

LOOK MA, NO HANDS

Will it, ironically and quite unexpectedly, be men who eventually shun the porn industry and end its pervading side-effects? Oliver Roberts looks at two websites that suggest this might be the case

Have we reached peak-wank? A number of websites and online forums seem to think so, but today we're going to focus on two of them, and by two I really mean one because both websites and their forums sort of correspond with each other, one usually leading its user onto the other, and vice versa.

First, there's www.yourbrainonporn.com (hereon known as YBOP), which was created in 2010 and has since spawned a 2014 book by the same name. YBOP is a secular, science-based site that looks at porn's – more specifically online porn's – effects on the brain. The information contained comes from more than 15 years of research and nine years' worth of accounts from recovering porn addicts.

YBOP is eager to point out that it is not looking at pornography and its effects from a moral point of view, but rather objectively presenting scientific evidence and case studies regarding porn's addictive qualities and its

subsequent tidal effect on the porn user's physiology and psyche, plus their general social interactions, more specifically with the opposite sex.

Second, there's www.nofap.com, which is really more of a forum-based site that offers support for those seeking release from the nasty fallout of the habitual cycle that NoFap terms PMO – Porn, Masturbation, Orgasm. In short, PMO refers to the act of watching porn and then masturbating to orgasm. And, as explained in great detail by YBOP, all this PMO'ing is doing serious damage to male PMO'ers in the form of actual, bona-fide addiction cycles that replicate the dopamine-hit-type addiction patterns witnessed in the brains of actual recreational drug users/addicts.

Not only do these addiction cycles induce withdrawal in the form of anxiety and depression and "brain-fog", they are also responsible for feelings of low self-esteem and self-loathing, plus – most horribly – erectile dysfunction and men generally having issues being able to orgasm with a real-life partner because their brains have gotten so used to orgasming to foul pixels.

(By the way, in case you're wondering, NoFap is so named because "fap" is an onomatopoeic expression for wanking.)

Out of our two aforementioned anti-wank websites, NoFap is probably the most compelling because, in its seven-year existence, its forum has grown massively and globally, and, apart from

the sincere and often heartbreaking posts and conversations geared towards recovery from PMO addiction, there are threads from scores of NoFap members (officially termed "fapstronauts") claiming that eschewing porn and refraining from masturbation entirely (except for uncontrollable nocturnal emissions) can unlock "superpowers" that include becoming super-focused/ambitious, more manly and more attractive to women.

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Illustration: Keith Tumbel

Some important things you should know about sperm retention

The notion of male sperm being sacred and highly charged, energy wise, is nothing new. As far back as 206BC, Chinese Taoist practitioners apportioned premature ageing, disease and fatigue to the life force lost through ejaculation, or "Jing". As a result, Taoists practiced sperm retention, which is something that still carries on today.

However, the idea of sperm retention, especially in any Westernised setting, was mainly the realm of modern-day Taoists and people into things like tantric sex (which has Buddhist/Hindu roots), and this is where NoFap comes in. So, the forums are chock full of their YouTube videos and you'll read about/hear fapstronauts eulogising sperm retention no end.

Some fapstronauts/NoFap practitioners even claim that holding onto their sperm causes them to give off a phenomena or highly mysterious energy even, that causes women to be inexplicably drawn to them without much effort on the dude's part.

However, one oft-cited contention with sperm retention and/or foregoing masturbation outright is that it can allegedly lead to rampant libido and unwanted erections, which, one imagines, could easily negate the aforementioned positive side-effects.

Oliver Roberts

he of the cereals, originally developed his ubiquitous Corn Flakes as part of an anti-masturbation crusade? He believed the docile flakes would somehow repress sexual impulses in the youth. Anyhoo, whatever your take on these things, there is no doubt that NoFap represents a significant, and perhaps yet unprecedented male-driven backlash against pornography and its after-effects.

I managed to track down a few South African fapstronauts who spoke to me about PMO addiction (using their forum names) and how the NoFap movement has helped/continues to help them.

JohnDoe (who joined NoFap less than a month ago) is 32 years old and started watching porn when he was a teen. He's been married for five years and says that porn addiction was ruining his life.

"My sex drive was basically zero, because I masturbated during the day at work. Porn made me want more from sex, unrealistically more. So when my wife declined weird fantasy stuff like anal, I went to prostitutes to try and fulfill my porn fantasy. Worst of all, my wife knows nothing about this double life."

JohnDoe has now found another local fapstronaut and the pair support each other over WhatsApp. He says he still pines for porn ("it's like a very bad group of friends that you miss at times") but, in the words of a true recovering addict, he says: "It's not easy, but at least I'm further away from my addiction than I was yesterday."

He says that in the time that he's stopped PMO'ing (17 days at the time of writing), he feels more "in tune" with his emotions, has more energy and is more affectionate to his wife.

Another user, McDreamer, is a 22 y/o bisexual who was terribly excited to be part of the article. He first saw porn by accident when he was six (!) and started PMO'ing roughly six years later. One of the reasons he signed up was to improve his sex life – the effects of 10 years of PMO'ing have been so severe that, up until last month, he had never orgasmed with a partner.

McDreamer admits he was sceptical

about certain NoFap claims, but confirmed that within 17 days of abstinence, he noticed his naturally introverted self come out of its shell a bit and, like JohnDoe, he's been "more in touch with my feelings and other simple things about myself... The changes aren't semi-imagined – they're real. I saw changes in the 17 days versus the 10 years I've been PMO'ing. I know it's true."

McDreamer cites easy access to porn as the most challenging thing for a fapstronaut, or frankly any libidinous male alive today.

"It's not like an addiction to drugs or food or alcohol, which have some sort of restriction. Porn you can get 24/7 anywhere, plus it's part of our culture, and people regard it as a 'rite of passage'. Add to that an addiction to the internet and FOMO, and you have a recipe for disaster."

NoFap is not easy. Or rather it's easier for some than others. There are some members on the forum who claim to be PMO-free for more than a year (a lot of the time this includes not ejaculating) and, just reading the before/after posts, you can see that many forum members have successfully made their way through a very dark and swampy tunnel and come out the other side into blinding, mildly disorientating daylight, sort of like the way you feel when you go to the cinema during the daytime and then walk back out into the parking lot.

The last local fapstronaut I spoke to, 35 y/o Maronite Metal Praise, has a life story that is basically too upsetting to go into here, except to say that he was introduced to porn when he was nine, via the nudie magazines sold at his father's corner café. After being basically scammed out of all his money by a woman over the internet, and even got engaged to, he plunged deeper into PMO and has been struggling with it ever since. He says he's attempted the NoFap thing several times, and failed on each occasion, i.e. "overdosing on PMO."

"I can't go without masturbation for more than a week," he says. "It causes me to think of nothing else, at work, all I end up thinking about is porn and every disgusting fantasy imaginable. I desperately want to give it up... I hope one day I can finally be free of porn and masturbation addiction, but because I've indulged for years it will always be a weak link of my mind, inviting me to go down that long road to ruin one more time."

Some claim that online porn is the new tobacco, in that by the time we understand its effects it'll be too late and millions of lives will have been destroyed. Others claim that the effects of porn have less to do with availability and more to do with the psychology of each individual using it. And the fact that there is so much information alerts us to just how significant online porn and its consumption is, both as a subject and as something that, because of the uncertainty of its long-term effects, remains an unknown.

Whether or not you subscribe to the views and ideas of platforms like YBOP and NoFap, two shimmering ironies/anomalies have come out of these global retaliations against the persistence of online porn: (1) the retaliation has come from men themselves, who have too long been regarded as universally sex-mad and the presumed holders of shaky, locker-room morals when it comes to porn; and (2) online porn's very surplus may, in its own sweat-laden, sticky way, hold the key to a refreshing, hashtagged reversal in the way sex – and women – are treated and perceived.

Of course, the power of the internet and social media means this very well could happen, or not happen at all. But at least there's hope. ●

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Whatever your take on sperm retention, pornography and masturbation (remember that the latter has been alternately demonised/deemed perfectly healthy since, like, the beginning of time – did you know that Doctor John Harvey Kellogg, yes,