

## “not conducive for sobriety”: Sex Addiction and Neoliberal Masculinity in *Don Jon* and *Thanks for Sharing*

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Volume 9.1 (2021) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2021.320 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

### Abstract

*Thanks for Sharing* (2012) and *Don Jon* (2013), share similarities in their representation of the lives of unmarried men who are all approaching midlife, and who are all struggling to build meaningful, monogamous, long term attachments with women. In *Thanks for Sharing*, Adam (Mark Ruffalo) is addicted to brief encounters with numerous partners in contexts devoid of emotional intimacy, while a fellow member of his sex addicts support group, Neil (Josh Gad), struggles with a compulsion to touching strangers in public locations. In counterpoint, *Don Jon* charts the protagonist’s insatiable consumption of online pornography, since Jon believes that the virtual domain provides a far superior sexual experience than anything, he could find in real life encounters with women. This article is concerned with the relationship between sex addiction and masculinity, and how neoliberalism is imbued in the characters’ embodiment of masculinity regardless of their divergent social backgrounds.

**Keywords:** sexuality; masculinity; pornography; addiction; neoliberalism



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## Introduction

Released in 2012, Stuart Blumberg’s *Thanks for Sharing* depicts the trials and tribulations of two men battling sex addiction. The following year witnessed the release of Joseph Gordon-Levitt’s *Don Jon* (2013), a romantic comedy depicting Jon Martello’s (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) addiction to pornography. Both films share other similarities in their representation of the lives of unmarried men who are all approaching midlife, and who are all struggling to build meaningful, monogamous, long term attachments with women. In *Thanks for Sharing*, Adam (Mark Ruffalo) is addicted to brief encounters with numerous partners in contexts devoid of emotional intimacy, while a fellow member of his sex addicts support group, Neil (Josh Gad), struggles with a compulsion to touching strangers in public locations. In counterpoint, *Don Jon* charts the protagonist’s insatiable consumption of online pornography, since Jon believes that the virtual domain provides a far superior sexual experience than anything, he could find in real life encounters with women. This article is concerned with the relationship between sex addiction and masculinity, and how neoliberalism is imbued in the characters’ embodiment of masculinity regardless of their divergent social backgrounds.

Writing in *The Guardian*, Tom Shone has noted that in “the indie-auteur sphere, the figure of the sex addict has become what the serial killer was for mainstream thrillers in the 1990s: a repeat offender, plot-driver and sensation source, drawing audiences with a mixture of curiosity, skepticism and astonishment” (Shone 2014). Films in this newly emerging genre include *I Am a Sex Addict* (Caveh Zahedi, 2005), *Choke* (Clark Gregg, 2008), *Welcome to New York* (Abel Ferrara, 2014), *Shame* (Steve McQueen, 2011), and *Nymph()maniac* (Lars von Trier, 2013).

Alistair Fox has noted important distinctions between sex addiction films produced in the US and those produced in Europe, arguing that in “the sex-addiction movies, this theme-and-variation principle is apparent in the range of genres, tones, and moods that are used variously to address the central problem – or ‘theme’ – and in the relative extent to which each film focuses on the causes relative to the effects” (Fox 2006: 12). Fox asserts that the films in the American cycle are predominantly comic or mix elements of comedy with a serious tone, while those produced in Europe are unrelievedly grim and harrowing, constituting a continuum along which all the films under discussion can be ranged, depending upon the relative disposition of tone, narrative perspective, and story arc in each. In this article, I examine two other films in this recently emerging genre: Stuart Blumberg’s *Thanks for Sharing* (2012) and Joseph Gordon-Levitt’s *Don Jon* (2013), with the former depicting the trials and tribulations of two men battling sex addiction, and the latter a romantic comedy depicting Jon Martello’s (Joseph Gordon-Levitt)

addiction to pornography. Both films share other similarities in their representation of the lives of unmarried men who are all approaching midlife, and who are all struggling to build meaningful, monogamous, long-term attachments with women. While all of the characters in these films are confronted with various challenges in controlling their sexual impulses, the exact form these impulses takes differs. In *Thanks for Sharing*, Adam (Mark Ruffalo) is addicted to brief encounters with numerous partners in contexts devoid of emotional intimacy, while a fellow member of his sex addict support group, Neil (Josh Gad), struggles with a compulsion to touch strangers in public spaces. In counterpoint, *Don Jon* charts the protagonist's insatiable consumption of online pornography; Jon believes that the virtual domain provides a far superior sexual experience than anything he could find in real life encounters with women. Further differences are manifested in terms of the social milieu represented in both films, since *Thanks for Sharing* is set among the affluent suburbs of New York while *Don Jon* is set in blue-collar New Jersey. This article is concerned with the relationship between sex addiction and masculinity, and how neoliberalism is imbued in the characters' embodiment of masculinity regardless of their divergent social backgrounds. Prior to exploring this, it is important to contextualize neoliberalism as a mode of governance, its imbrication with shifting gender formations, and its impact on masculinity more specifically.

## The Neoliberal Turn

Any attempt to understand individual agency in the twenty-first century must be understood in relation to neoliberalism. Neoliberalism emerged in the late twentieth century as a form of Western liberal governance that erodes the welfare state and reconfigures relations with its citizens (Harvey 2005). Under neoliberalism, governments across the globe have withdrawn economic support for education, welfare, and healthcare, legitimized by a philosophical conviction that nation-states are not responsible for social welfare, but rather for protecting individual rights and the free market. In this cultural climate, individuals are ultimately responsible for their own financial and personal health, regardless of the social constraints that limit one's agency. As Nikolas Rose contends, no matter how "external and implacable may be the constraints, obstacles and limitations," each individual "must render his or her life meaningful, as if it were the outcome of individual choices made in the furtherance of a biographical project of self-realization" (Rose 1992, 12). Neoliberal discourses of selfhood are primarily expressed through transference of authority from "official" (government) sources to private experts in fields ranging from psychology (self-help) to fashion, weight loss, and career planning (Tudor 2011). Through these private experts, ordinary citizens are called upon to make good choices pertaining to their personal, social, and professional lives, and to work towards social and professional self-improvement.

The erosion of the dominant regime of Fordism as a prime mode of accumulation has given rise to Post-Fordist trends of economic privatization and competition, compelled by the internationalization of production (Tauss 2012). While mass manufacturing dominated Fordist production methods, Post-Fordism is marked by the impetus for constant innovation and reinvention, informed by the recognition of the fundamental instability of capitalism. Neoliberalism has emerged as the hegemonic model of economic governance, with globalized state interests and priorities increasingly directed towards capital. The Republican Party and its incumbent governments in recent US history are prime examples of the social mandate of neoliberalism. These conservative administrations withdrew economic support for education, welfare, job training, sex education, and youth programming all while touting a return to ‘family values’. (McDowell 1991). Underlying this dichotomy was the philosophical belief that government is not responsible for social welfare but rather responsible for protecting individual rights and the free market. As such, individuals are responsible for their own economic and social well-being (Butler 2006: 72).

### *Don Jon and the Regime of the Self*

In *Don Jon*, the opening of the film marks very clearly the centrality of neoliberal discourse to

the life of the protagonist. The audience is introduced to Jon through a voiceover self-narration, in which Jon proclaims: “There’s only a few things I care about in life: My body. my pad, my ride.” While highly valuing material possessions and one’s physical appearance has been central to all forms of gender identity, both material possessions and the body are presented in *Don Jon* in neoliberal terms as areas of selfhood which need to be maintained, cultivated, and developed through fastidious care and attention. Multiple scenes depict Jon as someone who is excessively diligent about cleanliness, and the strict regime he maintains with regards to vacuuming his apartment is paralleled in the strict regime he maintains at the gym. It is in this way that the imbrication of gender and neoliberalism becomes clear in the film, since Jon’s gender identity represents a shifting form of masculinity that is not entirely hegemonic, but one which has been molded by the demands of neoliberalism.



*Figure 1: Jon maintaining his physique in Don Jon (2013)*

Indeed, if hegemonic masculinity is defined as socially idealized attributes that, when exhibited by men, perpetuate male dominance and superiority, then the film makes it clear that Jon's masculinity is hybridized. His physicality and voracious sexual appetite accord with hegemonic notions of male supremacy and virility, yet he also showcases qualities traditionally associated with femininity, such as careful attention to the maintenance of his body and home. It is apparent that Jon's gender identity is pulled into often competing and contradictory directions by the dictates of both hegemonic masculinity and neoliberalism, and this causes confusion for the significant others in his life. His primary romantic interest, Barbara (Scarlett Johansson), is disturbed by Jon's attention to cleanliness and housework, and she insists that she should be cleaning his apartment since cleaning is, in her view, women's work. Jon's cleanliness and strict adherence to a cleaning regime is, in Barbara's eyes, and is disruptive to his manhood as it marks him as feminine. Yet, at the same time, Barbara is frustrated that Jon is employed in a bar and encourages him to go to night school so he can develop new skills and earn more money. While his dedication and discipline to the self in the domain of the home and body is something which Barbara resents, she fails to see the contradiction in her expectation to see Jon exercise this exact same skill set in the public domain of world and work. Indeed, in order for Jon to become



successful in the shifting economy, he would be required to cultivate a new skill set which is traditionally associated with femininity. As Kathi Weeks asserts, employers are now seeking “more from their employees than was typically demanded in the factories of the industrial era: not just the labor of the hand, but the labors of the head and heart. Post-Taylorism work processes therefore tend to require more from immaterial laborers than their sacrifice and submission, seeking to enlist their creativity and their relational and affective capacities” (Weeks 2011: 69-70). Jon remains under great pressure when compared by Barbara to other men in her social circle who have mastered the new skills required to be successful in the neoliberal economy (“If he could do it, you could do it. You’re a winner, right?”).

*Don Jon*, then, charts the narrative of a man whose gender identity is in transition. On the one hand, Jon’s masculinity is hegemonic particularly in terms of sexuality, since his addiction to porn allows him to fulfill his sexual needs in a manner that is dehumanized and does not require emotional connection to another person. This is, after all, one of the hallmarks of hegemonic masculinity. On the other, he demonstrates the neoliberal skills required to care for the self and home in the private domain in ways which align more closely with traditional femininity. The film arrives at some form of resolution to this fragmentation when Jon meets Esther, an older woman who is emotionally broken after the death of her husband and son. If Jon’s consumption of pornography is implicitly connected to his refusal to be emotionally intimate with others, and

a lack of relational and affective abilities, it is through Esther (Julianne Moore) that he acquires the neoliberal skills which Barbara demands of him to be a more economically successful man in public life. When Jon finds Esther crying, he asks her what's wrong and begins to take an interest in the feelings of others for the first time in his life. Through Esther, he begins to connect with his feelings, and near the close of the film he looks into her eyes while they slowly make love. The experience is more intense because of the emotional connection they share, and very different to the porn sex he usually consumes. By eventually overcoming his porn addiction by embracing 'real' intimate connections, the film closes with Jon establishing himself as a 'new' man possessing the skills required to be successful in public and private life.



*Figure 2: Jon accessing pornography at home in Don Jon (2013)*

## *Thanks for Sharing and Shifting Masculinity*

Blumberg's *Thanks for Sharing* appears to make similar conclusions about the centrality of neoliberalism to shifting masculinity, and from the opening scene it makes it clear that hegemonic masculinity, and the role of sexuality in its construction, is central to the film. Adam, film's main character is handsome, affluent, and educated, and in the first scene New York is introduced to the audience as a playground of sexual temptation via a montage which cuts between billboards of supermodels in bikinis, and everyday women walking along the street. This juxtaposition makes it very clear that for Adam – a recovering sex addict of five years – there is no difference between his visual consumption of the models on the billboard and the everyday women who walk past him on the street: the camera cuts between both in quick succession, and Adam's response to both the real and the represented female body, as depicted in facial contortions signaling corporeal affect, is one of barely contained desire. The implication is that Adam is both tempted and tormented within a cultural milieu in which women and intimacy are commodified to the point where the female form exists to serve the specific dehumanized purpose of sexual gratification, much akin to its presentation in online pornography. This correlation is affirmed by Mike (Tim Robbins), whose introductory scene centers on a support group meeting where he states, "Is it me or is Manhattan one just big fucking catwalk?"

Sexuality has always been central to the construction of hegemonic masculinity (Orbach 2009; Reeser 2011; Gill 2008). Yet, *Thanks for Sharing* seems to suggest that sexuality is a

dangerous aspect of manhood, and that happiness can only be attained through the formation of a masculinity that centers on self-management and complete control. Adam earnestly declares, “I’ve had to make it a practice. I have to remind myself every day where this disease could take me...I’ve got to be vigilant”. Adam’s solution to the problem is one of self-discipline, management, and control. His self-narrative is one of transformation, from victim to survivor, from sex addiction to abstinence. His refusal to participate in all forms of sexual activity is curious since the film never really documents why and how Adam’s sex addiction is actually dangerous, yet Adam’s relationship with Neil, a fellow member of the support group, makes it clear that the sex addicted man is abject and an example of failed masculinity. While Adam’s sexual experiences have all been consensual, Neil is by contrast court ordered to be in the support group since he molests people in public. While Neil represents the comic relief in a film that is otherwise grim and puritanical in tone, it still remains clear that he is a character who has failed to live up to the neoliberal mandate of control and personal responsibility, thus marking his masculinity as deficient. Neil is treated aggressively by Mike and patronized by Adam, who both admonish him for not putting effort into his recovery process. His lack of discipline is underscored in a scene in which he is at home reading a recovery self-help book and stops to masturbate and then consume huge amounts of donuts, before he stops and then returns to his

book. The messages of such scenes is that impulse control requires constant self-management.

While Mike and Adam are neoliberal exemplars of reformed masculinity, Neil is constructed as abject in almost every way. He is overweight, lacking the discipline of self-care not only in terms of his mental health in the form of his sex addiction, but also in terms of his physical health.

Scenes which depict his bedroom shore up this image, since his domestic environment is messy, more akin a teenage boy's room than that a full-grown adult. What renders him even more abject and transgressive is the fact that he is a medical doctor by profession, an occupation that requires the qualities of diligence, discipline, and an ethic of hard work that Neil so clearly lacks.



*Figure 3: Neil is an exemplar of abjection and lack of discipline, currently in the process of taking an upskirt photo of his female colleague in *Thanks for Sharing* (2012)*

What remains clear, then, is that *Thanks for Sharing* highly prizes self-control as a way of

life, both in its positive representation of the men who achieve this and negative depiction of men who fail. Mike declares that he rejects his heroin addicted son since he lacks self-control, stating: “This is a programme for people who want it, not people who need it”. Individual will and desire is the most important step to positive change. The suggestion here is that desire and willpower are both more important than need, which appears to be an uncompromising distinction to make when “need” is at the heart of all forms of addiction. For Mike, even those who are indeed in need of help should possess the strength to “want” help more so than they need it. It is perhaps for this reason that the film registers as puritanical, and nowhere is this more apparent than in Mike and Adam’s definition of sobriety in the as “No masturbation nor sex outside of a committed relationship”, a guideline which is almost quasi-religious in its strict parameters. There are key moments in the film where *all* forms of sexual expression are positioned as a lack of self-control, and are depicted as fundamentally destructive to human relationships, in particular through the character of Dede (Pink): “The only way I know how to relate to men is sex. I seduced my high school English teacher and got him fired when he tried to break it off. In my 20s, 2 abortions. So now I’m 30, single, no dude, no kids. I just lost my best friend in the whole world because I fucked her old man”. Dede eventually becomes central to Neil’s recovery after he is eventually sacked for filming an upskirt video of his boss while at

work. This marks a turning point in the construction of Neil's neoliberal masculinity, where he performs an emotional confessional at group sharing and vows to change: "The truth is, I'm out of control. I'm scared. And I need help". It is important at this point to note the centrality of the support group as a context of relational sharing that is essential the construction of neoliberal masculinity. It is, after all, "dramatizations of personal feeling and receptiveness to others' emotions" which assist the "consolidation of neoliberal patterns of subject-formation" (Apostolidis and Williams 2017, 800). It is indeed after his relational sharing that Neil begins a process of transformation which involves becoming the kind of men that Mike and Adam are. This neoliberal transformation, similar to Jon in *Don Jon*, requires the acquisition of a new affective skill set which enables Neil to bond with the support group; his ability to self-manage depends on communal support between men, and emotional intimacy with Dede, who offers ancillary support by helping him to clean his apartment since dirt is "not conducive to sobriety". Both *Don Jon* and *Thanks for Sharing* make it abundantly clear, by the close of both films, that the neoliberal man is one who is controlled, emotionally expressive, and in a full rebuke of hegemonic models of masculinity: simply does not enjoy sex if there are no feelings involved.

This article has examined the imbrication of neoliberal masculinity, hegemonic masculinity and non-hegemonic masculinity, revealing new gender formations under neoliberalism in the context of sex addiction. The film demonstrates that men are at moment in social history where

new demands are being made - forged under the moral and social dictates of a shifting social order - and it is the body where these demands are played out. R.W. Connell has argued that neoliberalism is rhetorically gender-neutral, since “the individual has no gender, and the market delivers advantage to the smartest entrepreneur, not to men or women as such” (2005: 254), yet it is clear that it has the capacity to shift formations of masculinity to a greater extent than it has shifted formations of femininity (Davis 2002; Feasey 2008); it can be seen that hegemonic masculinity is queered under neoliberalism, with emerging forms of masculinities contending with the neoliberal expectations.

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