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“The ultimate test of self-discipline”: Lockdown and the NoFap community

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Abstract

NoFap is a community of mostly heterosexual men abstaining from what they see as an addictive cycle of pornography, masturbation, and orgasm, induced by the exploitation of innate male urges by the pornography industry. In the general population, increased masturbation and consumption of pornography are associated with psychological factors including low affect, loneliness, and boredom, all of which may be exacerbated by the lockdown/social distancing measures adopted in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The present study explores how the NoFap community has responded to the pandemic through discourse analysis of an online message board. We identify four key themes: i) I let go in lockdown, ii) the opportunity of lockdown, iii) testing the parameters of NoFap, and iv) community cohesion. Each is defined and discussed. Combined they illustrate a digital community struggling to honor its meritocratic masculine ideals in the face of challenging circumstances.

Keywords

NoFap, Covid-19, pornography, manosphere, masturbation

Introduction

Consumption of pornography has increased across many countries over the last decade (Price et al., 2016; Zattoni et al., 2020), with some estimates suggesting up to three-quarters of men are active consumers (Lewczuk and Gola, 2018; Regnerus et al., 2016;

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Rissel et al., 2017). Interestingly, this same period has seen the emergence and growth of an abstinence community among men. Typically, their avoidance extends to masturbation and, in some cases, includes orgasms entirely—a variation known as “hard mode” (“Rebooting from Porn Addiction,” n.d.). Among the alleged benefits of avoiding pornography and masturbation are increased enjoyment of “real” versus fake sex,” along with positive psychobiological outcomes such as greater drive, sharper cognition and the development of traits typically associated with heightened testosterone levels: bigger biceps and a deeper voice. Collectively these attributes, and others, are called “super-powers” (“40 Epic Benefits of NoFap,” 2020).

This community, known as NoFap, has several dedicated digital outlets. The largest of which is the subreddit NoFap, currently boasting over 800,000 members (reddit NoFap, n.d.) and recently gaining over 100,000 within less than a year (Hartmann, 2021). The online forum provides guidance and social support for individuals who feel that they have lost control over their lives due to excessive masturbation or consumption of pornography. Members, labeled “Fapstronauts,” commit themselves to a 90-day abstinence as part of a mental reboot to break a negative feedback loop of Pornography, Masturbation, Orgasm (PMO). Although NoFap is not limited to people who regard themselves as being addicted to pornography, alongside “overuse” and “compulsive use,” the community homepage emphasizes it as a critical reason to register (“What is NoFap?”, n.d.).

There are a variety of other explanations as to why people decide to abstain from pornography. In addition to philosophical viewpoints, such as higher religiosity and conservatism, a study of men on an unrelated subreddit suggests they may refrain because they worry about the health implications of excessive masturbation (Zimmer and Imhoff, 2020). Others see it as an exciting test of their self-control (Bishop, 2019) or a way to increase their relationship commitment (Fernandez et al. 2021). However, most commonly, people join NoFap for reasons related to personal motivation, relationships, intimacy and an alleged link between pornography and sexual dysfunction (Osadchiy et al., 2020). For example, NoFap founder Alexander Rhodes became an anti-pornography campaigner following concerns about its impact on his sexual performance (Luscombe, 2016). Upon reading a study that seemed to evidence a surge in testosterone after a week without ejaculating, he became interested in possible physical and sexual benefits associated with abstaining.

Some authors have characterized NoFap as being a part of, or an entry point into, the “manosphere” (Burnett, 2021; Hartmann, 2021; Johanssen, 2021): a coalition of online communities in which anti-feminist/male hegemonic masculinities are constructed and affirmed. Constituent groups include Involuntary Celibates (incels), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) and Pick-Up Artists (PUAs). Common to each group is a focus on prescriptive gender norms and the idea that a traditional form of heterosexual masculinity is under attack from a gynocentric feminist cultural consensus (Ging, 2019; Nagle, 2017). Manospheric concerns include social change mainstreaming misandry and the stigmatization, and subsequent denial, of men’s innate masculinity: the authentic male as a natural hunter and leader (Marwick and Caplan, 2018). Beliefs predicated upon an interpretation of evolutionary psychology principles (Menzie, 2020; Van Valkenburgh, 2018) that is genetically deterministic and thus could be considered fallacious (Buss and

Schmitt, 2011; Welling and Nicolas, 2015). These attitudes have been used to distinguish such spaces from others that are predominantly or entirely male (Lilly, 2016; Ging, 2019). The mere presence of only or mostly men is not sufficient for labeling a community part of the manosphere.

When categorizing masculine homosocial spaces, that is, spaces dedicated to furthering social bonds between persons of the same sex Hammarén and Johansson (2014) distinguish between vertical/hierarchical and horizontal variants. For them, vertical/hierarchical homosociality refers to social dynamics and relations which seeks to defend and strengthen hegemonic masculinity and reinforce gender hierarchies. The common thread is a belief in a natural patriarchy segregating men and women based upon inherently dominant masculinity (Bird, 1996). In contrast, horizontal homosociality relates to arrangements in which relations between men are based on emotional closeness, shared experiences, intimacy, and friendship. The authors liken these to homosociality among females that tends to be more supportive and affectionate.

Durant et al. (2012) demonstrated how homosocial spaces can facilitate longer-lasting and more intimate bonds among cancer survivors than gender neutral ones, including between women on an ovarian cancer forum and men on a prostate cancer one. The authors argue that this is because people join online cancer forums to connect with others who have experienced what they are, and that in these outlets homosociality contributes to the creation and longevity of relationships. Similarly, Hanna and Gough (2018) showed that users of a male-only infertility forum benefitted from the support of other men and found themselves able to open up emotionally with them in a way they felt disempowered from doing physically or with women. In that respect, forum members felt they were held back by male hegemony, operating in its shadow, as opposed to finding it aspirational or even desirable. Members repeatedly situated their emotionally supportive community as an alternative to their offline lives, favorably contrasting the acceptance they enjoyed on the forum to that which they lacked outside it. Other potential candidates for horizontal homosocial communities include gay male groups and digital spaces dedicated to men's physical or mental health.

Not that vertical and horizontal homosocial male categories are mutually exclusive. Hammarén and Johansson's (2014) distinction still allows for overlap within the same community. In the fertility forum study, members appreciated the anonymity because it helped them to share feelings it would be more challenging to do in person (Hanna and Gough, 2018). Yet some also called themselves "weird" for doing so, and characterized women as less detached from their emotions than men are. Elsewhere in sexualities, Middleweek (2021) details hierarchization and horizontal homosociality among members on an online meeting place for owners and admirers of sex dolls. Even in manosphere communities, that are ideologically vertical, incels often openly discuss symptoms of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation alongside their more violent or misogynistic posts (Daly and Laskovtsov, 2021). So there may be elements of horizontal relations among hierarchical homosocial male communities and vice versa.

As per the vertical homosocial male spaces described by Hammarén and Johansson (2014), manospheric spaces share a common focus on male hegemony and patriarchy as humanities natural states. They also see this as being corrupted by feminists. However,

constituent groups in the manosphere situate themselves differently in masculine hierarchies, doing so as a function of how successfully they fulfill this standard (Ging, 2019). Some see themselves as embodying/aspiring toward this ideal. Or, in the case of beta identities, they see themselves as being unable to live up to it. Collective identities may inform their attitudes toward relationships with women. For example, PUAs actively pursue sexual relationships with women, distinguishing them from incel discourses, which view relationships as unobtainable (Jaki et al., 2019), or the separatist MGTOW for whom they are undesirable (Wright et al., 2020). Group differences in interpretation of their own relative status mean that the manosphere is not always a cohesive or harmonious coalition. For example, incels understand the alpha males in some groups, like PUAs, are desirable to women. Yet they think their erotic capital is undermined by them being uncivilized and brutish, as opposed to “nice guys” like themselves (Menzie, 2020; Palma, 2019). However, the common thread is that the most attractive women are drawn toward these men despite the social pressure not to be.

Johanssen (2021) places NoFap in the manosphere on account of its networked misogyny and the ideological instrumentalization of women. However, they note its inclusion is debatable because their discourses are typically less extreme. Like Hartmann (2021), we do not argue that NoFap is part of the manosphere per se. There are a plurality of reasons men may choose not to masturbate (Fernandez et al., 2021; Zimmer and Imhoff, 2020) so it would be crude to make common assumptions about why they do. Many, or perhaps even most, NoFappers may reject manosphere dogma since it is not a prerequisite for engaging with the challenge. We also have no reason to think they would partake in or promote abusive behaviors toward women online or offline like other parts of the manosphere (Bates, 2021; Ging, 2019). Nor do we think they would sympathize with/celebrate murderers such as Elliot Rodger. Moreover, unlike incels, MGTOW or PUAs NoFap is a registered organization with a homepage instead of a loose identity stemming from a range of blogs, forums, and websites (Burnett, 2021; Ging, 2019). And to the extent that registered users align themselves with the publicly expressed values of a website, their official outlets are markedly different to other candidate manosphere spaces because they explicitly forbid “sweeping anti-women comments.”

In that respect, NoFap may be part of a pipeline to manospheric beliefs or a group in which many members are fellow travelers. Still the research to date suggests that, when studied collectively, NoFappers tend to endorse several core manosphere narratives, including gender essentialism, masculine hegemony and a disdain for feminism (Ging, 2019). These tendencies could make them a space these ideas are normalized without being required or even expected. Rather than being part of the manosphere continuum, there may be a continuum within NoFap communities themselves ranging from those who reject manosphere tenets or are ambivalent to those who embrace them.

For example, a discourse analysis of the NoFap Reddit page by Taylor and Jackson (2018) characterizes the community as a largely male space in which heteronormative attitudes are commonplace, and discrepancies between men and women’s social roles/status are understood as a consequence of essential binary differences in their physicality and hardwiring. “Real” men are naturally dominant individuals, competing with each other to attract “real” women via displays of natural heterosexual masculinity. But

because these behaviors have apparently been ideologically vilified and suppressed by feminist modernity, authentic masculinity requires men to embrace who they really are. Therefore, the alpha male is both an innate part of men that they need to free, and a state to strive toward. Stories like these, about the decline of “real” men under feminism and the stigmatization of alpha male masculinity, are consistent with the red pill philosophy: a lynchpin for the diffuse parts of the manosphere (Van Valkenburgh, 2018).

As well as a feminist consensus, though, the NoFap members cited by Taylor and Jackson (2018) believe these qualities have been further dampened by men’s now effortless access to pornography. In line with historical discourses on masturbation more broadly, they perceive pornography as a corrupting and emasculating force (Garlick, 2012; Stolberg, 2000). The brain cannot distinguish between virtual and “real” sexual stimuli, so pornography subverts the naturalized exchange economy in which self-actualizing men get sexually rewarded for their labor. Instead, they are getting the orgasm minus the effort. As the neuroscientist Gary Wilson memorably put it, when visiting pornographic websites, men’s brains may think they have acquired an abundance of sexual partners when they are just “fertilizing the screen.” (Hartmann, 2021, p419). Hence, the digital realm represents an artificial marketplace in which men become complacent: mere consumers of other people’s sexual pleasure versus autonomous individuals able to acquire their own. In contrast to real women, who are drawn to their masculine power, virtual women have usurped men and taken it from them.

Taylor and Jackson (2018) exemplify this through the contrast between sexually active men, who feel like “king of the jungle” post-coitus, and “lonely losers” who masturbate “to pixels on a screen” (p627). Men, as natural organisms, have healthy sexual drives. However, a lack of control is construed as effeminate because it signals that one cannot yield self-governance and regulation over one’s emotions. Therefore, masculinity in the NoFap community is a balance between acknowledging one’s sexual desires and maintaining control over them. Thus, a popular narrative among NoFap members, if not the organization itself, appears to be that the growing popularity of pornography is socially hazardous, threatening to subvert the stability of a natural patriarchal order. Such arguments are incompatible with feminist critiques since they postulate that the masturbating man only engages in a system of exploitation to the extent he is a victim. Hence, the liberated post-masturbatory man is characterized as sovereign and authentic. Uncompromised by external forces, such as pornography, he has obtained a higher level of subjecthood. Consequently, he is better situated to attract “real women” than a “little bitch” or “pussy” beta male (Hartmann, 2021).

This is not to say that NoFap represents a single world view. Like the website repeatedly points out, the group is not homogenous (“What is NoFap” n.d.), and as stated above, there are a range of reasons individuals take up the challenge. A Twitter analysis by Burnett (2021) supported this notion by identifying seven overlapping masculine subjectivities associated with the community. All of these share elements of the discourses detailed by Taylor and Jackson (2018), that is, innate masculinity being degraded by society and pornography, men having a physical predisposition for power, and the need to take ownership of it. First are Fapstronauts, who are anxious about PMO’s impact upon their mental/physical health. They worry that pornography makes it harder to “stay hard.”

Sure enough, an analysis of the Reddit page by [Osadchiy et al. \(2020\)](#) found sexual dysfunction was a key motivator for most people sharing their reasons for abstaining from masturbation.

[Burnett \(2021\)](#) also identified the Self-Masters to whom NoFap is an opportunity cost: a waste of limited time, energy and money. Their masculinity is evidenced not through these base desires but high-performance achievements: an attractive muscular physique, financial success and traditionally masculine traits such as bravery and dominance. Like the videos cited by [Hartmann \(2021\)](#), this subgroup embraces a neoliberal outlook common to other self-help forms. The last of [Burnett's \(2021\)](#) varieties, which we wish to mention, are Meninists, who see pornography as like a succubus, or Aldous Huxley's fictional drug SOMA: a feminist utility designed to leave men docile and weak. Consumers are effectively cuckolded, only experiencing sex through others. To counter this, men need to abstain from PMO and take back control—a struggle one user likens to emancipation from slavery.

Across the literature, a consistent picture emerges of pornography, and by extension PMO more broadly, being viewed as a threat to masculinity. Relapsing represents not only a failure to abstain from a habit but a fundamental betrayal of something integral to being a man. Under typical circumstances, this means NoFappers must stay vigilant and find ways to fill their time that enable them to reaffirm their commitment to abstinence. But what happens when they can no longer rely on their usual routines?

Pornography and the pandemic

A factor that may aggravate the likelihood of relapse is social isolation, with prior research identifying a positive association between Internet pornography use and loneliness ([Butler et al., 2018](#); [Yoder et al., 2005](#)). One explanation could be that masturbation stimulates the dopaminergic pathways in the brain's reward system, providing users with a temporary release from feelings of dissatisfaction in their life—hence the effectiveness of dopamine antagonist naltrexone in treating compulsive Internet sexual activity ([Bostwick and Bucci, 2008](#)). On a related point, [Grubbs et al. \(2019\)](#) suggested people watch pornography as a means of coping with, or escaping, negative affective states. [Boethe et al. \(2020\)](#) found emotional distraction and suppression to be among the most reliable motivations behind problematic pornography use; in such instances, users visit pornographic websites to avoid low affective states. Further explanations identified include sexual pleasure, stress reduction and a lack of sexual satisfaction.

The predictors of pornography use mentioned above may have been exacerbated by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the resultant lockdown measures. Although the severity of restrictions has varied heavily between nations, states, and regions, a common aspect was/is introducing physical distancing rules to reduce transmission. These can include mandating employees work from home, limiting where/when people can assemble in public or private locations. There are also practical constraints, such as curfews and travel bans. These measures combine to reduce people's opportunities for social contact. [Gupta and Dhamija \(2020\)](#) suggest a short path from social distancing to social isolation. Across populations, lockdown measures and anxiety surrounding the

pandemic anticipate adverse mental health outcomes in various age groups (Banks and Xu, 2020; Holmes et al., 2020). Specifically, these outcomes have included, but are not limited to, depression, stress, and loneliness (Fingerman et al., 2020; Groarke et al., 2020).

Lockdown measures present a significant challenge to the NoFap community, creating circumstances that may increase the likelihood of participants relapsing. Similar concerns have been made about other behavioral addictions, including online gaming (King et al., 2020). In addition, there has been a recorded increase in excessive Internet use during the outbreak (Dong et al., 2020), and, most relevant to this topic, pornography use (Rodrigues and Martins, 2020; Mestre-bach et al. 2020; Pornhub Insights, 2020; Sharma and Subramanyam, 2020; Zattoni et al., 2020). Interestingly, solo masturbation appears to have decreased during the same period (Lehmiller et al., 2020), implying people are potentially less likely to masturbate but will more often consume pornography when they do. Such trends suggest further integration between the Internet and digital platforms with human sexuality (Nixon and Düsterhöft, 2017).

A popular media narrative analysis by Döring (2020) anticipates domestic isolation promoting low-risk sexual outlets as constructive coping behaviors to ward off lockdown induced boredom. Some data support their predictions, including the growth in pornography use detailed above and a cross-countries increase in the sale of sex toys in the immediate period following the implementation of local lockdown measures (Lee, 2020). Perhaps sensing an opportunity, leading pornography provider Pornhub.com offered free premium access to quarantined people in Italy before rolling their offer out across Europe and later worldwide. Their website subsequently saw an almost 20% increase in web traffic, with spikes tending to follow the implementation of regional social distancing measures (Grubbs, 2020).

With fewer opportunities for sexual relations, including between non-cohabiting partners asked to socially distance from each other, individuals accustomed to having casual intercourse may have had to adjust to going months without physical intimacy. Pornography could, therefore, provide an outlet to help people cope with disruptions to their sex life, along with virtual/phone sex (Dewitte et al., 2020). These possibilities are consistent with advice from government health organizations, in places including Ireland (Brent, 2020) and New York (Valenti, 2020), that have promoted masturbation as an alternative to sexual intercourse. Ironically, NoFap users are encouraged to do the thing they are trying to avoid in the name of public health. Hence, some researchers have even suggested online self-help forums, such as NoFap, may be invaluable to those experiencing heightened distress relating to what they see as problematic pornography use (Mestre-Bach et al., 2020). Moreover, this community offers an insight into if and how social distancing exacerbates perceived problematic pornography use and the emotional consequences for men trying to abstain.

The present study

The research team collected posts from Reddit registered users at R/NoFap linked to the topic of lockdown measures for critical discourse analysis. With the imposition of social distancing measures, this project explored how this community has adapted to this

significant change in their circumstances. Specifically, it aimed to explore how Fap-stronauts, from across the globe have been affected by local lockdown measures. We ask if these rules/regulations helped or harmed their engagement with the challenge and/or their ability to live up to their ideals of sovereign, meritocratic masculinity.

Social distancing measures pre-empted an increase in the consumption of pornography across the wider population. For men who are abstaining, these trends may predict an increased likelihood of relapsing, thus betraying the masculine ideals associated with NoFap (Hartmann, 2021; Taylor and Jackson 2018). Members failing to persevere during lockdown may see themselves as having regressed, conceptualizing their masculine identity in terms of degradation, feminization or being animalistic. This outcome could be particularly common for users whose primary motivation for wanting to take ownership of their body is improving sexual performance since they are also less likely to have access to sexual partners, as opposed to those framing the challenge as one part of a more holistic change in their lifestyle.

This other group comprise Burnett's (2021) Self-Masters subjectivity, characterized by their commitment to achievement and physical demonstrations of individual sovereignty. For them, the added pressure of social distancing could present a test of their masculine resolve. Abstaining from PMO at a time when other people are doing it more often may be a concrete way to prove themselves. This perspective could be further amplified by the knowledge that other people in the NoFap community are struggling, making their continued display of grit even more exceptional. Through this lens, lockdown may even be seen as empowering, with the heightened demands providing an opportunity for individuals to reaffirm their commitment to NoFap. We, therefore, explore the masculine identities evoked when community members discuss relapsing or rebooting.

Methodology

Data were collected and analyzed following the approach outlined in Butler et al. (2018). Using a model built in Python, the subreddit r/NoFap was scraped for any threads with the term "lockdown" in the title made between March 2020, when measures generally began, and November 2020. 524 posts, comprising 164 threads, were exported to Microsoft Excel for initial review. Two threads were discounted for lack of relevance to the study at this stage. All members of the research team coded and analyzed the same subsection of posts for intercoder reliability. Following further discussion about coding, the threads were divided for analysis by three research team members, with all coding reviewed by the fourth member of the research team. At this stage, a further three threads were omitted from analysis due to lack of relevance or due to the self-affirmed age of the poster being under 18. A final sample of 513 subsidiary posts, from 159 threads, were subject to analysis. During analysis, the research team ensured that all previously collected posts were still accessible on the forum. The dataset was anonymized too; all usernames and identifiable information were removed from the sample.

Using the coding schedule agreed upon in the trial coding exercise, each original post was summarized, the valence—positive, negative, and neutral—noted (Butler et al., 2018), and up to three key themes identified with themes seen as "an extended phrase or

sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about/what it means” (Saldana, 2021: 258). Themes included “asking for advice,” “defining NoFap,” “framing as addiction,” and “lockdown as a challenge.” Next, the responses in the thread were summarized and valence assigned. Consideration was also given to any gender implications (e.g., the way that women were discussed), and any alternative activities used to distract from PMO and, where present, were noted in the coding schedule. After all threads had been analyzed, the team agreed on overarching themes that defined the sample based upon common consensus. One of the researchers then gathered the most suitable quotations for each theme and wrote a summary that was then shared between members for approval.

In line with a Critical Discourse Analytic approach, the themes from within the texts were positioned within a broader social, political and economic context allowing the text to be recontextualized within broader “social processes” (Wodak, 2013: 185). Our original intention was to use quotations sparingly and comment on general patterns. However, when illustrating our themes, we did not think they could be adequately outlined without qualifying our claims or giving examples. Reddit is a public forum, and the NoFap page does not have optional security measures such as discussions only being accessible to approved parties. Users would therefore not have an expectation of privacy. Although they could reasonably expect their posts will not be subject to a research project. Hence, while key quotations were noted during the first round of analysis and informed the conclusions, we have elected not to provide any direct quotes in this paper to maintain anonymity and confidentiality and minimize harm (British Psychological Society, 2017; Butler et al., 2018). Where there appears to be a direct quotation, it has been paraphrased or represents a composite quotation.

This standard may seem overly cautious, and in changing posts, even mildly, we risk altering their writers’ original intentions. Other discourse analyses, which we have cited above, present verbatim quotations (Burnett, 2021; Ging, 2019; Taylore and Jackson, 2018), so we appreciate there is no definitive way to respond to consent, privacy, and anonymity issues. However, we believe the balanced approach we chose allowed us to develop and illustrate our themes without compromising users’ online identity. These issues pose a significant challenge for researchers looking at Internet communications and will only become more important as people’s social lives become increasingly digitized (Sugiura et al., 2017).

When amending statements we have used synonyms, but we were careful to preserve the essence of what the poster wrote. All uses of metaphor were kept intact too, to be as consistent with the intentions of the original post as possible, for example, where we report a member writing “to create Heaven, one needs to live in Hell,” it is in line with their imagery and phrasing, though there has been a word substitution to protect the forum member.

The study was approved by the Robert Gordon University’s School of Applied Social Studies Ethics Committee and adhered to relevant guidelines for Internet-mediated research (British Psychological Society, 2017). Furthermore, no informed consent was necessary since the data collected existed within the public domain of the Internet, and the risk of harm was low (Stevens et al., 2015).

Findings/Discussion

A discourse analysis of relevant threads saw the emergence of four core themes. These are summarized and discussed below. The first two discuss lockdown as both a challenge that can overwhelm forum members and an opportunity to overcome that challenge. These two interpretations are not mutually exclusive. Many threads, and even individual posts, reflected both attitudes—a chance for personal growth made even more rewarding by its difficulty.

1. “I let go in lockdown”

The overwhelming majority of posts suggested the additional demands of lockdown and social distancing measures have been onerous for users. One claimed “most people call this hard mode,” and another labeled it “NoFap the next level.” A common sentiment was that the restrictions hampered people’s ability to make alternative plans or meet their other goals, betraying masculine ideals of meritocracy and self-ownership: “basically I was clean because I could be outside 24/7 - and it was awesome. My productivity was through the roof... Now I’m losing control.”

Further posts likened the NoFap struggle to armed conflict, positing NoFappers as soldiers and using extended metaphors relating to battles in which they will be “the victors.” They even spoke of the difficulty of leaving the period “alive” and said that “giving up means dying!”. The nature of the challenge had changed: “being unable to go outside the confines of my home or socialize indefinitely adds difficulty to this mission.” As we shall return to later, war analogies are significant for their associations with brotherhood among men. But also, like the allusion to slavery in [Burnett \(2021\)](#), the hyperbolic comparison underlines both the importance they place on overcoming the PMO cycle and the strength they believe is required to do so. Thus, lockdown was seen as an arena in which their mettle would be tested.

Imagery relating to violent conflicts is a common metaphor in manospheric spaces, whether this takes the form of labeling feminists as “literal Nazis” or conceptualizing an abstract “war of the sexes” ([Lilly, 2016](#)). Perhaps this reflects the innate masculinity these groups celebrate, envy or aspire toward being defined by physicality. Although interestingly, among communities oriented toward more beta masculine identities, such as incels, it is common to see rhetoric about a “beta uprising” ([Ging, 2019](#)). An extreme example is the canonization of mass murderer Elliot Rodger, who has been approvingly commemorated in these groups for “righteous violence” ([Witt, 2020](#)). Yet where NoFap varies from some parts of the manosphere is their discourses are grounded in the individualist, neoliberal framework of the self-help industry. So, while to some, the enemy was pornography itself, more commonly, users saw themselves as fighting to overthrow their own urges: “You have to defeat yourself and remember we are our main enemies.” These two sentiments demonstrate the Meninist and Self-Master subjectivities detailed by [Burnett \(2021\)](#).

Past research has identified factors common to lockdown, including boredom, loneliness and social isolation, predict higher rates of pornography consumption ([Banks](#)

and Xu, 2020; Holmes et al., 2020). Moreover, lockdown and social distancing measures are associated with increased consumption of pornography across the general population (Rodrigues and Martins, 2020; Mestre-bach et al., 2020; Pornhub Insights, 2020; Sharma and Subramanyam, 2020; Zattoni et al., 2020). As such, it makes sense that a clear majority of posters were worried about the impact of lockdown on their progress and reported being more likely to relapse. Three subthemes emerge:

i) *Fighting boredom:*

The single most common reason users reported relapsing or worrying that they may later do so was boredom. Time alone in their bedroom with electronic devices was cited as a situation they felt exacerbated the urge to masturbate: smartphones, laptops, and televisions were all seen as pathways to sexual thought. The allure of online pornography was strong for bored people working electronically. However, it was even more so for members who had less structure in their days and spent copious amounts of time alone in their bedroom with just these devices for solace. Where users had formerly supplemented their NoFap challenges with rich, varied lives spent with friends or engaging in activities, such as mixed martial arts, they reported relapsing more than before. Many cited streaks they had been broken under social distancing.

One consistent outcome was almost immediate regret over the relapse. Some users said they cried, and others reported self-harm behaviors such as striking their genitals—punishing a body they did not feel control over. Hence, the aftermath often seemed to be worse than the low-affect prompting their relapse in the first place. To counter boredom, users suggested a plurality of activities. Though some emphasized building the brain versus the body, the most common suggestions were running and weightlifting.

Bedrooms became makeshift gyms in place of the ones they would visit: “I’m a bodybuilder and love training at the gym - it depresses me I can’t” and “taking the crap out my system at the gym was the only thing keeping me sane.” Physical activities were cited as auxiliary techniques in the NoFap journey to self-improvement. They typify the Self-Master subject position highlighted by Burnett (2021): alpha males evidencing their masculinity via physical demonstrations of self-regulation and endurance. Focusing on exercising versus masturbating is consistent with NoFap’s notion of performative masculinity expressed through strength and discipline (Taylor and Jackson, 2018). The importance of physicality aligns with patriarchal scripts integral to the community. Men perceiving gender through this lens may value traits they see as displays of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity, for example, confidence, dominance, and morphological masculinization (Hartmann, 2021; Van Valenburgh, 2018).

This last point is notable since muscle mass and enhanced upper body definition are among the main reasons men exercise, to modify their body toward a masculine ideal, that is, a muscular mesomorph body shape (Franco et al., 2015; Grogan, 2016). Importantly, both endurance and resistance training temporarily increase testosterone (Grandys et al., 2009; Smilios et al., 2007) in marked contrast to PMO which is associated with testosterone loss (Jiang et al., 2003).

ii) *Loneliness:*

As well as feeling bored, users in the dataset openly discussed feelings of loneliness. They attributed many mental health problems to social isolation and the absence of human connection. Taking comfort from, or investing in, existing relationships, including with family members, was a commonly suggested alternative to masturbation. Members cited copious time alone leading to frustration and distress: feelings they linked to their relapses, as the PMO cycle became a coping strategy. Like [Grubbs et al. \(2019\)](#) suggested, they watched pornography as a means of coping with or escaping, negative affective states. One even suggested they had become dependent on the PMO cycle during lockdown because it had become their “sole companion.”

These feelings were particularly prevalent among forum users who were not in committed relationships or lived alone. Some felt like they were going “mad” and divulged fantasies they had about self-harm. Without social stimulation, members worried they had returned to their old “pitiful” selves before the social empowerment offered through the community. They regress to the conceptualization of the masturbating man, as detailed by [Hartmann’s \(2020\)](#): unproductive, unmotivated and lacking the confidence and self-assurance nurtured by the community. On a related point, some members described being lonely before lockdown, giving a potential indication of one subset of men the NoFap coalition includes the socially inhibited young men found in all areas of the manosphere ([Bates, 2021](#)). For them, social distance measures had worsened their situation.

2. *The opportunity of lockdown*

Despite acknowledging the difficulty of retaining their streaks during lockdown, many community members saw it as an opportunity to put their grit to the test, and the narrative of opportunity was often interwoven with discussions of the immense challenge: “I relapsed from a two months streak because of the lockdown, but I’m back and stronger now.” Such linking highlights the framing of NoFap more broadly, with the difficulties being transmuted from the insurmountable to the possible. This is consistent with the group’s meritocratic identity partially stemming from evidencing performative aspects of traditional masculinity: triumph through self-discipline and control ([Burnett, 2021](#); [Hartmann, 2021](#)).

To these users, accounting for approximately a quarter of posts, the increased challenge offered a period for intense personal reflection and emotional growth. Lockdown was not just useful, but even good: “it’s gotten easier. I’ve so much time to grind hobbies, I study at my own pace, and I exercise daily.” One user even stated he had prayed for this sort of event because it offered a time to reboot that was unavailable in their otherwise stressful life. There were two subthemes:

i) *Personal growth*:

The difficulty of lockdown and social distancing measures made it something that could, theoretically, build character: “it can be spent taking care of yourself physically, mentally and spiritually... to become a focused man.” An especially memorable post compared the opportunity for development with Walter White’s transition on the television drama *Breaking Bad* to his alter-ego, Heisenberg. A journey that sees him evolve from a mild-mannered husband and chemistry teacher to a stone-cold killer and drug kingpin. Notions like this were commonplace: “we’re not going around the storm, but going through it” and “if you can get past this phase, nothing can ever hold you down.” Thus, despite the acknowledged difficulties that come with it, lockdown represented a proving ground: “I don’t want to hear ‘I think’, I want to hear ‘I will!’ I want to hear ‘I’ll do anything to succeed, even in lockdown’.” Successful abstinence during this demanding period would provide a viable source of strength moving forward. “to create Heaven, one needs to live in Hell.” Instead of falling into a vicious cycle and “hating” themselves they could use this time to become “unstoppable” and someone their “future self is thankful for.” After lockdown and social distancing ended, it would “always be easy mode.”

Optimistic framing like this illustrates the communal focus on meritocracy in individual subjects. Hartmann (2021) compares this outlook to a form of sexual Thatcherism: individuals ascending social hierarchies through merit. Other cited areas of the manosphere have been discussed in terms of their adherence to this ideology. Bratich and Banet-Weiser (2019) charted the incel movement’s rise through neoliberalism’s focus on self-determination and its subsequent inability to cope with those whose self-confidence is undermined by failure, that is, men who aspired to be alpha males, following the advice of PUA’s, resenting their inability to live up to these ideals. The authors suggest heteronormativity’s instrumentalization of women into masculine achievement markers inspires bitterness among entitled men unable to attract them. In networks of misogyny, in which sexual access is not just desired but expected, a man’s worth varies as a function of his ability to attract women.

However, a critical difference between Fapstronauts and incels is that, unlike the latter, the former aspire toward alpha male status instead of seeing their natural place as the bottom of a hierarchy (Ging, 2019). By embracing their authentic masculine subjectivity, they are investors and will be later rewarded for their hardship (Taylor and Jackson, 2018). In the sexual marketplace, they are prospective winners. As one member alludes: “lockdown will end, so you can be productive or waste it. How do you want to remember it? As a guy who mastered not fapping or a guy who masturbated. It’s up to you!”

ii) *“Separating the men from the boys”*:

In addition to lockdown representing an opportunity for Fapstronauts to push themselves, several saw it as a watershed moment that would i) expose those only casually dedicated to their cause and ii) highlight a chasm between them and the general population. Individual success varies as a function of their ability to master their sexual urges and their determination. “I started in June last year and laughed my ass off at people

panicking and sharing feels because of that little lockdown. It is not even a blip on my radar” wrote one member, being true to the masculine meritocratic standard discussed by Hartmann (2021). Emotion, relative to their calm demeanor, signals weakness. It was frequently argued most people would not exorcise competing desires and achieve a realized masculinity, defined by self-control. Hence, the ability of nascent abstainers to transcend their urges is obtainable only to the elite few: “if you can resist the urges of lockdown, you will be one of the few alpha males around,” thus exemplifying the outlook identified by both Taylor and Jackson (2018) and Hartmann (2021), optimum masculinity is conceptualized as a man who can take control of his body and quash temptations. Some people may achieve this during the easy times, but lockdown represents an even more extraordinary feat.

Triumphant members concocted visions of the future in which they proudly knew they had used the lockdown period to take control of their lives. In these visions, they mastered sovereignty and discipline as the wider population, depicted like mindless zombies. As per Taylor and Jackson’s (2018) notion of realness, “they don’t understand who they really are because they were just jacking off.” Post-masturbatory men will reap the benefits of the time and effort required to achieve this discipline, enjoying rewards and recognition when society looks to their increased productivity as an asset. One user claimed “the world needs” men who could get through lockdown without giving in. Another encouraged a struggling user by telling them “when distancing is over, you’ll be a different person, and others will notice how much better you’ve got through NoFap.” Echoing the Self-Masters from Burnett (2021), Lockdown is “the ultimate test of self-discipline.” It is not just appropriate to their goals, but the best way of meeting them as, after all, “smooth seas do not make skillful sailors.”

An elaborate post elevated the community’s aims to mythic status, suggesting that successful Fapstronauts’ children “will tell stories about the powers” they developed during the lockdown. Completing this image, and complimenting NoFap’s neoliberal ethos, is the recurring notion NoFappers being an elite 1% in contrast to a 99% who cannot exercise self-control. Unlike some other parts of the manosphere, the collective identity of NoFap is one of strength and control, so many see lockdown as a way of demonstrating these traits.

3. Testing the parameters of NoFap

While some struggled to retain their NoFap commitment, a small but significant subset of users questioned if they could modify or ignore aspects of the challenge. After all, lockdown measures reflected exceptional circumstances, so they argued it would be unreasonable to expect the same engagement. Why persevere during a period in which they would be far less likely than usual to be able to acquire sexual partners? These views echoed debates elsewhere surrounding abstinence, in which the use of pornography has been advised to limit the potential for Covid transmission with partners (Banerjee and Rao, 2020). Sentiments like this suggested that they were not aligning themselves with Self-Mastery subjectivities, seeing the point of NoFap as improving their sexual performance rather than being part of a more substantial lifestyle change. Threads

encompassed in this theme mostly took the form of would-be Fapstronauts asking if they could have the community's approval to be less vigilant. Because users could not verify each other's abstinence, this shows the esteem in which Fapstronauts hold their peers and the importance of transparency.

i) *Existential questions:*

Because the community's goals include helping members gain sexual opportunities, it is perhaps unsurprising that the change in circumstances prompted some to ask existential questions about the community. There were attempts at bargaining, for example, masturbating *less*. The membership was sympathetic to these suggestions, though a common rebuttal was that NoFap is about more than forging new sexual opportunities with "real women." That would be a by-product of the more comprehensive physical and mental health benefits: high performance, self-mastery, and self-confidence. "I haven't gone out in 140 days and found it hard to reach my current 21-day streak. Truth is I found a reason to hold, which is to pursue my dream - I am trying to achieve it this month."

From those seeking permission to relapse and those responding to them, we see [Burnett's \(2021\)](#) split of members worried about their sexual performance and the Self-Masters who said it showed "a need for self-discipline." NoFap was most typically positioned as a complete lifestyle change, of which enhanced sexual proclivity is only one part: "NoFap isn't about girls, friend, and if that's your goal you'll fail. It's about being a better version of you. If you are truly tired of who you are now and want that then NoFap will change your life." To encourage wavering members to stay on track, ardent followers stressed the importance of being true to their values rather than their "uncivilized" habits: "sex with women on screen must be stopped. It's real vs reel... Real = good... Reel = bad... If you are human, you can do this... Animals cannot." There would be "no free pass." Responses like this further highlight the tension between the "real" and the "artificial," as cited by [Taylor and Jackson \(2018\)](#).

ii) *Digital intimacy:*

Attempts to redefine and negotiate the parameters of NoFap extended to members in sexual relationships using the forum as a focus group to evaluate ways they could be intimate with their physically absent partners. Some asked if masturbating over the phone or a video call would count as a violation since they physically could not see each other. Others wondered if masturbation without a visual stimulus would be acceptable since the challenge had become more difficult. In both instances, the negative but rarely hostile responses reflected the view that relaxing restrictions inherent to the challenge would undermine its meritocratic foundations. There would be "no free pass" for lockdown. As per [Hartmann \(2021\)](#), NoFap is about internal control and thus represents a pledge that members should stay loyal to regardless of external circumstances threatening to emasculate them.

4. Community cohesion

Regardless of whether the membership saw lockdown as a time of relapsing or rebooting, a hallmark of their posts was the allusion to the digital community to which they could turn for support. The vast majority of posts were overwhelmingly positive, and frequently members would finish on a note of encouragement—telling others to “hang in there.” Posts were often emotionally open, discussing difficult topics such as self-loathing and sadness following a relapse after an unbroken streak. Users’ willingness to trust each other with their vulnerability is noteworthy since the group collectively aspires toward a version of stoic masculinity that would seem antithetical to such displays (Hartmann, 2021). Hence, NoFappers consistently demonstrate aspects of horizontal male homosociality discussed by Hammarén and Johansson (2014) despite common approaches to their challenge, or interpretations of its significance, being built upon essentialist hierarchical foundations. As per Hanna and Gough (2018) finding that men on fertility forums felt oppressed by the masculine expectations they also argued to be inherent, this theme reinforces the flexibility of masculine identities in homosocial spaces. The NoFap forum represents a safe space where users can disclose personal and intimate information without fear of judgment or rejection. If they reported relapsing due to lockdown, others reassured them with advice, recognizing how difficult it had been to keep to their routines, supportive comments or upvotes—helping them navigate their setbacks with positive regard. When showing doubt, responses were accepting, constructive, and motivational. Brotherhood was a recurring motif, manifesting through the affectionate and thematically appropriate term “bro” or the regular parallel between community members and military units going into battle together.

Despite being a group founded upon the notion of personal autonomy, the NoFap community makes a point of acknowledging shared aims and efforts. Users regularly contextualized their solo efforts as part of a joint movement, reaffirming their commitment not just to their cause but to each other. They are embarking on a shared journey they see in defiance of an increasingly progressive agenda that has feminized mainstream society. Thus, to successfully embody the hegemonic masculine values framing their discourse, they must nurture new members and champion peers (Taylor and Jackson, 2018). Fapstronauts kept each other in check through reinforcement and mentorship. Experienced members, delineated by streaks in their flares that accompany their name, often shared sage advice with those earlier in their abstinence. In doing so, they often pointed out that they were well equipped because they began before lockdown and that people need not feel weak for relapsing under these conditions provided they did not give up. In line with the meritocratic ideology, high achievements were recognized and respected: “you have a 300-day streak, I so admire you. You are who I want to teach me!”. There were comments about legacy building after the hardships of lockdown: “remind yourself why you are doing this and why this is important to you. I speak for everyone who has for some time and with some experience... You’ll be surprised how much greater an achievement NoFap becomes over these weeks and months.” Many threads consisted of users sharing what had helped them optimize their performance, thus acknowledging their gratitude for the group they were giving back to. Their philosophy may be distinctly

neoliberal, yet they aspire to equality of opportunity when sharing what works for them under tough times.

Conclusions

The present study sought to address how the NoFap community has responded to the challenge of lockdown and social distancing measures during the Covid-19 pandemic: a time in which the general public have increased their consumption of pornography (Rodrigues and Martins, 2020; Mestre-bach et al., 2020; Pornhub Insights, 2020; Sharma and Subramanyam, 2020; Zattoni et al., 2020). Four key themes emerged from the discourse analysis: i) I let go in lockdown, ii) the opportunity of lockdown, iii) testing the parameters of NoFap, and iv) community cohesion.

The first two represent divergent outlooks: lockdown measures are a hindrance or a positive catalyst for change (we reiterate that these are not mutually exclusive). The common thread is that users see them as a challenge, which may be overwhelming or empowering. Whether it was positively or negatively framed, lockdown represented “the ultimate test” or their resolve: an integral part of meritocratic sexuality (Hartmann, 2021; Taylor and Jackson, 2018). Of course, interpretations are not static, and several posters stated that they had changed their minds one way or the other. In adapting to their new situation, some members attempted to redefine the constraints of NoFap, enquiring as to what would constitute cheating. Others have questioned the purpose of participating in the challenge when circumstances inhibit them from finding sexual partners or spending time with those they do not cohabit with. The temptations of some members to give up because they could not find sexual partners demonstrates the divisions in motivation found by Burnett (2021), that is, self-mastery versus sexual anxiety. Despite these trials, the community continues to grow and persevere.

When identifying recurring themes, we looked for broad patterns in the data and did not explore whether posts’ content or tone changed as social distancing measures went on or were relaxed. We chose not to adopt this approach since we were not targeting users from specific areas, so the onset and severity of lockdown measures in their territory, along with behavioral expectations, would be inconsistent. Several users identified as being from India, France and the United Kingdom. Yet, in line with Reddit users in general, the community appear to be primarily Anglo Northern-American (Taylor and Jackson, 2018). However, there are significant discrepancies in how States have responded to Covid and the measures adopted. There are also significant differences in death toll both between and within national populations that may partially account for individual differences in stress and anxiety. For instance, people’s stress levels appear to vary with their personal experiences of the virus (Gallagher et al., 2020). These could include them, or a person they know, receiving a diagnosis, along with the perceived risk to others in their community.

We highlighted the broader social, political, and economic neoliberal and hegemonically masculine framework in which NoFap is positioned. We suggest that this context and the subject matter of the threads and posts intertwine and warrant further examination, particularly around the gendered implications of NoFap. We also note that there are

related NoFap groups devoted to female Fapstronauts or NoFap with a particular religious angle, neither of which were explored as part of this study. Follow-up studies could control location and chart longitudinal changes in selected users' attitudes and/or reported behaviors. In this study, we took a cross-sectional approach at a period in which social distancing rules were being enforced across the world. It is possible some of the users' concerns may have dissipated over time or following local relaxations.

There may also be individual differences to the challenge of lockdown depending upon individuals' political orientations. Like previous research, we found that the NoFap community seemed to have a largely neoliberal outlook that would suggest they are more conservative. Yet we saw limited engagement with the broader political context, or even the ethics of lockdown and social distancing measures: they were challenging, but not necessarily right or wrong. For example, there were very few references to the then-upcoming American Presidential election, even though it was primarily fought around the theme of opening up. Elsewhere [Burnett \(2021\)](#) identified a crossover between NoFap and the white identitarian alt-right, with some members seeing pornography as a "Jewish plot" to make people passive and weak (also see [Kerl, 2020](#)). We did not observe this during our analyses, though it is worth emphasizing this was just one of seven subjectivities identified, so it does not represent a consensual view. Yet while Alt-right sympathies are not a core part of the manosphere, it has been argued that manosphere groups explicitly borrow from alt-right discourses, ideas, images, and terminology ([Johanssen, 2021](#)).

Perhaps because the search term utilized led us to threads in which individuals shared their experiences, as opposed to their philosophical beliefs, we found limited explicit discussions of gender roles. Therefore, it is outside the scope of this paper to advance the debate surrounding whether or not NoFap is a part of the manosphere. However, like [Hartmann \(2021\)](#), we speculate that it may be a gateway to more overtly misogynistic content. In particular, the algorithmic interface of social media sites could result in a pipeline from NoFap to PUAs. They share the commodification of women, depersonalizing them into givers of pleasure for worthy men, codes to be broken, whose sexual interest is a natural response to how men act rather than agentic decision-makers in their own right. Of the two, PUA communities are arguably more insidious since they actively encourage members to attract sexual partners via persuasion and manipulation. In contrast, NoFap discourses aim to reconnect members with seemingly innate masculinity, making them more true to themselves.

Finally, it is also possible that some men give up the challenge in the face of repeated failure, seeing themselves as fundamentally incapable of meeting the NoFap standard: an outcome that may be more common because of the added difficulties associated with social distancing. This brings us to the possibility of these men internalizing a sense of failure and inferiority against what they see as a relatively concrete measure of their masculinity: the NoFap challenge. In some cases, it may prompt them to recalibrate their alpha masculine identity toward a beta subjectivity. This potential transition aligns with [Bratich and Banet-Weiser \(2019\)](#), who interpreted parts of the incel movement through this lens: men who tried and failed to follow PUAs. Thus, we join them in calling for further research into how different masculine identities intersect.

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