



Making Sense of *Jiese*: An Interview Study of Members from a Porn-Free Self-Help Forum in China

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Abstract

About 6 million men in China engage in *jiese* (abstaining from masturbation and porn) and call themselves *jieyou* (porn-free self-help community members). In this article, we sought to unpack how the idea of *jiese* took root in Chinese historical, social, and cultural contexts by interviewing 32 *jieyou*. Guided by the sensemaking theory, we conducted a critical discourse analysis of participants' responses and ended up identifying four major themes: embodied experiences, *jiese* as rational and noble, reconstructing the subjectivity of *jieyou*, and nationalistic sentiments. We found out that *jieyou* tended to justify their abstinence by seeking sources of legitimacy in traditional Chinese culture, the ideology of healthism, science, and patriotic discourses. We argue that *jiese* reflects young men's contradictory cultural practices of conservatism, self-medicalization, and neoliberal governmentality.

Keywords *Jiese* · *Jieyou* · China · Sensemaking · Critical discourse analysis · Masturbation · Pornography

Introduction

A health influencer @Yixueshouzha posted a screenshot of the online chat between a high school student and a doctor on Weibo (a popular Chinese social media platform). The student started the conversation by saying “Hi, doctor! While I have abstained from sex for over a month, I had an erotic dream yesterday. Now I am afflicted by the guilt.” The doctor then responded, “Guy, the *Jiese* Forum (a porn-free self-help community) is a cult. What's wrong with acknowledging and pursuing individual biological needs?” This post quickly garnered public attention and spawned a storm of criticism on social media. The *Jiese* Forum was condemned as contaminating the minds of young people.

The *Jiese* movement in China, which advocates men abstaining from masturbation and porn, is equivalent to the “NoFap” movement in the West. While the *Jiese* movement is shunned by health professionals due to its outright denial of sexual

science, it gains popularity among young adults. For instance, an increasing number of young men have joined online *jiese* support forums and self-identify as *jieyou* (porn-free community members). They are convinced of the benefits of *jiese* such as getting rid of excessive indulgence in harmful sexual behaviors, cultivating healthy sexuality, and enhancing spiritual health. There are more than 6 million registered users in Baidu *Jiese* Forum up to June 2022, which has generated over 88 million posts (Forum, 2022).

Much scholarly attention has been paid to the repair and reproduction of hegemonic masculinity in NoFap (e.g., Hartmann, 2021). By contrast, less is known about how such an anti-masturbation movement takes shape in non-Western contexts (Fernandez et al., 2021). As prescribed in Confucianism, sexual desire symbolizes a rudimentary animal instinct that should be controlled; otherwise, it will result in the collapse of both family and society (Lu & Lu, 2013)). Thus, young adults in China are encouraged to practice self-regulation of sexual desire (Aresu, 2009).

In this article, we seek to explore how the patriarchal ideology, traditional medical beliefs, and neoliberal imperatives play into the sensemaking of *jiese* among young men in China. We ask, what does *jiese* mean to *jieyou*? Moreover, how do *jieyou* engage in the collective constructions of pornography and sex? We argue that *jiese* reflects young men's contradictory cultural practices of conservatism, self-medicalization, and neoliberal

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governmentality. Drawn from the debates on sexual self-discipline, individual choice, and pseudoscience, we hope to enrich the literature on *jieyou*'s identity building and further inform the design of future interventions aimed at improving youngsters' sexual health knowledge.

Literature Review

Pornography Addiction and Self-Medicalization

Whether or not pornography consumption is addictive remains debated. Some studies indicate that Internet pornography addiction fits into the general addiction model (e.g., substance addiction) (Love et al., 2015). However, others argue that there is little evidence that suggests that porn use is addictive (Ley et al., 2014). Owens et al. (2012) conducted a systematic literature review on the effects of internet pornography on adolescents and concluded that there was no obvious association between the consumption of online pornography and health problems. Despite these ongoing debates, a group of individuals insists that their uses of pornography are problematic (Grubbs & Perry, 2019). Recent years have also witnessed the widespread self-reported addition to pornography among cyberporn users (Grubbs et al., 2018).

The self-reported pornography addiction is indicative of a burgeoning self-medicalizing impulse (Taylor, 2019). By pathologizing a behavioral attribute or a physiological manifestation, self-medicalization turns a not-well-discussed situation into a medical issue without or even against experts' advice (Nettleton, 2006). Thus, self-medicalization promotes the "individualization" of social problems (Fainzang, 2013). Also, pornography addiction, mainly based on individuals' self-diagnosis, can be used to interpret various ethically and morally miserable scenarios (Taylor, 2019). For example, Grubbs and Perry (2019) developed a theoretical model indicating that the moral disapproval of pornography use contributed to moral incongruence (i.e., one's behaviors are contrary to his or her stated values). Specifically, religious people consuming pornography are usually tortured by moral pressure.

In addition to managing moral incongruence, producing and sharing self-related knowledge serve as another motivation for self-medicalization. First, Internet health is democratizing, and experts' authority is gradually challenged by informed youngsters (Segal, 2009). The computer-mediated knowledge is publicly negotiated and collectively assessed without being verified by the scientific community (Fortunati, 2018). Thus, the authority over the construction and preservation of medical knowledge is weakened by ordinary people through multiple ways of accessing health-related information (Turner, 1995). Furthermore, illness is increasingly becoming a public experience rather than personal privacy. For instance, pornography addiction has

been constructed as a "transient sexual disease" in the NoFap movement, and the accumulated interactive discussions on the Internet have led to the reinforcement of the historical perception that men with habitual masturbation have diseased bodies (Taylor, 2019, p. 56). Moreover, Internet forums not only foster the formation of illness subcultures but also lead to social movements aimed at resisting the mainstream medical discourse by eradicating pornography and masturbation (Conrad & Stults, 2010). Both the NoFap campaign in Western societies and the *Jiese* movement in China emphasize the problematic nature of pornography addiction by providing seemingly scientific explanations. However, scholars have criticized such narratives as pseudoscience leading to the stigmatization of vulnerable sexual minorities (Ley, 2018).

The NoFap Movement in the West

The extended access to Internet pornography and accompanying excessive porn use has given birth to the Western NoFap movement (i.e., undoing the bad effects caused by pornographic addiction through abstaining from pornography and masturbation) and an upsurge in porn-free self-help communities (Burnett, 2022). The r/NoFap Reddit community had boasted approximately 477,000 members by 2020 (Hartmann, 2021). Previous studies have attempted to investigate this growing online community by focusing on members' motivations.

The masculinity and misogyny rhetoric in the NoFap movement was introduced by Taylor and Jackson (2018) in their research on users' positioning in a pornography abstinence forum (r/NoFap), which illustrated how heterosexual men justified their anti-pornography position through discourses of innate masculinity and necessity of heterosexual intercourse. They further argued the importance for men to take ownership of their masculinity to combat an assumed feminist hegemony. Following a similar epistemological perspective, Hartmann (2021) discussed "manospherian modes of self-relation" displayed in NoFap-videos on YouTube, which revealed men's great desire to govern their bodies due to the fear of acquiring effeminate characteristics during masturbation. She also pointed out the relation of NoFap to a larger manosphere in which anti-feminism and misogyny thrived. In addition to examining online masculinities, Burnett (2022) approached the discursive construction of masturbation on Twitter as political contestation which mirrored the intersection of racism, nationalism, ableism, and anti-feminism. He identified seven NoFap subjectivities (i.e., fapstronauts, self-masters, role-players, believers, meninists, fetishists, and alt-righters) and linked them with competing myths, thereby reflecting on the morbid nature of the NoFap movement.

Another branch of research centered around the phenomenological experience of problematic pornography users. For

example, Cavaglioni (2008) delved into men's lived experiences shared in an Italian online porn-free community and noted that most forum users perceived their frequent porn use as an undefined disease and were vulnerable to feelings of shame, loss, and guilt. Chasioti and Binnie (2021) further provided a useful lens to understand individuals' problematic pornography use (PPU) by taking potential etiological factors (e.g., situational resources and material conditions) into consideration. Although Grubbs et al. (2018) spotlighted the role of religiousness in individuals' sensemaking of pornography addiction, it was suggested that members' perceptions were more influenced by "gender performativity, ongoing self-improvement, and successful social exhibitionism" rather than religiousness (Chasioti & Binnie, 2021, p. 2238). Aligned with it, Fernandez et al. (2021) concluded that moral incongruence was one of the least frequently cited reasons for refraining from masturbation while the belief drawn upon the concept of neuroplasticity suggesting that abstaining from porn use could reverse the harmful effects of pornography consumption on brain predominated forum users' narratives.

Overall, the existing literature mainly adopted critical and phenomenological perspectives to unpack male users' discourses of anti-pornography and anti-masturbation without attending to the specific sociocultural forces. However, in the case of China, the public attitudes toward pornography, masturbation, and abstinence are compounded by traditional cultural beliefs and the government's overall control.

Sex in China: Cultural and Historical Contexts

The perceptions and attitudes toward sex in China need to be understood within the cultural context consisting of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Influenced by Confucianism underscoring *lijiao* (feudal code of ethics), sexual topics have remained taboo since the Qing Dynasty (Zhang & Beck, 1999). According to Confucian thought, sex should be regulated by a fixed set of social protocols. For example, the husband and the wife should stay in separate rooms even after marriage to prevent frequent sexual activities (Lu & Lu, 2013). As Confucianism lays out, sex is shameful and must be conducted in private, which necessitates ethical control over individuals' sexual life (Steinhauer, 2016). In line with it, sex symbolizes the combination of *yin* (femininities) and *yang* (masculinities) in Taoism. The regulation of sexual behavior is believed to help keep balanced, thereby being conducive to one's health (Zhang, 2021). Meanwhile, Taoism links *jing* (seminal essence) closely with men's longevity and immortality. *Jing* is regarded as "the root of the body" and "the basic substance that maintains the activities of life" (Farquhar, 1999, p. 162). As one old saying puts it, "a drop of sperm is worth ten drops of blood." As a result, masturbation is strongly condemned as the loss of *jing*. Buddhism also advocates abstinence with the purpose of "reducing attachment

and modeling an alternative to lay life" (Kaza, 2004, p. 23). *The Five Precepts and the Eightfold Path*, the monumental work of Buddhist ethics, states that a person should neither be attached to nor pursue carnal desire (Gomes, 2004).

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), placing an emphasis on the harmful effects of masturbation, exerts a great impact on public attitudes towards sex. The philosophy of TCM subscribes to holism, that is, considering individuals' all health problems as a dynamic complex of interwoven processes (Zhang & Chor, 2021). Within such rhetoric, *shen* (kidney) acts as a reservoir for *jing*, and *shenkui* (energy kidney deficiency) suggests the lack of virility. By the same token, masturbation accelerates *shenkui*, leading to various health issues. Tseng et al. (1993) surveyed male patients with sexual dysfunction and found that 51% of the participants felt they needed to decrease or avoid masturbation and 62% of them believed that excessive masturbation would result in *shenkui*.

Historically, sex in China has been further shaped by state political goals. Although the idea of enjoying sexual pleasure was introduced to China during the May Fourth Movement in the late 1910s, all kinds of sexual expressions had been suppressed for nearly 30 years after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (Ho et al., 2018). Sex was mentioned solely for the sake of reproduction and the advancement of the family and society (Pan, 1994). Individual desires especially sexual desires were considered as opposed to collective goals during the Maoist era (Zhang, 2015). Under Hu Jintao's presidency, Confucianism, which had been undermined and attacked during the Cultural Revolution, was reinvigorated to legitimize the management of social transgressions including pornography use. In recent years, President Xi Jinping's call for creating a "green" (healthy) internet environment has defined pornography as a grave threat to the order in Cyberspace and thus should be disavowed, resulting in crackdowns on pornography websites. Furthermore, the burgeoning neoliberal ethos in contemporary Chinese society indicates two paradoxical ideologies: the empowerment of individual desires and the multi-layered institutional constraints on personal choices (Zou & Wallis, 2022).

In general, *jiese* in the Chinese context was best understood within the meta-logic. Specifically, the relational concept of the self, the continued stigma of masturbation, and the state's prescribed values and norms played a crucial role in guiding individuals' self-identification and interaction patterns (Apei, 2020). Nevertheless, the extant literature has not thoroughly unpacked the gendered and sociocultural implications hidden behind individuals' sensemaking of pornography and *jiese* in China.

Jieyou's Sensemaking

Originating from a primarily cognitivist perspective, the sensemaking theory has then been enriched to include

constructivist elements (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). From the constructivist perspective, sensemaking refers to “the discursive process of constructing and interpreting the social world” (Gephart, 1993, p. 1485). In other words, sensemaking is a social process in which individuals perceive things through extracting the basic, recognizable structures which are molded by the interpersonal, sociocultural, and institutional contexts (Tang et al., 2020). In recent years, studies have focused on the embodied component of sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). For example, people make sense of themselves and their lives through embodied experiences, namely, a “sensing” of their surroundings in the course of sustained daily interactions (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012). Particularly, a growing scholarly interest has been devoted to the role of individual emotion in the sensemaking process (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). They found that negative emotions including fear and anxiety significantly hindered individuals’ sensemaking efforts (i.e., cognitive information processing capacity). Furthermore, sensemaking functions as a necessary gap-bridging action when an individual’s personal life is disrupted unexpectedly (Mamykina et al., 2015).

Through sharing their stories with others, *jiyou* engage in retrospective sensemaking. Chinese people are reluctant to discuss sex in public, let alone seek professional assistance in sex therapy (Bhugra & Silva, 1995). Moreover, men are expected to be strong enough to *chuan zong jie dai* (carry on the family line), which requires them to preserve *jing*. Seen as a major threat to procreation, masturbation, and porn are discouraged and even prohibited in traditional Chinese families. Notably, a therapeutic mode of governance has given rise to contradictory sex narratives. On the one hand, the continuous reforms and opening-up greatly promoted the progress of modernization, enabling young adults’ exposure to sexual health knowledge. Thus, individuals’ sexual desires are protected. On the other hand, the state regulation of online consumption of sex and porn maintains the legitimacy and stability of the party-state by encouraging self-discipline and limiting individuals’ choices (Ho et al., 2018). Delving into the intertwining ideological assumptions in *jiyou*’s sensemaking can reveal the underlying cultural beliefs and the power dynamics. Thus, we interviewed 32 *jiyou* from Baidu *Jiese* Forum to explore how they perceived *jiese* and the ways that they engaged in the collective construction of sex and porn.

Method

Participants

After receiving IRB approval, we posted a flyer introducing this research project on Baidu *Jiese* Forum to recruit participants. The flyer contained the following information: researchers’

identities and contact information, the project’s aims (i.e., understanding how and why they joined Baidu *Jiese* Forum and the feelings and changes they have undergone), and the interview format and duration. It also specified that an eligible participant must meet the following three criteria: (1) he is a man, (2) he is 18 years old or older, and (3) he has logged on to the *Jiese* Forum at least every other day during the last six months. The saturation rule in qualitative research was adopted. We stopped recruiting participants when no new insights and narratives emerged from the interviews. We ended up recruiting 32 participants aged from 18 to 34 with a wide range of educational backgrounds including high school, undergraduate, and graduate degrees. The detailed demographic information of each participant was provided in Appendix A. Participants were not compensated.

Measures and Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were used to ask exploratory, open-ended questions to obtain participants’ sensemaking of sex, porn, and *jiese*. First, we asked participants, “what do masturbation and porn mean to you?” Then we proceeded to know their background information such as their living conditions and family relationships by asking “how do your parents and family think of masturbation and porn?” “Have you talked about *jiese* with them?” To develop a deeper understanding of the attributions behind the practice of *jiese*, we intended to collect stories with sufficient details. Therefore, participants were asked to provide additional details by answering questions such as the following: “When did you begin your journey of *jiese*?” “Why did you start the journey of *jiese*?” “Do you think *jiese* changed you a lot? If so, what changes do you think *jiese* brought?” Afterward, we sought to understand their sensemaking of *jiese*, thus we asked, “how do you make sense of the discussions on the *Jiese* forum?” Finally, we encouraged them to share their perceptions about the scientific basis for *jiese* by asking “how do you compare medical knowledge circulating on the *Jiese* forum with experts’ argument?” Several other questions (e.g., warm-up questions) were asked, which were not of the main interests of the current study so were not reported.

Due to COVID-19, the third author conducted all the interviews using WeChat (a popular electronic communication tool in China). Interviews typically lasted between 35 and 65 min. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Chinese to preserve the subtleties in the language. Only the selected quotes were translated into English.

Data Analysis

We conducted a critical discourse analysis of the interview data to unpack our proposed research questions. Critical discourse analysis focuses on revealing the power structures and cultural ideologies concealed behind the language (Wodak & Meyer,

2015). As stated previously, the current study sought to investigate the discursive construction of *jiese* among *jieyou* with limited sexual health knowledge. Hence, we took a stance that knowledge is neither objective nor monopolistic, but rather the intersubjectively constructed and interpretive practice of a community (Foucault, 1980). To analyze the interviews, each author read through the transcripts to extract meaningful data units and then identified recurring themes. Next, we compared our notes and did another round of analysis. When having disagreements, we discussed thoroughly to make a decision. Finally, the four most prevalent themes were explicated in the results section.

Validation

All three authors grew up in China and have a comprehensive understanding of Chinese culture. In particular, the third author, as a long-time observer of this online forum and a male interviewer, had intimate knowledge regarding men's discourses of anti-masturbation and thus easily established rapport with our participants. Meanwhile, several measures were employed to guard against investigator bias and enhance validity. In accordance with the peer briefing guidelines, we invited a member of Baidu *Jiese* Forum who was not included in our sample to read the original posts, review our interpretations, and provide feedback (Spall, 1998). After addressing his concerns and doubts, we then asked two experts specializing in sexual health and Chinese culture to proofread our earlier draft for culturally specific terminology (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). We further revised our manuscript in response to their suggestions.

Results

In essence, *jieyou*'s sensemaking of sex, porn, and *jiese* reflected the intertwinement of a series of seemingly contradictory ideologies prevailing in Chinese society. After combing through, combining, and discarding recurring concepts emerging from our analysis, we concluded the following four major themes: embodied experiences, *jiese* as rational and noble, reconstructing the subjectivity of *jieyou*, and nationalistic sentiments, which can certainly overlap. Particularly, we situated our analysis within the context where family power dynamics, self-medicalization, identity crisis, and neoliberal governmentality came into play.

Embodied Experiences

Complying with the state's call that individuals' sexual desire should be controlled, *Jieyou*'s narratives reflect their attempts to free themselves from anxieties and shame brought by masturbation through practicing abstinence and improving sexual morality. Our analysis further showed that the self-regulating subjects were established

and solidified through *jieyou*'s exchange of emotions and embodied experiences. Moreover, *jieyou* used online forums as a space where they felt empowered to push back against experts' opinions.

First, it should be noted that the long-lasting anxieties about masturbation were not undermined by technical and theoretical advances. Many participants expressed their fear concerned with masturbation, deriving from sexual ignorance that was deeply entrenched in China. For example, P20 said "I didn't know how I engaged with masturbation when I was a child. I was so freaked that it would lead me to poor health condition. Thus, I fought off the urge to masturbate by tying my hands with wire." For a number of years, despite the sexual knowledge has been promoted, China still has suffered from a lack of an unequal distribution of sexual knowledge between cities and the countryside. A few men grown up in rural areas stated that they were plagued by panic attacks since medical resources and sex education were very limited in the countryside. For instance, P13 started his story by saying, "masturbation contributed to my frail body, which was embodied by frequent fever and anemia." Furthermore, the anxieties that underpinned individual concerns about health conditions were revealed in the idea that masturbation caused all diseased symptoms. As P24 mentioned, "acne on my face cleared up after I abstained from masturbation for a month; however, once I started masturbating, acne flared up quickly." A few participants also reported other health issues caused by porn use such as memory loss, kidney failure, brain damage, and stutter. As such, some common reasons for getting acne including hormonal fluctuations as well as unhealthy diet were absent from their narratives; instead, they ascribed all poor physical conditions to their habitual masturbation. In these instances, *jieyou*'s anxieties had a subtly different texture and should be interpreted in the context of neoliberal ethos which encourages individuals to take responsibility for their own health. In such a neoliberal climate, the illness became a personal failure due to one's lack of self-regulation.

Besides anxieties, shame associated with masturbation was also emphasized in *jieyou*'s stories. Shame, in Confucian culture, serves as a moral constraint to ensure individuals' moral integrity and thus fosters a harmonious society (Yang & Walker, 2020). Many participants reported they kept silent about *jiese*, which was explained by P27, "you would jerk off in secret, but it's impossible to do it in front of your friends, let alone mention it's hard to quit it." Instead of openly talking about *jiese* in real life, participants can only actively engage in such discussions via the Internet, as P3 said, "I will not go to promote this thing offline mainly because I want to save my face (*ai mian zi*). I'm afraid that others will laugh at me." *Mian*, which refers to a reputation obtained from social achievement and adherence to moral standards, functions as an internalized sanction. Even today, individuals' moral

obligations are highlighted in the construction of a harmonious society in contemporary China.

Finally, it should be noted that a large volume of embodied practices shared in the online forum significantly influenced young men's emotions and sensemaking process of *jiese*. *Jieyou* created a paranoid atmosphere by recording their daily efforts of *jiese* in the online forum. For example, P13 commented on the atmosphere on the *Jiese* forum, "most posts record the deterioration of the body accompanied by the catharsis of depression and despair after masturbation." In addition, some participants emphasized that their embodied experiences of *jiese* were grounded in science. For instance, P6 said, "It is believed that a study conducted with tens of thousands of participants can lead to a scientific conclusion. Our *Jiese* forum has millions of *jieyou* who talked about how their health suffered a lot from masturbation. Obviously, their experiences proved that *jiese* was needed and scientific." By the same token, health professionals' ongoing endeavors of understating the adverse effects of masturbation were further challenged by *jieyou* since these experts ignored the bodily experience of a large number of men. Thus, expertise, which in the past was integral to self-government and self-regulation, had a decreasing authority over individuals' conduct. Rather, the embodied experiences accumulated in cyberspace fostered a trend of self-medicalization, thereby coalescing into a force to cast doubt on medical expertise.

Overall, *jieyou*'s embodied practices symbolized a kind of obedience or submission to state governing techniques. Most notably, *jieyou*'s sensemaking of their various bodily experiences took root in the interplay of a neoliberal climate (i.e., an emphasis on self-optimization) and the relational notion of self-identity. Specifically, men's bodies were expected to be strong and viable, which led to their self-monitoring efforts.

***Jiese* as Rational and Noble**

In addition to embodied experiences, a lot of participants were inclined to shape *jiese* as rational and noble. The importance of reproduction in a family enabled young men to exploit traditional values (e.g., the duty of carrying on the family lineage) to justify *jiese*. Furthermore, many participants expressed their resistance to masturbation by supporting TCM, while paradoxically utilizing science to bolster the legitimacy of anti-masturbation.

To begin with, *jiese* fit into traditional Chinese culture that men should show filial piety and take responsibility for reproduction. For instance, P4 shared a story about how he struggled to quit masturbation, through which he protected his body given by his parents. In this way, anti-masturbation signified his filial piety. Moreover, P3 expressed his concern that masturbation would lead to infertility, saying, "a recent video released by an official media described a low pass rate at the local sperm bank. I think it has something to do with men's habitual masturbation." In this case, sexual desire was constructed as serving procreative

aims. Correspondingly, masturbation was described as a danger to family fecundity since it was perceived as a waste of sperm that could have been utilized for reproduction. In the Chinese context, the family as a basic unit plays a critical role in maintaining the regime's control of the vast population and political stability. Reproduction, traditionally seen as essential to achieving family harmony, needed to be ensured by investing in a men's long-term sperm health in *jieyou*'s perspective. Therefore, *jieyou* who believed in this familistic logic were devoted to cultivating their moral characters and improving fertility by quitting masturbation.

Significantly, TCM was also cited by participants to justify *jiese*. Within the discourse of TCM such as *jing* and *yin-yang*, health problems were framed as disharmony among bodily functions and individuals' failures to lead a healthy life. For example, P11 explained that *jing* was a kind of nutrient for the human body, which needed to be remained to firm him up. Similarly, P19, the moderator of the *Jiese* forum looked down upon other *jieyou* who failed in *jiese* by saying, "they always ask stupid questions, which is normal since they are weak. They even cannot make up their mind about whether to quit masturbation thoroughly. According to TCM, the brain marrow and spinal cord are connected. If the kidneys are not functioning properly, your brain power is certainly not adequate." As Holism deeply entrenched in TCM suggests, human bodies are interacting wholes and nearly all health problems can be attributed to abnormalities of *shen* as well as *jing* deficiency. Thus, individuals that were unable to follow through *jiese* could easily fall into self-blame; meanwhile, anti-masturbation came under the spotlight in response to health concerns.

It's noteworthy that *jieyou* proposed "scientific *jiese*", which attempted to employ seemingly scientific narratives to rationalize *jiese*, despite the fact that *jiese* was widely criticized by health professionals as unscientific. Some participants reported that "scientific *jiese*" was another theoretical system provided to persuade some *jieyou* who were skeptical about the scientific nature of TCM. Within a national system of science popularization in China, an increasing number of citizens were exposed to basic knowledge of science and medicine (Jia & Liu, 2014). Therefore, it was more likely to attract young men to believe in the urgency of abstaining from porn when *jiese* was in the disguise of science. However, this intention was antagonized by an apparent paradox: individuals' experiences of *jiese* always lacked the expertise of specialists and were hardly evidenced by science. To wrestle with such a dilemma, some participants relentlessly asserted the similarity between science and metaphysics. As P10 argued, "Metaphysics and science both come from practice. Science is not the truth. Metaphysics just lacks a specific method to prove the truth, but it also has a lot of merits." In this scenario, science was not represented as authoritative; rather, *jieyou*'s embodied practices discussed above were framed as a significant source to truth. Furthermore, a few

participants made use of Western science to defend the addictive nature of pornography. For instance, P8 said “Researchers in the U.S. have found that many people become addicted to masturbation after the first try and can never get over it. Thus, the so-called harmless adaptive masturbation does not hold water.”

Drawn from most participants’ sensemaking, *jiese* signaled a man’s sacrifice of personal joy for a noble purpose. More importantly, *jieyou* actively exploited scientific terminologies to legitimize *jiese*, which redefined their efforts of abstaining from masturbation and porn as an integral part of personal development.

Reconstructing the Subjectivity of *Jieyou*

Jieyou’s concern for their own health and self-accusation of masturbation were connected to the third theme that emerged, that is, the reconstruction of the subjectivity of *jieyou*. Anti-masturbation discourse in the Western context, as a way to reinforce the value of ideal masculinity and thus produce masculine subjects, has been well-researched (Burnett, 2022). However, the modern form of the subjectivity of *jieyou* in China was best understood in a neo/non-liberal context where a therapeutic mode of governance and traditional patriarchal ideology had penetrated citizens’ practices. Neoliberalism in China referred to a project to transform individuals into self-governing subjects, which shifted structural failures into personal responsibility and thus solidified authoritarian rule (Zhu, 2021). In the following paragraphs, we explicated how a new social subject was produced through the discourses such as the fear of losing self-control, the desire for normalization, and the hope for a bright future.

First, most participants had internalized the mainstream discourse regarding the lack of self-control of men consuming porn. In some stories shared by *jieyou*, they self-identified as heroes who got rid of their miserable life by turning themselves into self-disciplined subjects that were committed to healthism. For instance, P8 stated that *jiese* not only helped him to abstain from masturbation but also signified his self-optimization. He said, “I feel obligated to manage my health. I used to play video games days in and days out. After starting *jiese*, I uninstalled many games. Also, I even don’t binge-watch short videos on TikTok anymore. It seems that *jiese* has given me a new lease on life.” Furthermore, a few participants firmly believed that *jiese* would contribute to a man’s success since individuals gave up the wrong investment in masturbating to porn but learned to govern themselves and engage in more beneficial activities such as reading and working out. When comparing those who failed to control themselves to quit pornography with those who lived up to traditional expectations through *jiese* successfully, P2 said “you would be more energetic than others if you could quit masturbation. As a result, you are in better health and

more likely to succeed in your career than others.” *Jieyou*’s sensemaking strengthened individuals’ mastery of their destiny via constant self-discipline; however, the interrogations of societal structures were totally absent.

Besides the anxiety of losing self-control, a lot of participants also felt alienated, so they attempted to pursue normalcy and even a vanguard position above the “normal” through *jiese*. In many participants’ narratives, porn consumption was perceived as abnormal and immoral, in line with the state’s policy of crackdowns on pornography mentioned above. P4, for example, admitted that he used to think he was eccentric, dirty, and sordid when he indulged in sexual activities; however, he felt his heart was full of righteousness and rekindled the hope of life after *jiese*. Aside from worrying about if the behavior of porn use itself was normal, some participants were also concerned about whether they were normal as an individual. For example, P13 expressed his excitement that he was no longer a masturbating man. He mentioned “like other *jieyou* who were still addicted to pornography, I used to be so stupid. After *jiese*, not to say how smart I am, at least I am a normal person now.” Similarly, P6, a 20-year-old man born with a disability shared the story that his body finally functioned better after *jiese*. He said “At the age of 13, I noticed that my left leg had begun to atrophy due to masturbation. After I struggled to abstain from masturbation, my weak muscles got stronger.” Such narratives reflected men’s desperate desire for jumping out of the “abnormal world” and being accepted by society through behaving “normally” defined by the mainstream culture. Normalization involved a process of imposing disciplinary power, which required individuals to reinvent the self and enhance their self-governing techniques (Foucault, 1977). Therefore, the deviant behavior (e.g., masturbating to porn) violating the natural rationality that dominated their bodies, was corrected by inducing individuals’ modes of self-governance rather than iron-fisted mandates.

Finally, *jiese* itself created the illusion that one’s success depended solely on individual practices while precluding the fact that opportunities were closely linked with socioeconomic status. Abstaining from pornography accompanied by self-regulation was seen as the solution to the dilemma of themselves and their families. A typical story adopting the discourse of recovery would talk about one’s own experience that their bodies benefited from *jiese*. For instance, P8 who kept up physical training and abstained from sex proudly recalled his mother’s compliments about his appearance by saying “my mom said I was taller and more handsome after insisting on *jiese*.” Besides physical improvement, some participants reported that their social values and mental health had improved significantly as well. For example, after telling his story of a meteoric rise to fortune due to *jiese*, P11 went on to say “after I earned great achievements in my job, a girl pursued me and we had sex on a regular basis. Later, my

career plummeted. I should have persevered in *jiese*.” In this story, *jiese* was emphasized as a deciding factor for success in career and wealth. Relatedly, P15 thought *jiese* made him become “a good-tempered person.” To these participants, *jiese* was seen as a powerful method to “change fate” (P11) and alleviate palpable anxiety about being left behind in a rapidly developing society.

In neo/non-liberal China, individual development is believed to be realized through self-care and self-regulation. In line with the states’ tactics of privatizing social norms into public practices, these *jiese* practitioners were built as subjects that were scared about being left out by the mainstream and easily sank into self-blame of lacking self-control and thus paralyzed themselves in an illusory hope constructed by *jiese*.

Nationalistic Sentiments

Nationalistic sentiments, fueled by the out-group attack and state discourses, constituted the final theme in our analysis. Specifically, *jiemyou* attempted to push back criticism towards them through seeking the legitimacy of *jiese* from the authoritative narratives of the state, thus they frequently got involved with nationalist discourses. Our participants mainly took advantage of the following three strategies to reach such an intention: fighting against corrupt capitalism, bringing a conspiracy belief into the spotlight, and devoting themselves to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

First, many participants argued that the profit-seeking principle deeply entrenched in Chinese hospitals contributed to the stigmatization of *jiese*. In their sensemaking, most private hospitals maliciously employed the so-called experts who disseminated the belief that masturbation was harmless, thereby leading to a large number of masturbating men who suffered from severe health problems. P12 further explained, “these experts could make money by taking in a constant flow of patients whose bodies got destroyed through masturbation.” In such narratives, the money-driven capitalists declaimed “innocuous masturbation” and slandered the scientific stance of *jiese*. Furthermore, some participants accused capitalists who were greedy for profit. As P3 commented, “those capitalists do everything for money. They don’t care about our health at all. As you can see, they get traffic by showing women’s big breasts to men. They want us to be addicted to porn use so that they could earn a lot.” The accusation of capitalism stemming from china’s long-lasting legacy of anti-capitalism was indicative of the hatred towards external powers rather than internal market transformation. Besides, it often co-existed with historical commemorations, particularly the modern history of humiliation that China had been invaded by imperialistic countries, which was always exploited by the Chinese government to advocate patriotism.

In addition to anti-capitalism, the widespread notion that the burgeoning porn industry was a murky conspiracy of the West emerged in participants’ narratives. For instance, P15 articulated that the dissemination of pornographic information would lead to “the degeneration of nation” since it tempted men to masturbate to porn who should have reserved their masculine energy for more meaningful goals. Other participants felt it necessary to unveil who was behind the porn industry. For example, P6 related pornography to foreign hostile forces by saying, “it must be a conspiracy led by world powers. They just aim for undermining China’s young generations.” Similarly, by reviewing the history of the Japanese invasion of China, P25 said “they never give up destroying us, and pornographic movies spread by them were more horrible than opium since they cost less.” Such a conspiracy belief served as a means to externalize the blame to other groups, thus launching a withering attack on foreign evil intentions. Notably, the sentiments of anxieties mentioned previously and the conspiracy theory were simultaneously presented in participants’ narratives, echoing previous research that *jiemyou*’s conspiracy belief was closely connected with the feelings of powerlessness (Goertzel, 1994) and lack of control (Kofta et al., 2020).

Last, many participants proudly expressed their own responsibility for contributing to “the great revival of the Chinese nation” proposed by President Xi. For instance, P32 defined *jiemyou* as “excellent teenagers” who saved “men in ruins” through promoting *jiese* and further added, “we are spreading *zheng neng liang* (positive energy).” *Zheng neng liang*, as a buzzword in China’s political discourse promoted by the state, elicited a form of “transcendental Chinese patriotism,” that is, a new type of patriotism that was more grassroots in nature (Du, 2014, p. 5). By highlighting positive emotions, it provided Chinese people with a symbolic context filled with healing and empowerment under the therapeutic mode of governance. Echoing reactive collectivism derived from state political agenda, the public was cultivated to actively participate in making national images of China guided by the Chinese dream of “national rejuvenation.” Consequently, some participants expressed their strong willingness to “protect the physical and mental health of minors” through “cleaning up pornographic websites” (P18). Moreover, P22 was concerned that the government could hardly wipe out all pornographic websites completely since “criminals who disseminated obscenity set up websites extremely quickly.” He further added, “it’s our duty to crack down on those harmful websites.” The burgeoning authoritarian populism in China, different from the populism in Western countries, offered a meaningful lens to understand the peculiar phenomenon of *jiemyou*’s boycotts towards pornography. In the words of Mamonova (2019), authoritarian populism is characterized by “a coercive, disciplinary state, a rhetoric of national interests, populist unity between ‘the people and an

authoritarian leader, nostalgia for ‘past glories’ and confrontations with ‘others’ at home and/or abroad” (p. 562). In this way, *jiyou*’s resistance to the porn industry adhered to the nationalist discourses propagated by the government.

As seen in *jiyou*’s narratives, the mainstream rhetoric that porn consumption and masturbation posed a threat to the future of the nation, has been widely embraced by these young men. In response to the state’s call of passing on *zheng neng liang*, a lot of participants linked their efforts of *jiese* with patriotism and a great stride forward in resisting capitalism.

Discussion

Sensemaking denotes a process in which individuals bridge cognitive gaps by engaging in diverse micropractices including physical, emotional, and cognitive ones in their daily life (Schaefer & Dervin, 2009). *Jieyou*’s sensemaking of *jiese*, as a way to exercise self-empowerment, is not only conducive to coping with psychological distress and uncertainty, but also promotes reconstructing their subjectivity. In addition to masculine subjectivity and masculinist discourse that have been widely investigated in the West, our findings indicate that *jiese* should be meticulously examined in a particular political and cultural context. Specifically, traditional cultural beliefs, authoritarian rule, and neoliberal notions play into Chinese youngsters’ sensemaking of *jiese*. Through interviewing 32 young men on Baidu *Jiese* Forum and conducting a critical discourse analysis of participants’ narratives, we seek to understand how *jiyou*’s subjectivity and multi-layered values were produced and interacted in China.

In this study, we capture how *jiese* embodied the neoliberal notion of self-regulation, echoing (Ong, 2007) definition of neoliberalism as “a technology of governing free subjects that co-exists with other political rationalities” (p. 4). In China, neoliberal subjectivity coexists with government regulatory techniques and traditional cultural beliefs. *Jiese* practitioners, demonstrating a set of complex characteristics, including anxieties of being alienated, a strong desire for self-government, and supporting the government’s crackdowns on cyberporn, are what Sun (2015) called “biocitizens” made in nationwide health promotion (p. 12). As one of governing techniques, China’s biological citizenship projects primarily encourage individuals to live “ethically” and monitor their bodies. Most *jiyou* are inculcated with the regulatory discourses that porn use severely corrupts Chinese society, thus initiating cyber nationalism towards porn. Furthermore, some deeply rooted cultural values, for instance, holism in ancient medical philosophy, are exploited to legitimize the idea that individuals should take responsibility for their own health. Overall, our participants’ sensemaking caters to the

mainstream discourse that a man ought to remain normal and healthy by optimizing their self-disciplinary capabilities.

Significantly, the neoliberal subjectivity constructed in China signals the complicated interplay between biopolitics and men’s autonomy. As a part of the biocitizenship project, men of young generations are required to uphold science. However, by reviving traditional Chinese notions and the emotional connectedness offered by online communities, the *Jiese* forum has attracted lots of young men afflicted by self-diagnosed porn addiction with the gradual expansion of social influence. In this forum, *jiyou* intend to question science and challenge experts’ authority through their embodied practices. As a result, they redefine truth, spotlight a conspiracy mentality, and claim *jiese* as scientific and rational. On the surface, the state’s goal of disseminating science to cultivate the public has been undermined by the development of the *Jiese* forum. Indeed, *jiyou*’s advocacy of regaining self-control over one’s body, endorsing the ideology of healthism, fighting against corrupt capitalism, and being dedicated to national rejuvenation conforms to the neoliberal governmentality in contemporary China. Specifically, *jiyou*’s daily practices have internalized state regulatory discourses of self-government and perceived porn as spiritual pollution. Thus, a man’s normal sexual desire is stigmatized as a harmful impulse, which may lead to severe health problems in the future.

A series of similarities and subtle differences are observed between the NoFap movement in Western societies and the advocacy of *jiese* in the Chinese context. First, previous studies conducted in the West have showcased how popular political discourses are interwoven into the anti-pornography and anti-masturbation movement (Burnett, 2022). Echoing it, our study discovers that a lot of participants frame *jiese* as a means to resist the corrosive influence of capitalism. *Jieyou*’s narratives of conspiracy, anti-capitalism and positive energy cater to the increasingly strident nationalism of mainstream politics in China. Beholden to a nationalist standpoint, the anti-masturbation movement is more likely to silence any other doubts and objections. However, it is worth noting that the nationalists among *jiyou* build their discourses on the context of a one-party state while NoFappers in the West utilize hybrid sociopolitical visions. Second, it is found that the scientific-sounding claims of anti-pornography have penetrated both cultures. In contrast to the heavy reliance on scientific narratives to construct porn use as a threat in the West, *jiyou* tend to gain public support from many alternative approaches such as seeking legitimacy in their embodied experiences and traditional Chinese culture. Third, our analysis suggests that *jiyou*’s adherence to masturbation abstinence is primarily motivated by the misperceptions of masturbation as unhealthy, consistent with previous Western research (Zimmer & Imhoff, 2020). However, *jiyou*’s discourses of “unhealthy” are mainly based upon TCM while

abstinence practitioners in the West refer more to modern medicine. Fourth, the promotion of anti-masturbation manifests individuals' overblown anxiety towards failure, security, and control in both Western countries and Chinese society. Stripping away the veil of political ideologies and cultural underpinnings, the rhetoric of anti-masturbation in two contexts plays a significant role in minimizing anxiety and strengthening the sense of self-empowerment. Finally, based on *jiyou*'s narratives, any sexual conduct that reduces men's *jing* and masculinities should be strictly prohibited, which reinforces traditional gendered ideologies. It appears to be in line with the patriarchal order, as reflected in the Western NoFap movement. Different from a broader anti-feminist and misogynist manosphere underscored in the anti-masturbation advocacy in the West (Hartmann, 2021; Taylor & Jackson, 2018), *jiyou*'s sensemaking of *jiese* takes root in traditional Chinese family hierarchies emphasizing men's capacity in procreation. In the view of many Chinese masturbators, abstinence symbolizes one's sublimity since they sacrifice their sexual pleasures to carry on the family line. Such a familistic logic perpetuates the superiority of hegemonic masculinity and the regime's control by investing in males' health.

Several implications could be drawn from this study. First, our findings add to the existing scholarship on how Chinese traditional cultural beliefs and social factors influence individuals' sense-making process of *jiese*. More specifically, our research demonstrates that traditional beliefs are employed to legitimize *jiese* and exhort men to exercise self-regulation. Second, our analysis indicates a critical difference between the anti-masturbation that has emerged in Western neoliberal societies and that espoused in the Chinese neo/non-liberal context. Despite the fact that the NoFap movement prevails in both cultures, the regulatory mechanisms imposed by the Chinese government give rise to self-regulating subjects who yearn for seeking normalcy via trying alternative approaches rather than following professional advice. In other words, the self-medicalization of *jiyou* serves as a product of the authoritarian rule in China rather than getting involved in the Western debate about whether masturbation is a normal part of personal psychosexual development from the medical lens. Finally, the current study further reveals how the predominant culture and ideology instill the neoliberal notion

of self-regulation into shaping *jiyou*'s sensemaking of *jiese* and identity-building process, which can guide the design of future interventions about improving young adults' sexual health knowledge and removing the stigma associated with adaptive masturbation and porn use.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

A significant limitation of the current study is that the participants in our study are heterosexual men, which limits the generalizability of the conclusions to more diverse populations. Future research should include gay men in the discussions of masturbation abstinence. Special attention could be paid to how *jiese* takes shape in their embodied identities. In addition, Chinese women's perspectives on this topic are obviously missing and should be of interest to future research. Moreover, our participants are mostly senior high school graduates. The comparative analysis of how *jiyou* from diverse educational backgrounds and social classes make sense of porn use and *jiese* is greatly needed. Last, considering the study's interpretive nature, *jiyou*'s perceptions and motivations identified in this study can merely draw tentative conclusions. Follow-up studies could survey representative samples to gain a comprehensive understanding of the rise of *jiese* in China.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, our study finds that *jiyou*'s sensemaking process is profoundly affected by seemingly contradictory ideologies prevailing in contemporary Chinese society. Through the strategies of self-medicalization and creating noble causes for *jiese*, porn and masturbation are rationalized as harmful and deemed to be resisted. Aligned with it, practicing self-discipline becomes the only way out, thereby shifting the critiques of structural issues such as state control over public porn use and the lack of sexual health education into the blame of individual incapability.

Appendix 1

See Table 1.

Table 1 Demographic information of participants

Number	Age	Education	Occupation
1	20	High school	Telemarketer
2	24	Bachelor's degree	Real estate sales agent
3	23	Bachelor's degree	Computer programmer
4	19	High school	Taxi driver
5	20	High school	Real estate sales agent
6	20	Middle school	Postal service clerk
7	23	High school	Retail salesperson
8	28	Bachelor's degree	Community health worker
9	21	High school	Animal breeder
10	22	High school	Bank staff
11	29	Middle school	Library technician
12	27	Some college	Baker
13	26	Bachelor's degree	Taxi driver
14	25	High school	Cashier
15	26	High school	Barber
16	24	Bachelor's degree	Web and digital interface designer
17	31	High school	Postal service clerk
18	30	Some college	Retail salesperson
19	28	High school	Human resource staff
20	25	High school	Carpenter
21	23	Bachelor's degree	Database administrator
22	21	High school	Gas plant operator
23	28	Middle school	Restaurant server
24	22	High school	Electrician
25	19	High school	Photographer
26	40	Middle school	Bank staff
27	32	High school	Insurance sales agent
28	27	Bachelor's degree	Animal control worker
29	33	Middle school	Butchers and meat cutter
30	29	High school	Electrician
31	25	Bachelor's degree	Human resource staff
32	21	Middle school	Restaurant server

6. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?

Self-perceptions of masturbation and *jiese*:

7. What do masturbation and porn mean to you?
8. When and why did you begin your journey of *jiese*?
9. How do you understand *jiese*?
10. Do you think *jiese* changed you a lot? If so, what changes do you think *jiese* brought to you?

Perceptions of what other people think about masturbation and *jiese*

11. Have you talked about *jiese* with your friends or family?
12. What motivates you to speak up or remain silent about this topic?
13. What do your parents and family think about masturbation and porn?
14. How do you evaluate experts' claim that masturbation is a healthy behavior?
15. How do you compare medical knowledge circulating on the *Jiесе* forum with experts' arguments?

Perceptions of online *jiese* forums

16. Have you disclosed to others that you joined Baidu *Jiесе* Forum? Why?
17. Do you think online *jiese* forum members suffer from some sort of prejudice and stigma? Why?
18. How do you make sense of the discussions on the *Jiесе* forum?
19. In your view, is it possible to destigmatize *jiese*? If so, what ways do you think can be used to achieve this goal?

Appendix 2: Interview Protocol

Warm-up questions:

1. What have you been doing lately?
2. Would you mind sharing with me three fun facts about you?

Demographic questions:

3. What gender/sexuality do you identify as?
4. What is your age?
5. What's your job?

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