2.82	1.39	209	65.9	108	34.1
I often feel restless because of trying to stop pornography watching	317	2.74	1.52	212	66.9	105	33.1
Pornography watching usually interferes with academic work, interpersonal relationship or leisure activities	317	2.71	2.0	235	74.1	82	25.9
I always view pornographic materials on the internet	317	2.64	1.43	236	74.4	81	25.6
I often access online to get involved in sexual or romantic relationships	317	2.63	1.45	206	65.0	111	35.0

Note. Items were rated from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest). Scores of 1–3 were classified as low and 4–5 as high. *f* = frequency.

Table 1 shows responses to the five items on risk of addiction to online pornography. Item means ranged from 2.63 to 2.82, which exceeds the study's criterion of 2.5 for high involvement but remains below the scale midpoint of 3.0, and no more than 35% of respondents scored high on any item. The highest-rated item was "I always get preoccupied with sexual thoughts" (M = 2.82, SD = 1.39), followed by "I often feel restless because of trying to stop pornography watching" (M = 2.74, SD = 1.52), "Pornography watching usually interferes with academic work, interpersonal relationship or leisure activities" (M = 2.71, SD = 2.0), "I always view pornographic materials on the internet" (M = 2.64, SD = 1.43) and "I often access online to get involved in sexual or romantic relationships" (M = 2.63, SD = 1.45). Taken together, these results indicate a moderate risk of addiction to online pornography among the respondents.

When responses were dichotomised, 35.0% of respondents scored high on accessing the internet to get involved in sexual or romantic relationships, 34.1% on preoccupation with sexual thoughts, 33.1% on restlessness when trying to stop, 25.9% on interference with academic work, interpersonal relationships or leisure activities, and 25.6% on always viewing pornographic material online. Roughly a third of respondents (33.1%–35.0%) therefore scored high on three of the five items, and about a quarter on the other two.

Problematic internet use and risk of addiction to online pornography

Table 2
Summary of Item Means for Problematic Internet Use

Variable	*M*	Min	Max	Range	No. of items
Problematic internet use	3.08	2.57	3.89	1.32	24

Note. M, Min and Max refer to the 24 item means.

The 24 items on PIU had a mean item score of 3.08; item means ranged from 2.57 to 3.89 (range = 1.32) (Table 2).

Table 3

Problematic Internet Use and Risk of Addiction to Online Pornography: Cross-Tabulation

Internet use	Statistic	Low risk	High risk	Total
No problematic internet use	*f*	85	52	137
	%	49.1	36.1	43.2
Problematic internet use	*f*	88	92	180
	%	50.9	63.9	56.8
Total	*f*	173	144	317
	%	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note. Percentages are column percentages.

Table 3 shows that, of the 144 respondents classified as high risk of addiction to online pornography, 92 (63.9%) had PIU, compared with 88 (50.9%) of the 173 classified as low risk. Within each group, 92 of the 180 respondents with PIU (51.1%) were classified as high risk, compared with 52 of the 137 respondents without PIU (38.0%).

Table 4

Problematic Internet Use and Risk of Addiction to Online Pornography: Chi-Square Tests

Test	Value	*df*	*p*
Pearson chi-square	5.430	1	.020
Likelihood ratio	5.460	1	.019
Linear-by-linear association	5.413	1	.020
N of valid cases	317		

Note. No cells (0.0%) had an expected count below 5; the minimum expected count was 62.23.

A chi-square test of independence showed a significant association between PIU and risk of addiction to online pornography, $\chi^2(1, N = 317) = 5.43$, $p = .020$ (Table 4). The null hypothesis that PIU has no statistically significant role in the risk of addiction to online pornography was therefore rejected.

Table 5

Risk of Addiction to Online Pornography Scores by Internet Use Group

Internet use	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*SE M*
No problematic internet use	137	9.9	4.2	0.36
Problematic internet use	180	11.7	5.5	0.41

Note. M = mean risk score; *SE M* = standard error of the mean.

Table 6

Independent-Samples t-Test of Risk of Addiction to Online Pornography Scores

	Levene *F*	Levene *p*	*t*	*df*	*p*	Mean diff.	*SE* diff.
Equal variances assumed	.062	.803	−3.248	315	.001	−1.833	0.564
Equal variances not assumed			−3.370	315.0	.001	−1.833	0.544

Note. Mean difference = no problematic internet use minus problematic internet use.

An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare risk of addiction to online pornography scores between respondents with and without PIU (Tables 5 and 6). Scores were significantly higher for respondents with PIU ($M = 11.7$, $SD = 5.5$) than for those without PIU ($M = 9.9$, $SD = 4.2$), $t(315) = -3.25$, $p = .001$. The study therefore established a significant relationship between PIU and risk of addiction to online pornography.

Qualitative findings

Student counsellors. Data from student counsellors indicated that undergraduate students engaged in online pornography to obtain sexual satisfaction, out of curiosity and because of exposure. Because the universities provided free and unlimited internet, students could use smartphones to access sexually explicit material from anywhere. Counsellors also reported that some students engaged in online pornography because they lacked acceptance by their peers or were idle, and that students used it to gain information about sexuality. Some students sought sexual satisfaction online because they feared the consequences of physical sexual contact, such as sexually transmitted infections, HIV and pregnancy. According to the counsellors, childhood experiences accounted for the largest number of students who engaged in online pornography: students without adult role models to confide in sought information about sexuality on the internet, which increased their risk of addiction to online pornography. Students also accessed pornographic material to gain exposure and experience sexual pleasure through online interactions with friends, peers and even strangers. Because they viewed it from the comfort of their rooms or beds and were not monitored, they remained online for long hours, which, in the counsellors' view, increased their risk of addiction. Two student counsellors commented:

"Undergraduate students engage in online pornography because of curiosity, they want to confirm the stories they have heard from peers and friends if they are true and to gain experience and exposure on matters of sexuality."

"Undergraduate students access pornographic materials from the comfort of their rooms to get sexual satisfaction because of fear of the consequences of physical sexual contact such as sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy."

Focus group discussions.

Focus group discussions with peer counsellors pointed in the same direction. Participants perceived a link between PIU and online pornography, noting that students spent several hours online and explored many sites, with negative effects. Students accessed information about sexuality, some of it in the form of sexually explicit videos and images, and sometimes reached such material unintentionally by following links out of curiosity. Participants also reported that students engaged in online pornography to experience sexual pleasure and to cope with boredom and idleness. Free and unlimited internet allowed students to visit any site at any time, including outside the university premises, and the privacy of their rooms and the anonymity involved encouraged more

searching and made it difficult to stop. These accounts suggest that PIU contributes to the risk of addiction to online pornography.

Discussion

The developmental stage of an individual may influence engagement in online pornography (Alexandraki et al., 2018). Consistent with this, students aged 18–24 years engaged in online pornography more than those in other age brackets, and most students used smartphones to access online pornography and sexually explicit material. Free internet connectivity was available in all the universities studied, and students could connect at any time, especially through smartphones, which is consistent with the argument that ease of access increases the risk of excessive use (Paulus et al., 2024, Mwangi et al., 2025). Earlier work has often concentrated on the frequency of pornography use (Duffy et al., 2016 and Nduka et al., 2026); this study found that PIU was significantly associated with the risk of addiction to online pornography. Many students reported staying awake late at night to engage in online pornography, and a smaller number remained on university premises to use the free internet for this purpose. Online pornography use was also reported to have negative effects: some students missed classes to engage in sexual behaviour with friends and strangers whom they had met online, and this behaviour led to avoidance of face-to-face relationships, with psychological and social consequences.

Preoccupation with sexual thoughts was the highest-rated item in Table 1 (M = 2.82), and online pornography use was also associated with early sexual activity. Students who were more at risk used the internet frequently and did not control the sites they visited, as posited by Chelsea (2011). Wamathai et al. (2014) reported that male university students viewed pornography to satisfy curiosity and to seek information about sexuality; consistent with this, the students with PIU in the present study were aged 18–24 years, an age at which they are forming relationships and searching for information on sexuality. Students also shared sexual material with friends, peers and strangers whom they had met online.

The qualitative findings agreed with the survey results. Student counsellors and peer counsellors both indicated that long hours online led students to explore many sites and exposed them to sexually explicit material, and that the privacy and anonymity of online access made it difficult to stop. This is consistent with Densley (2016), who noted that pornographic material is easily accessed through smartphones from anywhere and that too much engagement in online activities could lead to addiction. Overall, the findings suggest that PIU is associated with, and may contribute to, the risk of addiction to online pornography.

Limitations

The *ex post facto* design and the reliance on self-reported questionnaire responses mean that the associations reported here cannot be taken as evidence of causation, and the sample was drawn from four universities in two counties, which limits generalisability. Longitudinal designs would be needed to establish the direction of the relationship between PIU and online pornography use.

4.0 Conclusion

The study found that PIU was significantly associated with the risk of addiction to online pornography among undergraduate students in universities in Nairobi and Meru Counties. Item means on the risk scale ranged from 2.63 to 2.82 on a five-point scale, indicating a moderate risk. Of the 144 respondents classified as high risk, 92 (63.9%) had PIU, and risk scores were significantly higher among students with PIU (M = 11.7) than among those without (M = 9.9). Qualitative data from student counsellors and peer counsellors suggested that excessive internet use increased students' risk: some students encountered sexually explicit material while online, others received it from peers, friends and strangers, and the privacy and anonymity of online access encouraged further searching.

Students aged 18–24 years are at a developmental stage at which they seek information on sexual matters, and long periods spent online searching for such information can increase their risk of addiction to online

pornography. The study found that students engaged in online pornography because of idleness, lack of peer acceptance, curiosity, the search for information on sexuality, fear of the consequences of physical sexual contact, and the desire to gain exposure and experience sexual pleasure.

5.0 Recommendations

Because PIU was significantly associated with the risk of addiction to online pornography, the government, university management and student counsellors should develop intervention and preventive measures that address problematic internet use among undergraduate students. These measures should also provide relevant information on sexuality and guidance on making informed choices. Future research should use longitudinal designs to establish the direction of the relationship between PIU and online pornography use.

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