

r/NoFap mudding the anti-feminist waters: the (diluted) manosphere strikes back

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Abstract

NoFap is widely understood as a self-improvement movement centered on abstaining from pornography and “excessive masturbation”, primarily embraced by heterosexual men seeking to improve their health, relationships, productivity, and regain self-control over their masculinity through discipline based on abstention challenges. Although the community positions itself as a space for personal growth and respect for women, literature has identified its engagement with heterosexist, patriarchal, and misogynistic discourses. Scholars have compared NoFap to more radical anti-feminist manosphere groups, suggesting the manosphere can be conceptualized as a spectrum of ideologies and practices. Stretching Bridges and Pascoe’s (2014) concept of hybrid masculinities, this paper argues that r/NoFap operates as a “hybrid manosphere”, discursively distancing itself from overt manosphere affiliation while strategically borrowing from its ideologies. This allows members to position themselves as “good guys” while simultaneously engaging with oppressive discourses related to gender, power, and sexuality. The effect is the creation and expansion of a sort of ‘diluted’ manosphere, where some core manosphere ideologies are watered down with seemingly more ‘moderate’ positions, while still subtly reinforcing them.

Keywords: NoFap, manosphere, hybrid masculinity, online misogyny, pornography.

Introduction

The term “NoFap” originates from the onomatopoeic slang term “fap”, commonly used to refer to male masturbation. It is used to indicate the practices, discourses, and strategies focused on abstaining from pornography consumption and “excessive masturbation”. Additionally, it refers to the nebulous network of digital spaces - often interconnected, though not always - where “NoFapping” is promoted as a self-improvement technique to address and overcome self-diagnosed “porn addiction”, “overuse of pornography”, and “compulsive sexual behaviour”. Within this context, terms like “addiction” and “overuse”, drawn from a longstanding medicalized discourse around masturbation, are employed alongside pseudo-diagnostic frameworks developed by these communities, reflecting a discretionary and strongly pathologizing approach¹.

The nerve center of the NoFap community is the r/NoFap channel on Reddit, where membership doubled from 477,000 in 2020 (Hartmann 2020) to 1.1 million in 2024 (r/NoFap, May 2024). Members, predominantly heterosexual men, often referred to as “NoFappers” or “Fapstronauts”, are encouraged to undertake abstinence challenges lasting days, weeks, months, or even years. These challenges are accompanied by practices such as dopamine detoxes and self-optimization strategies involving diet, physical exercise, cognitive development, work ethic, and improvement of social or interpersonal skills, including attractiveness. The underlying belief is that successful recovery requires constant self-control and discipline, enabling individuals - primarily men - to no longer be dominated by their urges. This goal is viewed as achievable only through sacrifice and long-term (often lifelong) abstinence. Members state that their primary motivations for engaging with the community include regaining self-control, improving health, enhancing quality of life, boosting work productivity, and enriching their sexual/relational/intimate lives. In the NoFap discourse, “masturbating to pornography” is seen as inferior to “real” penetrative sex with a “real woman”. Ejaculating to a “pixel” woman on a screen, who is portrayed as indifferent to them, is contrasted with the perceived authenticity of a physical relationship. From this perspective, NoFappers argue that engagement with pornography hinders men from achieving their full potential and a ‘proper’ masculine identity.

Although NoFap users often claim to oppose misogyny by rejecting pornography, which they argue degrades women, research reveals significant evidence of misogynistic attitudes within these communities. Prause and Binnie (2023) found that while NoFap forums officially condemn discrimination, nearly 74% of 417 surveyed participants reported encountering misogynistic

¹ On the medicalization of masturbation and the construction of gendered subjectivities, see Garlick, S. (2012), Masculinity, pornography, and the history of masturbation, in *Sexuality & Culture*, vol. 16, 306-320.

content, alongside consistent instances of anti-LGBT+ and racist material. Furthermore, Prause and Ley (2023) identified frequent violent rhetoric on the r/NoFap subreddit, particularly targeting the pornography industry, sex workers, women, and researchers studying the community. Broader studies also link NoFap discourse to heterosexist, patriarchal, and misogynistic ideologies commonly associated with the manosphere (Burnett 2022; Han and Yin 2022; Hartmann 2021; Johanssen 2021; Smith 2024; Taylor and Jackson 2018).

Theoretical background

The manosphere consists of various groups and subgroups, as well as individuals and influencers, united by their concern with maintaining male (heterosexual) hegemony, whether they embrace, aspire to, or strategically disavow the “alpha” male ideal (Ging 2019). These disparate groups are particularly unified by their critique of feminism and the belief that society is becoming feminized and misandrist², placing masculinity under threat (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016; Vingelli 2019). Feminism is viewed as subverting the natural gendered and sexual power dynamics and establishing dominance over men (Rothermel et al. 2022; Marwick and Caplan 2018). However, distinct groups within the manosphere hold varying perspectives on men’s perceived marginalization, preventing the manosphere from being seen as a fully ideologically homogeneous bloc (James 2024).

The literature (Bates 2021; Cannito et al. 2021; Horta Ribeiro et al. 2020a; Horta Ribeiro et al. 2020b; Ging 2019) has discussed the most structured groups within the manosphere and their differences, such as The Red Pill (Botto and Gottzén 2023), MRA (Men’s Rights Activists) (Gotell and Dutton 2016; Rothermel et al. 2022; Schmitz and Kazyak 2016), Incels (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019; Halpin et al. 2024; Lounela and Murphy 2023; Rothermel et al. 2022; Salojärvi et al. 2020; Vink et al. 2024), MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way) (Jones et al. 2020; Lin 2017; Rothermel et al. 2022), PUAs (Pick-Up Artists) (Almog and Kaplan 2017; Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019; Carlo 2023; Cosma and Gurevich 2020). These are the main groups, but around them orbit individuals and communities that sympathize with or adopt similar sexist language and worldviews.

These toxic technocultures are rapidly spreading through mainstream social media contents (Vingelli 2019), especially in spaces perceived as threatening to male privileges (Ging 2019). This

² Misandry: The term refers to hatred or contempt for men. It has been used by Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs) since the early 1980s and was later exploited by manosphere groups, who claim that misandry is pervasive in society and institutions, which they argue favour women and discriminate against men, particularly in matters related to men’s rights. These groups promote an analogy between misogyny and misandry. Marwick and Caplan (2018) describe the equation of misandry with hatred of men as an appropriation of victimhood language.

has resulted in various social outcomes, including digitally-mediated harassment campaigns against feminists (Braithwaite 2016; Jones et al. 2020; Marwick and Caplan 2018; Salter 2018), mass violence (Dickel and Evolvi 2022; Halpin et al. 2024; Lounela and Murphy 2023; Vink et al. 2024; Vito et al. 2018), and alt-right mobilizations (Carian et al. 2022; Dignam and Rohlinger 2019; Mamié et al. 2021; Verza 2019). Additionally, scholars widely agree that the proliferation of anti-feminine and anti-feminist discourses in digital popular culture is increasingly becoming normalized, even within groups and communities not directly linked to the manosphere. In this context, Farrell and colleagues (2019), and Angela Nagle (2017) describe Reddit as the primary platform for the creation, dissemination, and propagation of manosphere contents. According to Massanari (2015), the massive spread of misogynistic contents on Reddit is facilitated by the platform's sociotechnical infrastructure, which brings together like-minded individuals, offers limited accountability, and allows for anonymity (Bernstein et al. 2011) fostering the creation of male-dominated homosocial spaces, potentially leading to assimilation into the manosphere and further radicalization.

Some authors have drawn comparisons between NoFap and more radical anti-feminist groups within the manosphere, such as Incels (involuntary celibates), MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way), and Pickup Artists (PUAs), who often endorse NoFap practices (Hartmann 2021). Krendel's (2020) linguistic analysis of manosphere discourse identifies themes of victimhood, insecurity, and discontent, sentiments similarly observed in Burnett's (2022) examination of NoFap communities. Hartmann (2021) notes that NoFap and PUAs share discursive and algorithmic overlaps, framing intimacy as labour and investment, and sex as a commodity that men pursue from women. Similarly, Smith et al. (2022) argue that both NoFap and PUAs perpetuate narratives that objectify and commodify women, presenting their sexual interest as an inherent reaction to masculinity and virility rather than a conscious choice. Burnett (2022) further contends that NoFap can be interpreted as a strategy to reclaim control over one's sexuality, akin to the celibacy promoted by MGTOW adherents, who emphasize their "alpha" status in contrast to the "beta" or incel masculinities they disdain. However, NoFap also mirrors PUA narratives by framing self-improvement in terms of "libidinal" strategies aimed at making women desire them and gain access to "real sex" (Ivi, 13). Hartmann (2021) and Smith et al. (2022) observe that although NoFap's classification within the manosphere is debated due to its less extreme nature, some members may still be exposed to and adopt manosphere ideologies, including gender essentialism, masculine hegemony, and antifeminism. This exposure may normalize or go unchallenged within the NoFap community, enabling some members to embrace and propagate these beliefs without substantial opposition. In this regard, Hartmann (2021, 17) suggests that NoFap could serve as an "entry point" to more explicit manosphere content, potentially facilitating the infiltration of misogynistic and sexist discourses into the NoFap community.

Supporting this idea, Smith (2024) explores the possibility of an ideological crossover between NoFap and more extreme manosphere content, proposing a pipeline that leads from NoFap to more radical ideologies. Smith highlights several shared elements between NoFap and the manosphere, including the belief in a battle for masculinity (which society is said to degrade, fail to protect, or actively suppress), the view of a natural male hierarchy, and the instrumentalization of women within a neoliberal framework of sexuality referred to as the “sexual market”. In this view, men are seen as sexual entrepreneurs competing for a finite resource: women. This perspective is also supported by Han and Yin (2022) and Johannsen (2021).

Smith (2024) suggests that the notion of the manosphere could be expanded to include a spectrum of individuals and groups, varying in their alignment and intensity. Thereby revealing what Ging (2019) terms the “manosphere’s ideological elasticity”, which allows core manosphere narratives and principles to permeate mass culture, potentially leading to their uncritical assimilation and reinforcement. This brings up the question of whether the manosphere itself has clearly defined boundaries and measurable dimensions.

As Burnett (2022) notes, “While certain sites may be easily classified as belonging to the manosphere, it is far more difficult to categorize the expression of mercurial, hybrid, and evolving masculine identities”. In relation to the manosphere, Ging (2019) describes “hybrid masculinities” (Bridges and Pascoe 2014) as those adopted by members of the manosphere who position themselves as victims of feminism. These individuals strategically distance themselves from hegemonic masculinities while simultaneously reinforcing power hierarchies and inequalities. The concept of hybrid masculinity, introduced by Bridges and Pascoe (2014), explains how some men strategically adopt discourses and practices from marginalized or contradictory forms of masculinity while simultaneously maintaining and reinforcing their own privileges (Burke and Haltom 2020), obscuring these processes. Bridges and Pascoe (2014) argue that certain groups of men, mostly white, cisgender, and heterosexual, engage in “discursive distancing” from hegemonic masculinity, while subtly aligning with it. They also practice “strategic borrowing”, appropriating discourses from marginalized masculinities and reframing themselves as victims of societal oppression. Finally, they “fortify boundaries”, blurring the symbolic and social distinctions between different groups of men by co-opting styles and practices associated with less powerful masculinities.

Drawing from this literature, we argue that NoFap, while not necessarily an official part of the formal manosphere, can be conceptualized as a hybridized version of it. NoFap’s self-improvement discourse interacts with manosphere ideologies, contributing to the formation of a hybrid ideological space where antifeminist tropes are diluted, normalized, and potentially mainstreamed. This “hybrid manosphere” discursively distances itself from the manosphere by positioning as a safe space, formed by “good guys” who aim to stop objectifying women by

quitting pornography, while simultaneously reproducing oppressive and stigmatizing discourses related to gender, power dynamics, and sexuality. The attempt is to stretch the concept of hybridization formulated by Bridges and Pascoe (2014) in relation to masculinity and to argue that the discursive distancing and strategic borrowing from the manosphere allow NoFap's members to position themselves as proponents of gender equality and respect for women, while simultaneously reinforcing oppressive, stigmatizing, anti-feminist, homophobic, transphobic, and anti-sex-positive discourses. This discursive distancing and the subtle ways by which manosphere ideologies are reintroduced within r/NoFap enable the reinforcement of misogynistic positions and ideologies to go largely unnoticed. This opens up the possibility that NoFap could serve as an entry point into manosphere ideologies (Hartmann 2021), while at the same time being seen by its members as a 'safe' space that allows participants to engage 'safely' with ideologies, practices, and discourses that protect male privileges and uphold gendered power relations from an anti-feminist and pro-men's rights perspective.

Methodology

The NoFap is a practice that blurs the (outdated) boundaries between what is arbitrarily considered the offline and the online (Bakardjieva 2005; Baym, 2000; Jenkins 2006; Slater 1998; van Doorn 2011). While both the consumption of pornography and the creation of global anonymous self-help groups are possible throughout online platforms, the related practices and discourses are constantly referred and inscribed in sexualized, gendered and material bodies and identities. As Deuze (2012) argues, we do not live life with media but in media, like fish in the water. Angela Delli Paoli underlines (2022) how processes of both active and passive digitalization of our everyday life, impacting and moulding practices, symbols, identities, and meanings related to our society, are becoming a key component to approach the interpretation of culture and society. Technology, in this sense, is co-constitutive of social life (Latour et al. 2012). As Deborah Lupton extensively debates in her work "Digital Bodies" (2015), our humanity is increasingly configured by digital technologies intervening in processes of embodiment, construction of self, relations, and institutions. Within this framework, the results of this research are based on a year-long covert digital ethnography conducted from December 2022 to December 2023. Digital ethnography is conceptualized here as a method that is carried out "on, through, and about digital media" (Abidin and de Seta 2020, 6). It involves not only conducting ethnographic research within digital environments but also reconfiguring its principles, methods, and practices in response to the new challenges posed by digital practices, algorithms, and platforms (Pink et al.

2015). This research integrates computational techniques, particularly Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) Topic Modeling (Blei et al. 2003), within the ethnographic continuum to understand the complexities of online communities. This is especially relevant in platformized digital environments, where user interactions and content production processes are typically massive, real-time, networked, and algorithmically structured. LDA Topic Modeling is a statistical technique based on the probability of word co-occurrence, used to uncover latent topics or thematic structures within a corpus of documents (Blei et al. 2003). It's crucial to clarify that the algorithm does not assign predefined labels to topics; instead, it counts word frequencies and identifies groups of words that frequently co-occur, indicating a potential thematic association. The output of the LDA model consists of generic topics, each accompanied by a list of words that commonly appear together in the analyzed documents. The model was applied to a dataset scraped from r/NoFap using a Python script, covering the period from January 1, 2021, to April 30, 2023. The original dataset includes 559,021 submissions and 2,036,456 comments. Although LDA is often described as a method for uncovering thematic structures without prior knowledge of the topics, literature suggests that the researcher's familiarity with the context is crucial for attributing meaningful interpretations to the topics generated by the algorithm (Brown 2019). Without this contextual understanding, the results may be misinterpreted and core experiences overlooked. Thus, the researcher's immersion in the community provides the necessary context to interpret and assign significance to the topics generated by the algorithm. At the same time, topic modeling also offered insights into the potential associations between topics and the prevalence of specific concepts that were overlooked during participant observation. This circular, recursive, and creative approach to digital ethnography enriched and benefited the research. Moreover, topic modeling allowed us to challenge the algorithmic logic of the platform and subreddit, which typically organizes posts and comments based on engagement, recency, or relevance. This hierarchical structure can limit the exploration of the full spectrum of interactions within the community during participant observation. Topic modeling tools enabled to amplify the voices of submissions and comments that were not 'trending' and didn't ascend to the top of the page. This was especially crucial given the limitations (impossibility) of manually scrolling or searching for specific keywords in the platform's search bar. Therefore, this integration of qualitative, inductive methods with computational tools should not simply be categorized as "mixed methods". Instead, it should be reframed as part of the same ethnographic continuum, where the goal is not to validate or add rigour to the qualitative results, but to support, guide, and inform them throughout their production. The results presented in this thesis stem from the amalgamation of participant observations, fieldnotes, and the outputs from the topic modeling.

The decision to conduct covert ethnography was primarily driven by ethical considerations, which are sensitive both to the researcher and the specific context. From the outset of the initial lurking phase, the community displayed a distinctly homosocial atmosphere, with prevalent heterosexist, patriarchal, and misogynistic discourses (Burnett 2021; Hartmann 2021; Taylor and Jackson 2018). This was further compounded by a non-sex-positive environment that stigmatized non-heteronormative sexual practices and promoted conservative views on family, relationships, and sexuality, alongside a narrative of a society corrupted by modern pornography. This context, situated within a digital platform like Reddit, where the risk of doxxing (the unauthorized release of personal information), harassment, or targeted attacks is high - particularly from anti-feminist members (Massanari 2017) - made anonymity and caution essential. The covert ethnography was crucial for establishing boundaries within the fieldwork, prioritizing self-preservation and risk mitigation. However, it also unintentionally reinforced gendered assumptions about vulnerability and required engaging in often painful acts of self-silencing. During participant observation, a fear emerged of inadvertently perpetuating violent language and unchallenged heteropatriarchal discourses and practices. Vörös (2015) describes the practice of engaging in a form of masculine complicity, which facilitates access to participants' experiences allowing participants to "kick back and talk freely", as "troubling complicity". This also involved relying on hegemonic male bonding, emulating the language and posture of the community, which risked sidelining feminist perspectives in male-dominated spaces. This raised questions about the intersection of our engagement with the group and our commitment to producing transformative feminist knowledge and research. To address this, the strategy of "feminist contradicting" was employed to provoke reflections on normative views of gender, masculinity, and sexuality, particularly in relation to alternatives to mainstream pornography and heterosexual practices. However, this approach was rarely, if ever, welcomed.

Finally, in relation to the upcoming analytical section, while the subreddit is public, in the digital realm, what is individually and culturally defined and expected to be labelled as privacy can be ambiguous, contested, and subject to change (Markham 2012). Since Reddit posts and comments, along with the associated accounts, are typically visible and discoverable on search engines, results are presented in a manner that anonymizes members by reformulating their sentences without direct quotations, reducing traceability to their Reddit accounts. This by leveraging the approach proposed by Markham (2012), known as ethical fabrication. This method involves a bricolage-style transfiguration of original data into composite accounts or representational interactions. No screenshots from fieldnotes are included.

Analysis

This section explores how r/NoFap engage in this process of manosphere hybridization through three central discourses used within r/NoFap: the anti-porn discourse, the discourse on the enlightenment and the decline of modern civilization, and the discourse on dating and “sexual market”.

The (a)weakening of Men

The central theme uniting the various, often contradictory, groups within the manosphere is the belief that feminism seeks to weaken men, portraying them as the real victims of a misandrist culture (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016; James 2024; Ging 2019). Although narratives of victimization differ across the manosphere (James 2024), the dominant idea promoted by these groups is that men are under attack, fostering a sense of grievance that positions them as marginalized in contemporary society, with feminism being blamed for this (Ging 2019; Lilly 2016; Rothermel et al. 2022). As I will demonstrate in this section, r/NoFap echoes this belief by asserting that an external system is actively weakening men turning them into “soft entities”. However, they also explicitly distance themselves from Incel and Red Pill ideologies, instead self-identifying as “good guys” and “the real feminists”.

For NoFap members, the external system to blame is generically identified in “porn”. While r/NoFap is explicitly positioned, as moderators frequently remind users, as not being an anti-porn forum for online culture wars, pornography is variously described by members as “slavery” that has enslaved modern men, an “evil” that has been normalized, the “opiate of the masses”, and something that “hijacks and weaponizes male sexuality for profit”. It is also blamed for fostering misogyny, objectification, and dehumanization of women, as well as for encouraging gender violence by “pornifying men’s brains” and making everything sexualized. Members claim that pornography creates “sexual confusion”, leading men away from heterosexuality and toward “degeneracy”, fetishes, and kinks, which they argue can eventually result in sexual pathologies, including pedophilia, or a change in sexual orientation, pushing viewers toward increasingly violent and extreme content. Porn is viewed as the source of a future epidemic of erectile dysfunction among young men, leading to an inability to form intimate or sexual (heterosexual) relationships, which ultimately threatens the traditional family structure and society, within a strongly heteronormative, penetrative, able-bodied framework. During participant observation, only a very small minority opposed this narrative, suggesting that porn is not inherently evil and that, if consumed without addiction, it is a personal choice.

Similar to other manosphere groups, in r/NoFap there is a widespread belief that the system is corrupted and aims to create weak, passive men, incapable of taking care of themselves or others. In this context, weakness is associated with the idea that porn has stripped men of their self-control, clouded their judgment, and fostered negativity, making clear thinking difficult and leading to reckless, unreflective behaviour. Statements like “Man, they sure seem to want men to be weak and waste their days masturbating, don’t they?” are common. While “they” is rarely clearly defined, it often refers to the porn industry or a docile soft modernity, displaying nostalgia for the past, or an agenda seen as attacking men, sometimes implicating sex workers, particularly OnlyFans creators.

“The agenda seems to be an attack on men as a whole. Whenever a community starts improving and breaking free from the porn narrative, it suddenly becomes a problem. It’s because we’re no longer trapped in the ‘normal’ bubble, mindlessly consuming the nonsense they push.” (Our rephrase, word by word, through ethical fabrication)

While NoFappers strategically borrow the manosphere trope of an external system weakening masculinity and hindering men’s productivity and reproductive potential, they simultaneously distance themselves from other manosphere groups. They argue that it is porn that leads men down the path of becoming Incels and embracing Red Pill ideologies. These groups are described from most NoFap members as harbouring resentment towards women, adopting a victim mentality, and embodying weakness, unwilling to fully work, exercise control, discipline and self-improvement. In r/NoFap, much like in PUA and TRP groups (James 2024), the victim mentality is both acknowledged and criticized. Self-improvement aimed at achieving an ideal of successful, realized masculinity is promoted as the remedy to escape this mindset. At the same time, their position as victims of a system that seeks to weaken them is recognized in its existence, legitimized, and reinforced, framing it as something they must fight against and ultimately overcome. r/NoFap members portray themselves as the ones truly capable of achieving this, all without holding disdain for women. NoFap is portrayed as the only way to liberate modern men from objectifying women and, simultaneously, from misogyny. This positions NoFap members as the “good guys” who aim to stop objectifying women, while also engaging in a process of deflecting responsibility for structural gender power dynamics and violence³.

In r/NoFap, many users present themselves as genuinely caring for women, claiming to treat them better, as “true feminists” would. They often self-identify as advocates for women’s rights to be seen as “human beings” rather than “sexual objects”, while also asserting that in recent

³ This position resonates with anti-porn feminist claims (see Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988), even if the critique towards porn remains primarily directed against the impact on men rather than on women.

times, “being a man is considered toxic”. Misogyny is subtly portrayed as “a dick that controls you”, framing it as a consequence of the sexual objectification of women in society. This perspective overlooks power relations and the heteropatriarchal order, instead reducing misogyny to a physical trait inherent in all men, a latent potential that pornography can awaken.

The role of feminism in relation to pornography is often debated, with the argument that being a “true” feminist involves rejecting pornography consumption, unlike “false feminists” who are seen as promoting it. This stance aligns more closely with radical feminist views on pornography and sex. However, some users criticize this form of feminism, arguing that it is just another way to attack men since they claim that pornography impacts women more significantly than men, labeling this as a “men don’t matter” rhetoric. In r/NoFap, radical feminism is not seen as “genuine” feminism but as anti-male propaganda that uses anti-porn discourse to advance anti-men agendas. In this context, the subreddit r/antipornography is often discussed as a hub for “anti-male circlejerk”, perceived as a feminist, anti-porn environment focused on combating sex trafficking, sex work, and exploitation. Some NoFap users dismiss it as a “toxic hole”, with comments like, “We don’t need your feminist man-hating bullshit here”. Additionally, some users argue that this situation exemplifies “toxic femininity”, a term they use to describe the perceived attack on men, suggesting that women are the ones starting gender wars online.

Some NoFappers claim that certain self-declared feminists are promoting supposedly sex-positive content from an anti-men perspective. They argue that messages about “showing body” and “being kinky” are framed as “feminist propaganda” designed to weaken men and undermine societal norms. This is described as “false feminism at work” that brainwash women and young girls, with the belief that these feminists are persuading women that empowerment equates to selling their bodies. Moreover, some argue that being objectified is considered viable and coherent for modern women when it is made for money, with the strategic argument of being “empowering”. In this context, women appear to be categorized into “good girls” and “temptresses”. Good girls are seen as nearly subservient, loyal, devoted, supportive, selfless, caring, and nurturing, embodying traditional femininity and reinforcing heterosexual norms based on their relationships with men. This division is also evident in the manosphere (Lilly 2016), where the ideal of femininity is often tied to the ‘housewife’ role. The rest of women, in Men’s Rights Activism (MRA) blogs, are portrayed as lazy, while Pickup Artist (PUA) communities describe them as attention-seeking and promiscuous, and in all manosphere as selfish, irrational, manipulative, and entitled (Lilly 2016). In r/NoFap, this negative portrayal is attached to “pixel women”, including porn actresses, OnlyFans creators, and Instagram influencers. These women are depicted as “temptresses”, reflecting the double standards women face regarding their sexuality: if they are sexually available or explicit, they are labeled as sluts; if not, they are considered prude or honourable. This happens when porn actresses are not strategically

portrayed as vulnerable and exploited by a cruel, oppressive pornographic system that harms both men and women.

This narrative reinforces the portrayal of pornography as corrupt and violent, detrimental to society, and aligned with the view that porn weakens men and contributes to societal decline. In particular, “pixel women” are depicted as selfish and uncaring, having escaped traditional roles of mothers and wives, which is seen as a reason for their self-interest, manipulation, and competitiveness. In r/NoFap, OnlyFans creators are portrayed as the worst offenders, accused of exploiting users’ addictions and dragging them down. They are described as preying on the NoFap community, which is perceived as a prime target for their schemes due to its high concentration of addicts. The characterization of OnlyFans girls as temptresses is reinforced through evocative terms such as “mermaids” and “witches”. They are described as using their “magic”, “witchcraft”, and “bewitching voices” to lure men into their traps, exploiting what is portrayed as an irresistible nature and the influence of powerful forces beyond men’s control. Pixel women are seen as deceitful, with OnlyFans creators being portrayed as women who degrade themselves. In r/NoFap, being a man involves resisting submission to “twerking girls”. Posts and comments frequently describe OnlyFans girls as talentless insecure women who search for money and men’s validation by exposing their bodies without offering any care. They are also characterized as “exploiters aiming to accumulate capital”, “materialists obsessed with jewelry and bags”, and “lazy individuals who prefer getting naked for money rather than working”. These discourses often overlap with Red Pill ideology, which characterizes women as controlling and manipulative, demanding resources without reciprocation (Botto and Gottzén 2023). Simultaneously, as noted by Roose (2020), men are portrayed as honourable victims of forces beyond their control, reflecting a form of tactical victimhood (Chouliaraki 2021) that positions men as “rightful” victims in contemporary society (Rothermel 2020). The tone of these discussions often deteriorates into hate speech, with members using intensely derogatory terms like “sluts” and making explicit statements of hate and violence. These discourses align NoFap more closely with the manosphere, particularly with the notion of a misandrist culture aimed at “devirilizing” men, where women are seen as exploiting their sexual power and men as giving them too much power over them.

It is important to note that during the participant observation, there were a few dissenting voices within NoFap. These individuals argued that sex work is legitimate, that women should have autonomy over their bodies, and that OnlyFans might offer better conditions compared to other types of sex work. They claimed that blaming OnlyFans creators is “misplaced and misdirected anger”, supported non-exploitative sex work, and challenged the notion that being on OnlyFans equates to easy money, labeling the hostility towards OnlyFans creators as “some

redpill incel shit”. These dissenting opinions were often heavily downvoted and faced substantial opposition, indicating a limited space for alternative views in the community.

While not overtly attacking feminism for men’s issues, r/NoFap users engage in discussions about how men’s problems are overlooked, and their struggles with addiction are downplayed, stigmatized, and mocked by a society that they feel neglects men as not as much as women. The self-framing as victims in relation to an unnamed, obscure system allows for a discretionary portrayal of perpetrators. There is a sense that something within or beyond the pornography system, perhaps ‘the government’, ‘the market’, content creators, porn actors, modern times, sexual liberation, feminists, or an anti-men society, must be blamed for men’s current state of ‘crisis’, weakness, and addiction. However, NoFappers hesitate to specifically label these anti-men sentiments as misandrist, fearing association with Incel or Red Pill ideologies or potentially being unaware of these ideologies. This suggests that manosphere beliefs may have permeated the internet, particularly on Reddit and within homosocial self-improvement communities. By avoiding explicit naming this men’s weakening system, they can blame all of the previous ‘perpetrators’ and none of them simultaneously, borrowing the same manosphere discourses while distancing from them.

In this framework, men’s issues are attributed to pornography, a women-dominated profession (Burke 2023), seen as obstructing men’s perceived entitlement to women’s bodies and care. Thus, pornography seems to play a role in the domination of women over men. “Because porn drains energy from men, it must be a feminist plot” (Burnett 2022, 13).

Woke Up: the matrix and the decline of modern society

At the core of the manosphere lies the Red Pill ideology, which draws its name from *The Matrix*, an epic movie that tells the story of awakening from a reality of illusions that keeps a weakened enslaved humanity. The most iconic symbol of the movie is the red pill: the protagonist, Neo, is asked to choose between two pills, red and blue. The red pill is said to reveal the world as it truly is, exposing the artificial intelligence machines that have enslaved humanity, and showing Neo just how deep the “rabbit hole” of reality’s horrors goes. In contrast, the blue pill offers the comfort of ignorance, allowing the protagonist to remain in a blissful delusion, unaware of the grim reality. The movie portrays the real world as a simulation, and Neo must decide whether to return to a state of ignorance or continue learning about the true nature of the Matrix and the simulation.

Over time, literature on the movie (Keegan 2018) and Lilly Wachowski, one of the Wachowski sisters who directed the trilogy, have emphasized that *The Matrix* should be understood through the lens of trans experience as a “trans metaphor” or “allegory”, exploring themes of human

identity, societal power structures, and free will. Interestingly (or perhaps unsurprisingly), the symbolic meaning of the red pill has been co-opted and altered by men's rights groups, the manosphere, and the alt-right/far-right movements. Red Pill environments twist the original message of the movie, using it to claim that a hidden enemy operates behind the scenes to suppress white heterosexual men, secretly ruling the world without the public's awareness. According to this narrative, people can "wake up" and see the truth by metaphorically swallowing the Red Pill ideology (Thorburn 2023). In the manosphere, men believe they are marginalized by a misandrist society that seeks to oppress them. This society, they argue, constructs a false narrative of male privilege, while men are actually the true victims. In this context, taking the red pill represents opening their eyes to feminist "brainwashing" (Ging 2019). Those in the manosphere who consider themselves "Red Pilled" see themselves as enlightened individuals who have uncovered the hidden truths of reality and can see the light beyond the darkness.

In the r/NoFap community, NoFap is sometimes, but rarely, explicitly framed as a way to escape the Matrix, with the practice constituting a "Glitch in the Matrix". In these few cases, practicing NoFap is presented as a way to recognize the Matrix and learn self-control, which is seen as the key for men to break free. Within this framework, NoFappers promoting these ideas view themselves as pioneers in creating a "brave new world", claiming that society is preventing men from becoming their true selves and instead turning them into weak simulacrum of who they should be. While few members of the NoFap community claim to believe in the existence of the Matrix, the majority explicitly rejects this idea, distancing themselves from the manosphere by dismissing it as "manosphere nonsense".

While many in the NoFap community dismiss the concept of the Matrix, they are still open to discussing their societal role as those who truly recognize the degeneracy and negative effects of pornography on men, future generations, the traditional family and society. In particular, the idea of "enlightenment" is prevalent in the r/NoFap community. Members often actively engage in the construction of an "us versus them" narrative, positioning themselves as the enlightened ones. It's not uncommon to encounter users referring to themselves as the "chosen ones".

"We are the select few. The chosen ones as we have determined for us that we deserve more than what the internet perceives us to need. We are just a little amount since internet strives to overcome the notion that genuine connection is real. We, the chosen ones, divert from the easy path." (Our rephrase, word by word, through ethical fabrication)

They describe themselves as the ones who can see through the “rabbit hole” of pornography, the illusion of pleasure it creates, how it tricks the brain into mistaking synthetic dopamine hits for real satisfaction and genuine connections. According to this view, pornography keeps men “hooked”, “addicted” and “enslaved”, clouding their minds with artificial dopamine highs, preventing them from standing up for themselves, thinking clearly and becoming better men. Those who don’t recognize this are mostly labeled as “porn addicts in denial”.

NoFap is often framed not only as a personal quest but also as a mission to awaken the world to the realities of the porn industry and the flaws of a “dopamine-addicted modern society”. Sexual content is said to be omnipresent, as if designed to brainwash men, keeping them in a state of docility and submission. One user described feeling “assaulted” by constant stimulation and sexualized images. Some argue that this state of the “modern age” demands a redefinition of masculinity in the direction of a “strengthness”, or it risks being lost. This especially in relation to the belief, and anxiety, that the consumption of pornography will produce a future epidemic of erectile dysfunctions in the younger generations, resulting in the collapse of society. They claim that without this change, men will be left behind. Members of the community often see themselves as true warriors, the only ones able to recognize the “real” society’s fallacies and take action. The system, they argue, is corrupt, and the societal stigma around men recovering from compulsive masturbation and pornography consumption is seen as evidence of this corruption. They position themselves as victims of a system that does not recognize their struggles and suffering, especially in its disregard for men’s health issues. According to them, society remains “in the dark”, having not yet swallowed the NoFap pill. The r/NoFap community sees itself as a niche of good men, actively working to resist a society that exploits women by turning them into sexual objects and dulls men’s minds, leading them to believe in this pornographic sexualized distorted reality.

The iconic Red Pill phrase “The Matrix is real” is often used in r/NoFap. Whether they fully believe in it or not, they often use the phrase to signal the existence of misleading and false narratives, particularly regarding pornography, being sex-positive, empowering and liberating while it is defined as a modern form of enslavement. Following these beliefs, some NoFappers are convinced that the “whole world” is trying to make men fail this challenge, with the hypersexualization of everything as evidence. Some also argue that the “attacks” on the NoFap community from media, researchers, and activists are part of a “woke conspiracy”, where men are under siege and wrongly blamed. Instead, they point to a hedonistic system, constantly chasing dopamine and pleasure, as the source of violence and enslavement. In this context, supporters of this perspective argue that the hypersexualization of society, partly driven by feminist sexual liberation movements, has caused the collapse of the family, which was once the cornerstone of society, leading to its decline and eventual destruction.

NoFappers portray themselves as fighting what they self-diagnose as an addiction that weakens men, rejecting what they feel are mainstream views on pornography, which they claim is normalized, praised, justified, and seen as sexually liberating in modern society. They strategically frame themselves as enlightened warriors, able to see this reality and striving to stop it. At the same time, they distance themselves from the Red Pilled “Matrix” concept when explicitly mentioned, as it is seen as conspiratorial and radicalized.

The Lord of the Cucks: The Return of the Kings

Ging (2019) explains how evolutionary psychology dominates the rhetoric of the manosphere in terms of sexual “selection” and “mating behaviour”. Women are portrayed as biologically irrational, hypergamous, and naturally drawn to alpha males, seeking strategic freedom while simultaneously desiring to be dominated (Ging 2019; Haslop et al. 2024; Thorburn 2023). In contrast, masculinity is described as being naturally rooted in rationality, productivity, control, and mastery over nature, bodies, and society (Ging 2019; Lilly 2016). A man who fails to exercise this control and dominance is seen as incapable of dominating women or is perceived as desperate for their attention, sometimes even submissive, an insult and dishonour to traditional manhood and the mark of the “beta male”. In the manosphere, the various, often conflicting, groups agree that the weakening of men from alpha to beta men results from societal changes, specifically the feminization of society (Bellassai 2006; Mosse 1982) and the advancement of a feminist agenda that promotes women’s and LGBTQAI+ rights at the expenses of men. According to them, sexual liberation has led to the loosening of societal controls over women’s sexuality, once enforced by governments and communities, contributing to a crisis of intimacy, the breakdown of the nuclear family, and a shift in the sexual marketplace. This shift forces men to compete with one another for what they see as their natural entitlement: women’s bodies and caregiving (Meszaros 2021). Using the marketplace metaphor, they argue that human sexuality operates like a “sexual market” (Thorburn 2023), where men compete for a finite resource (women), and winning this competition enhances their value and masculine status in society. Masculinity is therefore defined by access to the idealized desired canonical woman in a strongly heteronormative and ableist framework.

Different groups within the manosphere offer various strategies and viewpoints to handle this ‘emasculatation’ and perceived oppression of men in the misandrist sexual marketplace. For example, MGTOW recommends a range of approaches, from using women solely for sexual pleasure to avoiding marriage and relationships altogether, aiming to become a stoic, self-sufficient individual. PUAs offer strategies and workshops to master the “game” of seducing women, which often includes dismissing consent (placing the group as “warriors” of rape culture)

and insulting. Red Pill promotes strategies for becoming more masculine, focusing on self-control, discipline, and domination, to attain the position where a man no longer has to ask, everything is supposedly entitled to him, especially women. Incels view themselves as genetically unfit for the demands of a gynocentric sexual marketplace, in terms of both physical appearance and wealth. They believe they cannot change their situation and attempts to become alpha are considered biologically and naturally “futile” (Bates 2021; Meszaros 2021; Smith 2024; Thorburn 2023). As a result, those who do not compete in the sexual market are relegated to various forms of beta masculinity (Burnett 2021), labelled as cucks⁴, simps⁵, soyboys⁶, or betafags, and seen as betraying masculinity by being feminized or submitting to female power (Jones et al. 2020).

It is quite common for r/NoFap users to distance themselves from content they describe as explicitly manosphere-related, particularly regarding strategies for seduction, views on relationships, and the dating system. Specifically, they distance themselves from, condemn, and call out users for practices such as rating women’s physical appearance, using terms like “body count” to refer to the number of sexual partners, or promoting the PUA concept of the “game”⁷ and the “Incel energy” that vilifies and generalizes women, fostering resentment simply for their existence.

Porn is seen as something that creates Incels, while NoFap is considered a strategy to escape the Incel or Red Pill mindset, which objectifies women or seeks to dominate them. In this context, “Incel” or “Red Pill” is often used as an insult, and almost interchangeably. Some users claim to use the term “alpha” ironically, to indicate their success in their journey of abstinence, while distancing it from the typical manosphere connotations. They even criticise the manosphere’s “alpha mentality”, calling it lame and cringe, a product of insecurity, and ultimately counterproductive. At the same time, in r/NoFap, members frequently discuss the impact of pornography on the dating system, arguing that porn is causing men to become “simps” or “cucks”, unable to “get girls” or view women as human beings rather than sexual objects.

⁴ On the internet, a cuckold is defined as a man who is aroused by watching his girlfriend or wife have sex with another man. Cuckolding is the act of deriving sexual pleasure from this activity. The term is often used negatively to imply a passive man who does not assert control, through penetration, over the woman he is perceived to possess.

⁵ Simp is a slang term used to insult men who are perceived as overly attentive and submissive to women, typically in their attempt and hope to gain sexual attention or favours. It is often used to troll young men and mock them for being overly “submissive” without gaining anything in return, implying they believe they are entitled to sexual or intimate attention from a woman simply for being nice and caring. Simping refers to the actions and practices put into practice by a simp.

⁶ Soyboy is a pejorative term for men perceived to lack masculine characteristics. The term is based on the presence of the phytoestrogen isoflavone in soybeans, which is claimed to feminize men who consume soybean products and negatively impact their testosterone and sperm quality. Although this is considered a conspiracy theory and lacks scientific evidence, the term is still highly utilized, especially as a synonym for effeminate and “submissive cuck”.

⁷ The game refers to a set of skills, practices, and strategies used by men to attract women. PUAs (Pick-Up Artists) believe that one’s game can be improved by understanding evolutionary psychology, psychology, confidence, and self-esteem, through self-improvement efforts aimed at enhancing social skills and physical appearance. The techniques promoted by the group’s gurus to improve the game often disregard consent, involve negging, encourage violent practices, harassment, and are fundamentally tied to rape culture (Carlo, 2023; Dayter and Rudiger, 2019, 2015).

They claim this results in men being unable to interact with women in a “normal” way, develop emotional interest, or build strong intimate relationships.

“From my perspective, I now tend to view women more as objects than I did when I was younger, which is leading to an increase in simping and an overemphasis on sexual desires. This can cause women to be seen more as sexual objects rather than real individuals. Regarding women, they likely have too many options nowadays, given the number of attractive men on dating apps, making it more difficult for the average guy to establish an intimate relationship.” (Our rephrase, word by word, through ethical fabrication)

The community believe that pornography is ruining intimate relationships and that men are having less and less sex because of it, often expressing ongoing difficulties in “getting chicks”. While discussing the challenges of men “dating” and “mating” due to pornography consumption, NoFappers engage with imagery, language, and concepts central to various manosphere groups. They often combine ideas and discussions from different manosphere groups, which are sometimes in conflict over how to respond to the emotional and sexual landscape. Both NoFap and the manosphere describe this landscape as increasingly difficult for men, with both more or less explicitly suggesting an anti-masculinity sentiment and adopting a victimized stance in this socio-historical context.

In r/NoFap, users spend considerable time and discussions focused on what women want, what they like, and how to approach them. “Real” women are often described in ways similar to the manosphere, but with more moderate tones. They are frequently portrayed as selective (rather than hypergamous), wanting to be won over (rather than dominated), and attracted to confidence (rather than to “alphaness”). Users often agree that their “porn addiction”, which makes them inept, unproductive, and undesirable, is what makes them less attractive to women. Women, in turn, are portrayed as a homogeneous group naturally drawn to male self-control, seen as a sign of the ability to protect, provide, and be responsible, qualities considered essential for a potential family. This narrative actively reproduces the “evo-psyche” that Ging (2019) discusses, which defines “male and female behaviour” as naturally and evolutionarily determined. In a more “moderate” way compared to typical manosphere narratives, NoFap users appear to reinforce the LSM (Look, Status, and Money) rules, which suggests that to attract and succeed with women, one must focus on improving their physical appearance, social value, and success in the productive world.

Thus, engaging in NoFap is also seen as a way to maximize men’s sexual capital through self-improvement, focusing on stopping the objectification of women through building self-confidence, and going to the gym, which can ultimately attract women. Many NoFap

members discuss how they gain significant confidence by participating in NoFap and self-improvement projects, including taking care of themselves through exercise, diet, and practising self-control and discipline. Most report that this newfound confidence results in increased attention from women, reinforcing the belief that women are naturally and biologically attracted to traditional masculine traits such as self-control, confidence, strength, willpower, and general independence from women and self-sufficiency. Thus, men's self-control and self-discipline are viewed as the key strategies for building confidence, feeling more masculine, and gaining sexual capital, much like in the Red Pill ideology.

"Pulling a girl" is mostly constructed as the natural result of a successful period of abstinence combined with effective self-improvement, sometimes referred to as winning the "final prize", with the implicit idea that a woman must be earned. This concept frames women as rewards for men deemed worthy, undermining the representation of women as individuals with agency and decision-making power, particularly in matters of sexuality and attraction (Johannsen 2021). As discussed by Smith (2024), citing Bates (2021), in perpetuating this view of sexuality, NoFappers echo the manosphere's association of being a "real" alpha male with sexual conquest, viewing women's interest as a natural evolutionary response to men "pushing the right buttons" (Smith 2024, 534). In line with this, the manosphere's hierarchy of masculinities is reproduced, with the language of "alpha", "beta", and "sigma" masculinities tied to the "sexual market" and heterosexual relationships being widespread and normalized, though "refined" to remove explicit references to Red Pill and manosphere ideologies.

Members often remark that not simping feels like a superpower and claim that NoFap gives you the "King Pill", representing success in life, particularly in attracting women and forming a relationship. The connection between being a King and attracting women is apparent in comments where obtaining a girlfriend equates to "being a king", as success in NoFap and the sexual market is seen as a form of triumph. This echoes, albeit distantly and in a distorted form, the infamous PUAs website "The Return of Kings", which was shut down in 2018. The founder, Roosh Valizadeh, was repeatedly accused of misogyny, antisemitism, homophobia, and ties to the alt-right. He promoted Red Pill ideology, focusing on men's frustrations over their perceived loss of power in both intimate and economic spheres, particularly highlighting a "crisis of intimacy" in which men lack access to desired women's bodies due to feminism (Meszaros 2021). In r/NoFap, "a crisis of intimacy" is also widely discussed, though it is framed as a result of pornography consumption. This consumption is said to create unrealistic expectations regarding women's bodies, hypersexualizing them, producing erectile dysfunctions and making it difficult for young men to approach women, having thousands and thousands of "pixel women" at their disposal. According to them, this process turns men into hollow, brainless shells while reducing women to

potential sexual objects or OnlyFans models, making it impossible to achieve intimacy and build relationships, all within a taken-for-granted heterosexual ableist framework.

The combination of abstaining from pornography and securing a “real” girlfriend is often framed as the ultimate proof of achieving authentic masculinity, distancing oneself from an “incel” or “beta” mentality, which fosters resentment towards women or leads to simping and cuckolding. This narrative strongly mirrors the discourse of remasculinization (Smith 2024) and self-improvement promoted by Red Pill and PUAs (Smith 2024). In particular, the emphasis on breaking free from “beta conditions” is heavily endorsed by Red Pillers and PUAs as crucial for preventing women from holding power over men and asserting male dominance.

Moreover, according to some NoFappers, a real man doesn’t need a woman’s validation. In this sense, authentic confidence is defined not only as the ability to attract women but also to know when to say no, distancing oneself from them, not “putting them on a pedestal”, being independent from women. The recurring trope portrays some women as seductive and inherently temptresses, sirens seeking to trap a man, and men must remain vigilant not to be deceived or diverted from their path of self-optimization to become better men. This discourse intercepts and intersects with elements of Red Pill ideology about becoming the alpha male, blending them with key concepts from MGTOW, particularly the idea that women are corruptive, dangerous, and biologically different from men. However, this is done without resorting to the highly derogatory terms commonly used in MGTOW groups within the manosphere.

In this borrowing of various manosphere elements, a sort of “manospherian hodgepodge” emerges within r/NoFap, a diluted mix of often conflicting ingredients that, while watered down, still perpetuates typical manosphere narratives about heteronormative sexual and intimate relationships. At the same time, r/NoFap users position themselves in direct opposition to manosphere groups, claiming that by gaining confidence and self-control through abstinence from porn and self-improvement projects, they can be better men, stop objectifying women, rehumanize them, build healthy relationships, and deconstruct power dynamics. Here the strategically constructed illusion is that moving from a “cuck” position to that of a “king” is enough to achieve them.

Conclusions

While few NoFap members openly identify with manosphere groups, some acknowledge shared “truths” within these ideologies, such as the belief that men are persecuted, falsely accused by feminist hysteria, lack role models, and face societal neglect. Women are often depicted

negatively in these discussions, seen as indifferent, selfish, and driven by status and money. As a result, many r/NoFap members have expressed concerns that the group is becoming more radicalized, aligning with Red Pill and Incel ideologies. Despite this, most members explicitly reject manosphere views and the misogyny prevalent in digital spaces like Reddit, with some even citing that they want to quit PMO because they fear that continuing to engage with it might lead them to adopt similar misogynistic mindsets.

However, this paper demonstrates how r/NoFap members reproduce core manosphere ideologies, all while distancing themselves from manosphere groups through the co-optation of anti-misogynistic and anti-objectification discourses which dilute the manosphere component of their narratives and fortify the perceived boundaries between them. NoFappers often adopt a victimhood narrative, portraying themselves as victims of a system that undermines men, ignores their issues, and complicates sexual and dating life for men. This narrative fuels their self-improvement journey, casting them as victims of a hypersexualized society, yet positioning themselves as brave individuals striving for change and equality.

The effect is the creation and expansion of a sort of ‘diluted’ manosphere, where some core manosphere ideologies are watered down with seemingly more ‘moderate’ positions, while still subtly reinforcing these views. These ideologies are reframed as pro-women and promoting equality in society, rather than overtly anti-feminist. Although the concentration and density of misogynistic discourses may be reduced through this process of dilution, their nuclear presence remains intact. Building on Horta Ribeiro et al.’s (2021) study of the manosphere’s evolution across the web, Cannito et al. (2021) conceptualize the manosphere as a “magmatic terrain” with fluid and shifting boundaries. In this metaphor, communities like NoFap, where manosphere ideologies are often diluted or downplayed, act as ‘water’ that lowers the melting point of the surrounding ‘rocks’, potentially sparking the formation of magma. As this magma rises, it may lead to explosive ‘eruptions’ of harmful ideas and discourses, with serious societal consequences.

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