

‘I want that power back’: Discourses of masculinity within a pornography abstinence forum

As with the debates around pornography itself, the history of pornography research is characterized by extremes in positions and approaches, particularly around negative user effects. For example, some scholars suggest that men (almost exclusively) can be incited to commit violent sexual acts as a result of viewing misogynistic pornography (DeKeseredy, 2015; Foubert, Brosi, and Bannon, 2011; Malamuth, Addison and Koss, 2000), bolstered by studies offering a variety of underlying causes of ‘excessive’ pornography use such as obsession and/or compulsion (Bancroft and Vukadinovic, 2004; Wetterneck et al., 2012), or pornography ‘addiction’ (Griffiths, 2001; see also Ley, Prause, and Finn, 2014). Others take a neurological view, arguing that porn addiction - by way of sex addiction - literally changes the brains of users (Hilton, 2013) and might be readily treated by prescription drugs (Bostwick and Bucci, 2008). However, it is not the case that *all* contemporary research on pornography is focused exclusively on user effects, or framed as an entirely negative concern as research from a range of disciplines have attempted to ‘shift the paradigm’ away from the ‘porn debate’ towards more diverse questions and scholarship (Attwood, 2011; see Barker, 2014; Garlick, 2012; Kendrick, 1996; McKee, Albury, Lumby, 2008; Paasonen, 2010, Thompson, 2015; Williams, 2014).

Acknowledging explorations of queer pornographic cultures, performers experiences of pornography production, and histories of pornographies that have dramatically changed the terrain of pornography scholarship over the last few decades (just to name a few), here we focus on one particular line of academic interest: an engagement with the ways that pornography users themselves make sense of the role of pornography in their lives (see also Attwood, 2007; Hardy, 1998; Loftus, 2002; Mattebo et al., 2013; McKee, Albury, and Lumby, 2008; Mowlabocus and Wood, 2015; Vörös, 2015; Weinberg, Williams, Kleiner, and

Irizarry, 2010; Whisnant, 2010). As such in what follows, our interest is not with whether pornography is 'good' or 'bad', or either inherently transgressive or oppressive, but rather the ways that individuals speak about pornography and how doing so may both encourage and discourage different ways of understanding facets of gender and sexuality. Consistent with this goal, we cite here a range of scholars, some of whom seek to avoid polarities and alternatively position themselves somewhere in the critical spaces beyond the limitations of the pro/anti-pornography debate (Attwood, 2002; Mowlabocus and Wood, 2015; Williams, 2014).

Two studies of pornography consumption are of particular relevance to our approach and warrant further elaboration. Firstly, Simon Lindgren's (2010) analysis of porn fans' comments and interactions on the message boards of a website hosting pornographic links and content which indicated that a significant amount of conversation was devoted to fostering a 'viewer collective'. Lindgren highlights users' discursive investment in creating a sense of unity; a homosocial environment in which users cultivate a collective 'We' that almost supersedes the sanctioned topic of conversation about pornography performers. This 'collective' acts as an audience for individuals' expression of sexual desires and preferences, discussion of masturbatory sensations and practises, and the celebration of the possibilities enabled by hedonistic consumption of (and masturbation to) pornography. Lindgren's study provides insight into the intersection between pornography consumption and male bonding online, and highlights 'the online' as a site in which masculine norms hold the capacity to be both challenged and redeployed.

Secondly, a study by Gabriel Cavaglion (2009) offers a particularly illuminating account of online users' experiences of 'cyber-porn dependence' in an Italian pornography abstinence forum. Using 2000 messages posted in an online self-help community Caviglon's narrative analyses illustrates the multiple forms of distress offered by forum users, including

concerns about escalating pornography use, a decline of their social and 'normal' sexual lives, and a feeling of losing control over their own behaviour. Cavaglion highlights a space in which conversations between pornography users convey expressions of a conflict between using pornography and widely held social expectations of expected sexual behaviours. Particularly revealing are the expressions of helplessness, and the attribution of power to pornography which is exercised over these users.

However, from the outset it is clear that Cavaglion's (2009) focus is to "map the common symptoms" (p. 296) of pornography dependence, leading to their conclusion that many of the posts present in the forums were indicative of user pathology. Although Cavaglion clearly manages to engage the voice of pornography users, we would suggest that this focus on the pathological nature of 'excessive' pornography use is too simplistic, in that the author did not engage with what can be argued is a struggle to reconcile the contradiction between abstinence and normative expectations of masculinity. In other words, perhaps the expressions of distress noted above were more nuanced than simply guilt or shame about their 'cyber-porn dependence' as was concluded. For example, some of the extracts used in Cavaglion's study could be read as ways for men to position themselves as not enjoying pornography because of its interruption of expected 'normal' sexual performance. Through such reading distress could be viewed as a discursive attempt to convey that masturbation to pornography is of lesser value than sex between partners.

Notwithstanding our critique, Cavaglion's (2009) study suggests that online pornography abstinence forums could be a rich site for investigating men's concerns around the role of pornography in their lives. Of particular interest here is how the accounts of affective experiences may be indicative of users' struggles to reconcile pornography use, masturbation, and remaining "sober" from pornography with their expectations of how to 'do' masculinity. We venture that this struggle with masculine subjectivity potentially

underpins the kind of distress that Cavaglione reports. In this article we adopt a poststructuralist framework to examine the discursive work undertaken in a pornography abstinence forum concentrating on the ways that forum users reconcile their rejection of pornography with the perceived requirements of normative hetero-masculinity.

Details of the study

The data presented in this paper were gathered from NoFap, a sub-forum on the social networking service 'reddit' (<http://www.reddit.com>). Reddit itself (also known as "The Front-page of the Internet") is a massive media aggregate website which allows users to collect, comment, and rate a variety of media relating to special interest content. According to reddit's own statistics 54% of reddit's audience is based in the United States with a fairly even gender split in its user base (54% male, 46% female).ⁱ Registered users of the site can submit content (news and media links, images, text based posts, gifs, etc.) which are in turn either 'up' or 'down' voted by other registered reddit members. The site is divided into a vast number of special interest communities, known as 'sub-reddits', each with its own rules, moderators, and vocabulary.

The sub-reddit selected for the current study (<http://www.reddit.com/r/NoFap>) specifically hosts secular conversation threads about abstinence from masturbating to pornography, predominantly catering to self-identifying pornography 'addicts'. As such, overt discussions (or threads) concerning the effects and perceptions of pornography use are prevalent, and these directly address the subject of how pornography impacts individual men. While NoFap had reached over 200,000 registered members at the time of writing, actual demographics of this NoFap membership are very difficult to ascertain. In 2014 a member of NoFap created their own survey which was administered to the sub-reddit, and received some 4882 responsesⁱⁱ, and while there are a number of issues with the survey (many of which the creator readily points out), it is the closest and most recent demographic snapshot that we

have been able to find, and follows a similar trend as a previous survey distributed in 2012.ⁱⁱⁱ At the time of the 2014 survey 13% of respondents identified as under 16 years old, 46% as aged 17-21, and 32% as 22-28 (the remaining 8% were aged over 28). Furthermore, the survey indicated that the membership of NoFap at this time was predominantly made up of males (99%) who identified as heterosexual (94%).^{iv}

The first author went to significant lengths to become familiar with the structure, vernacular, and culture of the NoFap world. In essence NoFap is a ‘self-help’ community in which users share stories, personal progress, and pose abstinence challenges to one another. ‘Original posts’ (appearing as a title on the front page of NoFap for other users to interact with) and the comments that they generate are frequently personal accounts, motivational tracts, and messages of support. Many of the conversations within NoFap are layered with humour and sarcasm, at times adversarial, but for the most part are mutually encouraging and sympathetic to those wrestling with their pornography problems. Beyond a few offhand references to geography and cultural difference (e.g. “Canadians so beta they need more vocal people around!”), the backgrounds and cultures of users remain for the most part invisible. Yet the interactions within NoFap have a distinctly Anglo Northern-American character, most likely owing to the preponderance of American users of reddit in general as mentioned above. NoFap also draws heavily upon discourses of self-improvement and self-help with users sharing stories of failure and success as well as dietary, exercise, and meditation advice to other users. Relatedly, one of the central beliefs subscribed to by users of NoFap is the notion that abstaining from pornography and masturbation will in turn grant them “super powers” ranging from increased concentration and productivity, to improved self-confidence and sexual magnetism.

Perhaps unsurprisingly considering the demographics already mentioned, NoFap also has a strongly heterosexual, male tenor. While women and gay men are explicitly catered for

within the forum (for example multiple threads featured on NoFap remind forum members that women are also welcome to use the space) it is implicitly assumed that forum members are heterosexual men with users employing fraternal language (hailing each other as ‘brothers’ for example). Moreover, it is noteworthy that there appears to be an unspoken agreement about the type of pornography users are abstaining from. That is to say that genres, gender representations, and sex acts often remain nebulous and ill-defined. While this may be a function of the rules of the forum itself (as graphic sexual descriptions are discouraged due to the possibility of them “triggering” other users^v), unless stated otherwise the only discernible uniting element of the pornography discussed appears to be a presumption of heterosexuality, appealing to men, and being relatively ‘mainstream’.

Because the site of the investigation itself is already a location of discussions about pornography and abstinence, and for the reasons outlined above, it is conceivable that almost any thread picked at random would present a rich data site. However, one particular issue with the format of NoFap is that besides its status as a sub-reddit, there is little further delineation of focus for the forum. Accordingly, the ‘front page’ of NoFap is simply a list of the most recently ‘up voted’ posts to the site and the wide variety of topics on offer lend themselves to only cursory analysis of users’ constructions of masculinity. Thus, specific conversation threads were identified using reddit’s search function (which can either be used as a topic search across the whole website, or specifically within any single sub-reddit) to ascertain specific posts. This was achieved by searching for threads explicitly featuring the term ‘masculinity’ within the subject line of the ‘original post’.

Given this approach to data collection, we wish to highlight that the data presented is not intended to be read as representative of NoFap as a whole, but to present how some users express a particular investment in masculinity and how it is constituted (Edley, 2001; Edley and Wetherell, 1997; Taylor, 2001). That is, as opposed to an analysis in which users’ posts

are understood as oblique references to masculinity (through their talk about video games, pornography, exercise and diet, etc.), our study presents the ways in which users *actively* constitute masculine positions. Our search term ‘masculinity’ rendered numerous pages of ‘original posts’ which pertained specifically to defining masculinity. The ‘top 10’ posts and subsequent 663 comments as displayed when filtered by the subreddit’s ‘relevance’ filter were selected for analysis.

When using material posted by individuals on the internet it is important to consider the ethics of doing so. For example, it is critical to assess whether analysis of an Internet community can negatively affect the unique environment of that community (Eysenbach and Till, 2001; Flicker, Haans, and Skinner, 2004; Henderson, Johnson, and Auld, 2013). However, because reddit in general does not require an individual to register to the site to view posts by users (there *is* the capacity to set up private reddit groups which require invitation), one could argue that NoFap has a low level of perceived privacy for its membership (Markham and Buchanan, 2012, Whitehead, 2007). Moreover, NoFap is not highly vulnerable to broader public exposure, as the content discussed is for the most part relatively benign (see Markham and Buchanan, 2012). With this being said, there is a valid concern as to whether it is appropriate to use publicly available data under the assumption that participants *deliberately* make it public (see Holtz et al., 2012) and with this consideration in mind, the usernames of the 15 users quoted hereafter have been anonymized.

Analytic Approach

The analysis began with multiple close readings of the selected forums to become familiar with the patterns of talk and how users positioned themselves throughout. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2012) was then employed to organize the data set as a whole, and as a preliminary analytical tool, because of its theoretical flexibility, and ease of application to identifying patterns within a data corpus. Initial codes were

generated through analysis of small, basic segments of the data. These codes were then collated into broader themes which were then subject to a discourse analysis working from within a poststructuralist discursive analytic framework.

Within such a framework the focus of analysis is not upon the structures of language per se (words, sentences, etc.) but upon the ways that language produces and reproduces power relations by drawing upon the everyday expression and reaffirmations of social norms and practises (Foucault, 1995). That is, while we are interested in the language employed by the members of NoFap, we are not seeking to simply understand how users speak about pornography and masculinity, but to identify the discursive resources which users draw upon when formulating an appropriate masculinity within the fraught context of a pornography abstinence forum. As such, our analysis is not intended to expose some pre-existing 'truth' about masculinity, waiting to be revealed through inquiry, but instead to investigate the ways that the discourses deployed through the users' posts (in our case) constitute possible ways of being a masculine subject (Edley, 2001; Gavey, 1989; Willig, 2008). In this sense we are interested in how the specific context of these forums provides a space in which users may deploy a variety of discourses about masculinity, and how these discourses constitute shared meanings of masculinity (Burr, 2003; Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates, 2001).

Analysis and Discussion

Our analyses of the Nofap data rendered three prominent discourses related to how men negotiated masculinity and pornography use/abstinence: 'realness and realisation', in which users discussed the importance of 'real' relationships; 'masculinity as innate', in which users highlighted the biological importance of masculinity; and 'masculinity as performance' in which users attempted to reconcile how best to display this ostensibly innate masculinity. While these three discourses are presented as separate and distinct, significant overlap exists between them. For example, masculinity in an 'evolutionary' discourse can overlap with

conceptions of heterosexuality as ‘normal’, in that heterosexuality and masculinity can be conceived of as arising through evolutionary pressure and thus both be part of the ‘natural order’ of nature. Moreover, across the themes of realness and biological masculinity is an overarching struggle with the performative elements of masculine conduct. The following sections refer to, and discuss verbatim extracts from the data corpus that were highly illustrative of the most dominant discourses.

Realness and Realisation

Throughout the NoFap threads, references to ‘real women’ and ‘real sex’ essentially served the purpose of communicating that sex (and more specifically heterosexual sex, or ‘heterosex’) was fundamentally *not* masturbation (see Laqueur, 2003). Common sense conceptions of heterosexuality (and to an extent masculinity) regularly understand the act of sex either as coitus itself, or necessitating coitus at some point within a sexual encounter (Gavey, 2005; McPhillips, Braun, and Gavey, 2001). In turn, this scripting of ‘sex as coitus’ situates practises that are not penetrative as ‘not real’ sex, and perhaps not truly fulfilling sexual experiences.

The construction of ‘realness’ within the data suggested that participating members understand that masturbating to pornography was an emasculating act, in comparison to ‘real’ sex. Forum member’s reinforcement of the discourse of ‘real’ sex with women as the most valid form of sex stands in stark contrast to the findings of Lindgren (2010) who found users celebrated masturbation as an act that helped constitute masculinity, and an act of hedonistic pleasure in and of itself. However, by way of explanation, the positioning of an ostensibly ‘anti-masturbation’ position prevalent in NoFap is perhaps unsurprising for a forum dedicated to abstinence from pornography, as opposed to conversations had on a pornography forum fan page in Lindgren’s study. Nonetheless, it is interesting that masturbation could be

constructed in Lindgren's case as an act of sexual liberation, but as inherently shameful for the men of NoFap:

Extract 1

“[...] what in the world is masculine about jerking off to porn in front of a screen? If you got caught you would feel rightfully ashamed. There's nothing shameful about fucking a hot young girl, you feel like the king of the jungle afterwards that's what we are meant to do! Fuck girls. Not jerk off like lonely losers to pixels on a screen. He makes some good points in the book, doesn't mean I became a feminist and grew a vagina after reading it. If anything it made me want to fap less and fuck more. Is that not masculine for you? ”

The above extract is contextualised within debate amongst NoFap users as to whether feminist criticisms of pornography, which tread perilously close to criticisms of dominant heterosexual masculine norms, have a place in NoFap ideology. Here the extract defends author Robert Jensen's book *Getting Off: Pornography and the end of masculinity* while simultaneously maintaining distance from taking up a feminist (anti)position on pornography. This is evidenced through the display of an aspiration for 'real sex' and the articulation of the 'un-masculine' nature of pornography use. The post contrasts the elevated status of 'real' heterosex, against the "shameful" status of masturbation. The post contrasts this shame with feeling like the "king of the jungle" after having sex with a "hot young girl", evoking a primal, 'alpha-male' construction of masculinity common within the NoFap lexicon (the sexually active 'alpha' male stands in marked contrast to the subordinate 'beta' male).

Thus, the 'real' sex that men are "meant to do" is elevated as a dominant masculine action (to become the "king of the jungle"), as opposed to the subordinate position of being one of the "lonely losers". Moreover, the above extract frames sex as an achievement, with the elevated status of feeling like the "king of the jungle" not gained until after the sex act is complete: "you feel like the king of the jungle *afterwards*" (emphasis added). As such, it is not the sex act that is important for its own sake, but the significance of what 'real' sex signifies. The obtaining of status through the public display of 'real' sex is the significant

feature of sex in this context, and not the act of sex itself. In contrast, masturbation and other forms of sexual expression do not carry the same important connotation.

Extract 2

“No Fap is not only about overcoming our addiction over porn and masturbation, it is also about reconnecting with our inner masculinity. So lets come out of our fantasies and begin to connect with real women. Lets love them and have meaningful sex with them and show Philip Zimbardo that it is the beginning of the end of the Demise of guys!!! Can we do it??? Yes we can!!!!”

Extract 3

“Here here my man. I want that power back as well. Real women, real life, real respect. It’s out there for us.”

Here again women are spoken of as ‘real’ in contrast to the (presumably) virtual women of pornography. Importantly, within Extract 2 there arises a tension between the discourses of an ‘innate’, masculinity, and the requirement of explicit performance of its ‘innateness’ (explored later). However, this is quickly remedied with the assertion that a ‘reconnection’ with an “inner masculinity” is contingent on ‘connecting’ with ‘real women’. Similarly Extract 3 is a rejoinder which agrees with the importance of actualisation through sex with “real women”. This extract also manages to highlight the ‘loss of power’ many members of the NoFap community discussed in relation to the use of pornography for masturbation. Again, such loss of power is contingent on the inability to attract “real women”, with the power which is “out there” for the members of NoFap dependent upon ‘realness’.

Extract 4

“My no Fap journey began when i couldn't stay erect for a real life woman! That was 44 long hard days ago. Today i had sex for the first time. Very clumsy very quick but it was sex with a real live woman and not my hand. In the past 44 days i have come to relise how much it has held me back. How it stopped me from going out and talking to people, How it made me hate myself and how it stole my energy and masculinity [...] Stay strong brothers its hard but you are worth the sacrifice. ”

Extract 4 is an ‘original post’ titled ‘*Just lost my virginity aged 30*’ which garnered 103 mostly supportive comments. The ‘original post’ follows a structure of confession common across NoFap in which users share in their successes and failures of abstinence. In this case

the language of Extract 4 negotiates a series of disclosures of what are arguably failures of an idealized masculine sexual performance (most pertinently the disclosure of erectile problems), which are then rectified through an eventual achievement of ‘real’ heterosexual. Again, sex with a “real live woman” is positioned as an ultimate goal which pornography has inhibited by not only reducing users’ energy, but by also “stealing” an essential masculinity.

Extract 5

“I hate how it makes me feel shame. I hate how it makes me feel like a creep. I hate how it makes me feel like I am unworthy of love. I hate how it makes me feel weak when I finish. I hate how it makes me feel deprived of my core masculinity. I hate how it keeps me in my head, afraid of the challenges of the real world. I hate everything about porn, other than the fact that it seems pleasurable in the moment. So I will be finding my pleasure in real things from now on, because fuck porn and how it makes me feel.”

Extract 6

“Good on you man. Remember this feeling, let it drive you and keep away from porn. There's so many great **real** things to find pleasure in. The pleasure of connecting with people, the pleasure of exercise, the pleasure of reading, the pleasure of finding a girl you really like without seeing her as a sex object or worrying about sexual problems. All the best in your journey!” [Emphasis in original]

The insistence upon realising the importance of ‘reality’ is further expanded in an ‘original post’ titled “I hate how porn makes me feel” (Extract 5) which also exemplifies the helpless and angry tone adopted by many NoFap members in response to pornography. The tone is almost combative in its abhorrence of pornography’s apparent power, reminiscent of some posts analysed by Cavalgion (2009). However, at the same time the post is motivational in its refusal of pornography and its replacement with “real things”. Interestingly, this ‘original post’ also raises an idea of ‘love’ as opposed to simply ‘real sex’. Similarly, responding to Extract 5’s fervent plea, Extract 6 breaks away from a male sex-drive discourse to move closer to what Wendy Hollway (1989) describes as the ‘have/hold’ discourse. This emphasis on finding ‘love’ or really ‘liking a girl’ echoes Extract 2’s earlier suggestion to love women and have “meaningful sex” with them. Taken together, these extracts position some of the NoFap users as not simply eager for ‘real’ sex, but also looking for sex within a particular

type of intimate, romantic relationship. Again, these appeals echo Cavalgion's (2009) participants, who frequently spoke both of masturbation as emasculating and immature, but also of a desire to engage in committed 'intimate' relationships.

Masculinity as Innate

It is evident throughout the previous NoFap extracts that the users routinely positioned themselves, and addressed others, as heterosexual by default. Moreover, the constant 'realness' referenced in the above analyses positions masculinity as essentially tied to the structure and physicality of the male body and its ability to perform sexually. This notion of heterosexual masculinity equates both masculinity, and the nature of gender roles in general, with a physical predisposition that can be used to explain uneven power relations between men and women (Connell, 2005). A concurrent evolutionary discourse constructs gender inequality as having always existed for 'essential' reasons (e.g. because of physical difference), and utilizes common-sense interpretations of evolutionary theory to justify the rigidity of gender roles (Gough, 1998). Consistent with an essential discourse of 'real' masculinity, the appeals within the forum to legitimize an innate form of 'core' masculinity through biological explanations of gender difference were also framed as naturally heterosexual:

Extract 7

"This is nonsense. Can't fathom why this is upvoted Taking control of your sexuality and regaining masculinity is something I can talk about as I am a man. Why would I pretend I don't care about that. Women can talk about their own benefits here too. There's no point pretending this is an androgynous shared experience. Men and women are biologically different and will have different experiences."

Above Extract 7 is a comment on an 'original post' titled '*There are women on NoFap too, remember that*' which was met with some heavy resistance (the original author of the post later described the comment section as a "sea of negativity"). Extract 7 not only illustrates the 'boys club' perceptions of some members of NoFap, but also perhaps a biological

explanation as to why this is. This deployment of an evolutionary narrative of gender difference when grappling with masculine validation again has resonances with the biologically derived conceptions of gender difference and the alpha/beta male dichotomy mentioned earlier. These framings, while at times contested within the NoFap forum, were often bolstered by employing simplistic evolutionary explanations for not only the ‘natural’ differences between men and women, but also between men as a group:

Extract 8

“You think it’s a coincidence homeless guys don’t get laid? We’re animals [...] it’s natural to be attracted to what’s best for you and the species. Males probably used to fight between each other for females, we still do but not so much physically anymore. Same with every mammal where the males are larger than the females”

Extract 9

“Not true. In the old days (before internet) it was always the man who approached women, and courted them. Males often battle other males to show who is dominant, and the female follows the alpha. Rarely has it ever been that women chase the man. That makes no sense. If you are truly masculine, then YOU go after the woman.” [Emphasis in original]

By employing an evolutionary discourse, both of the above extracts give the claims of historically determined mating patterns apparent legitimacy, while also equating this sexual dynamic with ‘what’s best for you and the species’, or something that could threaten Western civilisation if interrupted, ratcheting up the narrative of a desire for ‘real’ sex highlighted earlier. This evolutionary theme resonates with an extract from Cavalgion’s (2009) article where ‘Marco the Moderator’ opined that “We are not living how we would like to live. We have denied ourselves those essential emotions for our survival”.

Moreover, the extracts above also manage to reinforce the naturalness of men’s physicality which again constructs men’s biology as a justification for a ‘natural’ sexual domination of women by men (Connell, 2005). This portrayal of biologically determined domination offers space for the acceptance of sexually aggressive acts perpetrated by men, as men are seen simply succumbing to an inherently innate brutishness:

Extract 10

“Implying most women don’t like to be sexuality dominated and also implying it hasn’t been this way and isn’t ingrained into humans for thousands of years. The only difference porn has made is that like women who treat men as disposable, now men treat women as disposable as well and they don’t like it [...]”

Extract 10 draws upon the same resources as expressed in Extract 9 about historically determined domination, while simultaneously invoking ‘naturally’ uneven gender relations. The post itself, as in Extract 1, is another comment in response to feminism’s perceived vilification of a ‘natural’ masculinity. The evocation of an apparently “ingrained” sexual domination draws upon language and resources that naturalises rape and perpetuate rape myths, justifying it as an inevitable evolutionary/biological processes (Gavey, 2005). Yet, the claim on the one hand that sexual domination of women by men has been “ingrained into humans for thousands of years” is at odds with the second assertion that women have historically treated men as disposable.

Masculinity as Performance

Although participants of ‘NoFap’ frequently drew upon constructions of an innate sexual drive and inherent gender difference, many illustrated the intrinsic contradiction of having to actively perform these characteristics to fit into a conception of an idealized, hegemonic masculinity. That is, forum members showed an implicit understanding of the elusive nature of performing a theoretically innate masculinity. This struggle in defining masculinity and how it can be read is again typified in the efforts to discern a ‘real alpha’ masculinity across NoFap. Notably, however, the understanding of a need to perform an ostensibly ‘innate masculinity’ did not necessarily result in resistance to it, but instead in an implicit acceptance, if not explicit promotion of this performance:

Extract 11

“Embrace who you are and who you strive to be as a man. I personally would sometimes make myself more timid to not offend somebody, or to appear nice, or something along those lines [...] But I am beginning

to realize I am only hurting myself by not constantly striving to be masculine and increase my masculine nature. It will affect some people, but it's who I am at the core. So embrace your masculinity. For you and your (potential) lover.”

Extract 12

“Think about what feminine means to you. Are you doing those things? Are you seeking approval, laughing nervously, and being indecisive? You shouldn't be [...] And by the way, you can laugh, but laugh only if you want to. Laughing because you are nervous is feminine. Let the girls do that around you. Think about what masculine means to you. Are you doing those things? You should be. Are you decisive? Do you know what you stand for? Do you know what you want, and can you find a way to get it? These are the traits you need to be cultivating [...] Pay deep attention to your internal monologue. Don't do or say things to people unless you want to [...] Don't use 7 words when 4 will do. Speak in a deep, controlled voice.”

In the above ‘original post’ (Extract 11) the concept of a man that is both “who you are” and “who you strive to be” is introduced with an appeal to “embrace your masculinity”, again in the manner of a motivational call to arms to rally a general NoFap audience. However, the text indicates that it has been necessary for the author to hide aspects of his masculinity in the past to “not offend”. This disclosure positions certain expressions of masculinity as naturally offensive, or masculinity as a construct that has been vilified and judged to be problematic in its ‘natural’ form. At the same time, there is a tension in the post around a masculinity which is supposedly inherent but whose performance has been suppressed by feminism (Messner, 1998). This ‘reclamation’ of a ‘true’ masculinity can be read as a backlash against feminism in the form of an assertion or recuperation of a ‘supressed natural’ masculinity.

In contrast, Extract 12, taken from a lengthy ‘original post’ which lists appropriate ways to perform masculinity, explicitly indicates that one should ‘cultivate’ particular traits to appear masculine (as opposed to simply realising an innate or core masculinity). This list includes many stereotypical “traits” consistent with ‘alpha’ male stereotypes such as inexpressiveness, independence, aloofness, and repudiation of ‘the feminine’. The extract invokes essential gender “traits”, which again illustrate the idea of a “natural sex” and thus a ‘natural sex difference’ of two sexes that are “in a binary relation to one another, while

simultaneously highlighting the arbitrariness of these differences through their necessary performance” (Butler, 1999, p. 178). Here, the post has basically laid out a blueprint of what a ‘real man’ needs to be, while simultaneously demonstrating the rigidity of its required performance.

Many users mobilised the notion of particular masculine traits that could be cultivated (or ‘actualized’) in order to present oneself as an appropriately masculine subject. Much as Extract 12 appealed to other members of NoFap to reclaim their suppressed masculinity, the following extracts taken from three separate comment sections indicate a similar conflict between understandings of changing social expectations and performing masculinity in particular ways for other forum members:

Extract 13

“No More Mr Nice Guy by Robert Glover discusses this very often. He explains that we should be proud of being a man. Being a man means you are passionate, creative, you focus on solution and fixing. Don't allow toxic shame to talk away that pride. Learn to self-affirm.”

Extract 14

“The thing about power, at least in the modern world we live in today, is that a man simply has to respect himself and not heel to being a beta (bitch) to be considered masculine. You don't have to be Heisman winner or national wrestler or something, just respect yourself and your own opinions. I don't see that much in the women of today either.”

Extract 15

“Who are you to say what Nofap is -really- about? As you should know, most fapstronauts partake for several different reasons. My reason for being a fapstronaut is to increase my masculinity, become stronger as a man, and learn who i really am. If a woman is uncomfortable with masculinity (aka sexist) that is THEIR problem, not mine.” [Emphasise in original]

A common thread throughout the definitions of masculinity given by NoFap users, represented in the three extracts above (as well as Extracts 11 and 12), is the positioning of men as needing to take ownership of their masculinity. What is clear is that this can only be done by casting off certain social expectations. Of note are the overt references to self-respect and self-discipline, which ostensibly stand apart from the traits that could be classed as ‘beta’

or feminine traits. The uncompromising tone of this discourse also orients the construction of an ideal masculinity as contingent upon the actualisation of the innate masculinity referenced earlier.

Also readily apparent in the foregoing extracts is the positioning of masculinity as under attack. Implicitly the idea of “seeking approval” or listening to criticism is framed as a ‘beta’ position where men need only respect themselves to realize their core masculinity. In this sense, when masculinity is not being simplified to the stereotyped performances exemplified in Extracts 12 and 13, masculinity becomes an amorphous and ambiguous construct predicated only on the ability to not bend to the will of others. As a result the extracts above suggest it may in fact be the public face of the ‘nice guy’ that is considered the masculine performance, as men surrender their innate masculinity to in turn be accepted into a society which is critical of certain ‘masculine’ behaviours.

Concluding Commentary

In this article we aimed to contribute to a body of literature that focuses on the pornography audience while moving beyond a negative effects model to engage with more complex and nuanced work around the experiences of the users’ of pornography. In particular, we sought to illuminate the ways that participants in an online pornography abstinence forum negotiated masculinity and their pornography use/abstinence. Whereas a website committed to the rejection of pornography might have been expected to be a site of ‘progressive’ or ‘unconventional’ expressions of masculinity aligning with anti-pornography feminist concerns, our analyses indicate that the members of NoFap cited in our analysis most frequently utilized and redeployed familiar masculine discourses. In particular, the construction of men as dominant seekers of pleasure and women as the ‘natural’ suppliers of this pleasure within the data (through both ‘evolutionary’ and ‘real heterosexuality’

discourses) simply reproduced ‘common sense’ sexual expectations of gendered dominance and submission (Gavey, 2005).

Moreover, across the data presented forum participants used discourses of autonomy and heterosexual agency to account for their refusal of pornography, as opposed to ethical or moral concerns about the content of pornography itself which remained somewhat ironically amorphous and unexamined. In line with Gabriel Cavaglion’s (2009) study, users expressed a widely held concern around loss of agency through pornography’s apparent power over them, which manifested most explicitly as concerns that pornography use was somehow interfering with the users’ ability to achieve a sense of normality by attracting women. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that users utilized discourses of agency, as they struggled to reconcile their confessions of a loss of sexual self-control with their positions as masculine subjects (Terry, 2012). Importantly, *how* abstaining from masturbating to pornography would increase users’ masculinity, and why women would find this appealing remained largely uncriticised.

However, unlike Cavaglion (2009), we suggest that pornography users are acutely aware of normalizing pressures, which on the one hand situate coupled heterosexual sex as a prototypical ideal and on the other position pornography use and masturbation as well outside of this ‘charmed circle’ of valued sex (Rubin, 1984). Notably, users deployed discourses that involved both strong desires for ‘real’ sex alongside discourses of monogamy, and their distress over an apparent inability to achieve a fairly stereotypical relationship or sexual experience. Whereas Simon Lindgren’s (2010) pornography users celebrated the hedonistic pornography consumption and masturbation as a badge of masculinity which makes “men into men” (p.183), the users of NoFap discussed masturbation and pornography as an imminent threat to ‘real’ sexual relationships and the realization of an idealized, yet elusive masculinity. Interestingly, in both NoFap and in Lindgren’s pornography fan forums the maintenance of a homosocial environment almost eclipses the main topic of conversation,

such that whether men are celebrating or rejecting pornography, a sense of approval from other men is paramount.

Scholarship on pornography is inherently political and often controversial, and as such research that asks standard questions, uses standard research methods, and frames pornography use in the same ways will continue to find results that confirm popular assumptions (McKee, 2009). Our findings suggest that beyond the labelling of 'excessive' pornography use as 'pathological' are fraught negotiations of how to perform and convey 'appropriate' sexual desires and how this conduct relates to idealized forms of masculine behaviour. Our analysis highlights the struggle by forum members to gain (or regain) control over their masculinity, employing idealised masculine themes of self-control, self-actualisation, the rejection of feminist criticism, and the need for 'real sex' in order to justify their resistance to pornography use and masturbation. Here, men's control over themselves and the repetition of an aspiration to appropriate (hetero)sexual conduct highlights the efforts that are afforded in maintaining such a 'natural' state, while leaving the paradox of having to struggle to uncover an innate tendency unconsidered. In essence, the 'effect' of pornography use that NoFap members were most concerned about was its ability to hijack their sexuality, and as such impinge upon their 'real' masculine subjectivity. While user distress might well be described as pathological by some, we suggest that pornography scholarship must continue to ask questions about the ways that pornography use can be incorporated into individuals' meaning making, a focus too frequently sidelined within dominant psychological research paradigms.

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ⁱ Taken from reddit’s advertising help page: <https://reddit.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/205183225-Audience-and-Demographics>

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https://www.reddit.com/r/NoFap/comments/1zt8z7/the_rnofap_survey_results_and_breakdown/?st=ix2zuzq4&sh=28602dc7

ⁱⁱⁱ Project Know is an online addiction resource which surveyed 1,500 of the forum’s members in 2012. At the time of the survey 90% of respondents self-identified as heterosexual males and the dominant age group reported was 20-29 year olds (58%), with 31% identifying as aged 13-19 years, and the remainder as aged over 30 years (11%). <http://www.projectknow.com/discover/taking-a-whack-at-porn-addiction/#.VmluPWSDGko>

^{iv} Despite these statistics however, it is necessary to mention here that while every NoFap user presented in this article has been referred to using masculine pronouns, and despite users overwhelming self-identifying as male in their ‘original posts’ and comments, it can only be assumed that all NoFap members quoted were indeed male.

^v If text is posted holds the possibility of arousing other users, the poster is encouraged to censor such text with a solid colour box using a simple line of code: “Please mark any triggering text with the following code: [text I want to hide]/(nsfw).” <https://www.reddit.com/r/NoFap/>