Predicting problematic pornography use

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Using pornography compulsively; using it to cope with negative emotions; being disturbed by one's own choice of pornographic material; feeling ashamed of using pornography—according to a new international study led by Beáta Bőthe, a professor in the Department of Psychology at Université de Montréal, these factors can predict problematic

pornography use (PPU).

Harnessing AI to support sexual health

Problematic pornography use is the most common manifestation of compulsive sexual behavior disorder (CSBD), a condition characterized by uncontrollable sexual urges and behaviors accompanied by clinically significant distress.

Pornography use becomes problematic when the individual is unable to control it even though it is causing emotional problems and interfering with their daily activities.

To help find solutions to prevent the harmful consequences of CSBD—distress, relationship problems, financial problems and potentially legal issues—Bőthe's research team looked at variables that can predict PPU.

More than 70 scientists from around the world compiled their research data and used machine learning to identify over 700 potential predictors.

The purpose makes a difference

Among the most significant factors, five emerged as the most recurrent and important: frequency of pornography use, use motivated by emotional avoidance and stress reduction, use that violates the individual's own moral framework, and sexual shame.

"Some people use pornography to reduce negative emotions like stress or sadness," Bőthe explained. "But this is a coping mechanism that doesn't resolve the original issue and can even aggravate it. It can create a vicious cycle in which pornography use seems to become the source of

the person's distress."

Bőthe also pointed out that frequent pornography use isn't necessarily problematic; it becomes a source of distress when the use is excessive and the person is unable to control their behavior.

Developing an emerging field of study

Bőthe believes the results of this study improve our understanding of pornography use in general and the risk factors for problematic use in particular. As this is a relatively new field of study, these new data will help point the way for future research.

"For example, I was surprised to see that gender was not a significant variable for PPU in this study, although it is commonly believed that there is a big difference between men and women," Bőthe said. "It shows we must continue to include all genders in studies of pornography and not just assume that it's something men do."

Bőthe believes that this new empirical knowledge will ultimately support the development of more targeted, appropriate and effective prevention and treatment programs.

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