

Exploring gender subversion and recuperation in anal fisting among gay men

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Abstract

Anal fisting among gay men, that is, the sexual(ised) and erotic (single or partnered) practice of inserting the hand(s) and/or forearm(s) into the anus and rectum, has historically been framed in medical and medico-forensic case studies as a violent and dangerous sexual practice associated with the contraction of disease, heightened risk of sexual injury, and the possibility of death. In contrast to this, pro-Queer scholars of gender and sexuality have conceptually reframed the act of anal fisting among gay men as a subversive sexual practice which in its discursive and material performances radically transgresses the heteronormative tropes which typically underwrite human sex/uality, especially in ways that render the preferred representations of (gay) sex as 'vanilla'. By drawing from unstructured individual interviews with a sample of eight (self-identifying) South African gay men who regularly incorporate anal fisting into their sexual relations, this study explores the gendered contradictions which rhetorically circumscribe how these men discursively construct and experience the corpo-erotic practice of anal fisting. In doing so, the findings highlight that while anal fisting among gay men may in fact engender shades of a sexually subversive practice by the way it radically (re)makes the material and erotic possibilities and connections of gay men's bodies in exceptionally non-normative and perhaps Queer ways; it is, at the same time, also invested with, and reiterative of, discursive repertoires which actively recuperate heteronormative as well as heteromasculinist tropes and gendered power relations that, in some instances, appear femiphobic.

Keywords

Anal fisting, femiphobia, gay masculinity/ies, gay men, gender recuperation, gender subversion

Opening (from the behind): an introduction to anal fisting

Anal fisting can be broadly described as the sexual(ised) and erotic (single or partnered) practice of inserting (a portion of) the hand(s) and/or forearm(s) into the anus and rectum. More colloquially referred to as 'handballing' or 'fist-fucking', and in more medicalised and less salacious terms as

brachioproctic insertion; the practice of anal fisting within the rich and diverse repertoire of human sexual relations has a long history which extends deep into the annals and practice of human sex and sexuality (Taormino, 2006). However, with that said, the (hetero-normative) cultural and medicalised rendering of anal fisting, especially within the so-called ‘Western’ world, has typically framed it as a ‘dangerous’ if not life-threatening sexual practice, traditionally characterised as an obscene form of sexual deviance (Cappelletti et al., 2016).

In recent history, ano-rectal fisting has been culturally constructed as largely confined to the sexual subculture and community of kink and fetish typically identified under the umbrella of ‘Bondage, Discipline, Dominance, Submission, Sadism, and Masochism’¹ or, by the abridged abbreviation, BDSM. In this regard, anal fisting has often been associated with a more ‘extreme’ spectrum of sexual and erotic practices, such as forms of rubber fetishism, consensual spanking and flogging, cock-and-ball ‘torture’, and, of course, vaginal fisting (Fedoroff et al., 2017). To this effect, anal fisting has traditionally been regarded as an aberrant sexual practice which has not only been treated with caution in sexual health literature, but also, in some countries, has met with criminalisation, especially where it has been seen as another form of gay (anal) sex² (Stardust, 2014).

From outset it is important to highlight that there exists very little published critical social scientific research on anal fisting, internationally, and no research on the subject in the South(ern) African context, specifically. The scholarly picture on anal fisting is therefore largely dominated by historical and contemporary work from the ‘Global North’ and, on a close reading, can be sharply divided into two academic trajectories of research. First, there exists a body of medical case studies which (explicitly or implicitly) frame anal fisting as a violent practice, often with the (direct or indirect) implication of fisting being associated with death, sexual injury (such as perforation of the colon or ano-rectal prolapse), or the contraction of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) (Cohen et al., 2004; Reay & Eisele, 1983; Torre, 1987). In recognition of the legitimate safety precautions that fisting entails, it is worth mentioning that sexual health writers encourage a considered approach be taken when people are initiated into fisting (Fegatofi, 2013; Goldstone, 1999; Makai, 2014). Moreover, the very term ‘fisting’ does not adequately capture the different techniques available to fisting participants based on their degree of expertise and experience with anal fisting, such as the entry-level ‘Silent Duck’³ and, beyond this, more advanced ‘Full-Fist’ and ‘Double-Fist’ techniques. In addition to this, there are commonly accepted recommended guidelines which maximise the pleasure and safety of the fisting experience, including the use of significant amounts of appropriate lubricant, ensuring carefully filed fingernails, and the use of gloves to promote anal hygiene. Importantly, fisting etiquette also encourages an evolving process of consent in which the ‘penetrative’ partner, or fister, remains attentive to the ‘receptive’ partner or fister’s cues to discomfort.

Second, there exists a small body of Queer-inflected sexuality and porn studies on anal fisting, largely underwritten by the sexual anthropological insights of Gayle Rubin (2011). Rubin’s ethnographic-style studies of the then underground anal fisting scene within the gay BDSM and leather community of San Francisco, between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, were groundbreaking in placing the subject of anal fisting on the academic radar.⁴ When read in conjunction with Rubin’s (1984) conceptual configuration of the hierarchies between so-called ‘good’ (socially endorsed or sanctioned) sex and ‘bad’ (deviant or punishable) sex in a gender-binary, Western, and heterocentric society, it becomes apparent that anal fisting is not just an act of sex which occurs in a cultural vacuum, but rather is also a socio-political practice of erotics which, along with those less-hetero-and-more-homo-sexual or Queer as well as poly-amorous, non-procreative, and sado-masochistic forms of eroticism, rejects the conventional practices of heterosex/uality and explores alternative modes of erotic pleasure-making.

In addition to Rubin's work, Queer scholarship has also drawn from the subculturally produced sexual health and erotic literature of anal fisting practitioners, such as Bert Herrman's (1991) *Trust – the Hand Book: A Guide to the Sensual and Spiritual Art of Handballing*. In contrast to the cautionary and pejorative tone struck in medico-forensic studies, Queer-inflected scholarship and sub-cultural literature celebrates fisting as a radical and subversive sexual practice capable of generating an erotic experience tantamount to what has been described as a 'divine sexual communion' (Brough, 2005, p. i) between its participants.

Thus, while it is important to acknowledge the Queer-inflected counter-narrative to medicalised case studies which recognises the intense intimacy and potent subversiveness that anal fisting may portend for its participants, it is equally important to recognise the subjective complexities and nuances which ultimately inform and underwrite the psychological and affective desires and motivations to participate in fisting. This complexity has been hinted at by fisting aficionado Tim Brough (2005), when he acknowledges that the meanings attached to the corpo-erotics of fisting are often dependent on 'whom you ask' (p. i): For some, anal fisting is about an intensely passionate sexual intimacy, while for others it is an erotic extension of consensual dominance and subordination play.

In this regard what is less known are how the subjective meanings and practices of anal fisting discursively intersect with gay men's construction and experience of gender and masculinity as well as sexuality. While the assumption may be that anal fisting is an inherently Queer form of gender subversion and sex/uality because, at least superficially, it is seen as an 'extreme' form of sexual and, in particular, anal intercourse and erotic play. This assumption should not be taken for granted. For example, in studies of how gay men talk about the relational dynamics entailed in anal sex, it has been shown that rather than expressing particularly radical, gender non-conforming, or Queer ways of constructing anal sex/uality, gay men often tend to adhere to particularly heteronormative and gender-stereotyped ways of negotiating and 'doing' anal sex (Moskowitz et al., 2008). The most illustrative example of this is how gay men (and gay pornography) often come to discursively construct and deploy the subculturally peculiar (self-)labels of 'Top' (preferring the position of 'penetrative' partner), 'Bottom' (preferring the position of 'receptive' partner), and 'Versatile' (open to either a 'penetrative' or 'receptive' position), in ways which not only denote sexual preference or, on a practical level, sexual position during anal sex, but, at the same time, as gendered (that is more or less masculine) identities and behaviours⁵ (Johns et al., 2012).

To this effect, this study set out to explore how discourses around gender and masculinity/ies come to interplay with/in the ways (self-identified) gay men who participate in anal fisting construct and experience the corpo-erotic practices of anal fisting.

Method

Participants

For this study, eight (self-identifying) gay men who regularly incorporate anal fisting into their inter-personal sexual practices and relations were recruited to participate. Out of the eight participants, two were 'African', three 'White', two 'Coloured', and one 'Indian'. In this regard, it is interesting to note that, at least for the 'African', 'Coloured', and 'Indian' participants in this study, oblique references were made to the practice of (gay) anal sex/uality, generally, and anal fisting, in particular, as something distinctly non-normative from the typical racially/culturally/ethnically peculiar and dominant narratives which exist around male sex/uality. For these participants, all of them recounted being introduced to fisting by 'White' sexual partners; with two of the participants, Iqbal⁶ and Mmusi, even stating that they thought fisting was largely a 'White thing', given that they

had only seen pornographic material of fisting involving ‘White’ performers and, in addition, the reluctance demonstrated by other sex partners, who were not ‘White’, to engage in anal fisting with them. Although not an original focus of this research, I would acknowledge that a limitation of this study was an inability to more adequately consider how the often-blurred discursive repertoires of ‘race’/culture/ethnicity would come to be deployed and intertwined through/with sexuality, gender, and masculinity/ies in the corpo-erotic practices of anal fisting.⁷

All of the participants lived and worked in the Cape Town metropolitan area. The participants ranged between 23 and 47 years of age. Two of the participants were in a long-term and committed monogamous relationship (with each other), two identified as being in a shorter term (occasionally) open relationship (with each other), and the remaining four identified as being single. All the participants identified as cis-gendered men, that is, identifying with their assigned birth sex of ‘male’.

In terms of sexual preference, two participants identified as ‘Tops’, four as ‘Versatile’, and two identified as ‘Bottoms’. Only four of the participants identified as members of the BDSM community or particularly partial to BDSM-themed sex. Among participants, the years of experience with/in anal fisting varied between (roughly) 1 year, minimum, and 15 years, at a maximum. While direct participant experience with/in fisting did vary, all the participants were well-versed and fluent in the subcultural language of fisting practice as well as the generally accepted etiquette of fisting practice. Finally, none of the participants had reported any sexual injuries or the contraction of any STDs as result of anal fisting experiences.

Interview guide

Data were collected through a series of unstructured individual interviews with each participant. The unstructured format of the interviews helped to facilitate a broad and deep conversational space through which participants were afforded the opportunity to articulate at length their understanding and experience of fisting. The interviews were only orientated by a single question which served to frame the interview, namely, ‘What is anal fisting to you?’

In using a single open-ended question to initiate the interview, I sought to place each participant in the position of an ‘expert guide’ whose subcultural knowledge as well as sexual and erotic experiences not only mattered, but, moreover, were significant in leading the interview – especially considering my (relative) lack of ‘first hand’ experience or expertise with fisting subculture and practice. In doing so, the aim was to create an organic and conversational interview space about which fisting could be discussed in a non-judgemental and non-pejorative way, as opposed to some kind of (semi-)structured and perhaps invasive multi-question interrogation of a participant’s sex life. For the purpose of this research, which deals with deeply personal stories of each participant’s intimate sexual desires and practices, I sought to ensure that each participant was firmly in control of their narrative experience within the interview. In addition, the open-ended and unstructured format of the interview aided in promoting a relaxed, casual, and often humorous interaction – an important consideration when discussing potentially sensitive experiences which may provoke interviewee anxiety and hamper forthright disclosure.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through the use of a ‘snowball’ sampling technique drawing on research contacts and networks I have worked to establish through a broader ethnographic research project within the local BDSM community of Cape Town (Martin, 2017). Prospective participants were identified with the help of research contacts in the community and, thereafter, invited to participate in this study. Following this, each participant who agreed to being recruited into the study also

doubled as a source for further recruitment of other participants. Similar such ‘snowball’ strategies to participant recruitment have proven common in sexuality studies, especially for studies which entail research with sexual subcultures and communities which are difficult to access by virtue of their peculiar sexual practices or socially stigmatised status (Browne, 2005). In this regard, drawing from participants’ personal networks of sexual partners, with their consent, proved vital in consolidating a workable qualitative sample.

On recruitment, each participant was given a Participant Information and Consent Form outlining the aim and details of the present study, the participant’s rights within the study, the researcher’s ethical obligations to the participant, and practical information around data collection. Prior to any of the interviews being conducted, participants were asked to provide written consent agreeing to be interviewed as well as have their interview audio-recorded. Each interview was transcribed and then analysed.

Ethical considerations

This study was granted ethical clearance by the University of Pretoria’s Humanities Research Ethics Committee.

Data analysis

All the interviews were analysed by means of a discourse analysis which specifically focussed on identifying and examining the ways in which tropes of gender and masculinity/ies came to operate in underwriting the meaning(s) attached to each participant’s experience and practice of anal fisting. Discursive analyses have proven especially popular and effective in gender and sex/uality research with gay men (Mercier et al., 2017). This is because discourse analysis enables an analytic that traces the complicated, complex, sometimes conflicting and often intersecting ways in which gay men come to construct their sexuality, sexual desires, and sexual behaviour, especially in relation to established hierarchies and dominant expressions and representations of gender and masculinity in both the broader heteronormative⁸ society and the gay community. Discursive analysis has aided in developing narratives within gender and sex/uality research that capture the ‘thick’ layers of contradictions which often underpin sexual desire and practices (Litosseliti & Sunderland, 2002).

In this study, discursive analysis of the interview transcripts yielded empirical data supportive of the Queer-inflected assertion that anal fisting marks a sexually subversive practice that undercuts gendered and masculine heteronormativity by the way it radically (re)makes the material possibilities, erotic relations, and affective connectivities through/with/of gay men’s bodies. At the same time, analysis revealed discursive repertoires deployed by some participants which were predicated on heteronormative tropes that recuperated heteromasculinist logics about power relations in sex, and which reiterated problematic forms of femiphobia.

A sample of data extracts which I found representative of the broader discursive themes emerging throughout the findings are presented in the discussion that follows.

Findings and discussion

Subverting hetero-and-homo-normative sex/uality/ies: anal fisting as a radical remaking of intimacy and pleasure

Anal fisting is one of those sexual practices that by virtue of its non-normative status is often surrounded by a number of inaccurate assumptions and prejudices about both it and its participants

(Allan, 2016). One of the especially prominent beliefs about fisting is that it represents and reproduces an extreme if not violent form of gay BDSM sex/uality which orientates around sadistic or masochistic versions of (hetero)masculinity. While this impression may be played on (or exaggerated) in gay BDSM-themed pornography, or even in gay clubs which cater to the BDSM community, an interview exchange with Garth highlighted an alternative experience of anal fisting which starkly contrasted with existing beliefs and portrayals:

[Fisting] . . . forces you to work on trust and respect for each other and each other's body and space. For me it's always been a lot more intimate than regular [anal] sex. The level of trust and respect you have to put into getting to that point where I feel I can let another man put himself inside me like that is different to just a casual thing. All of that only strengthens the intimacy and intensity of that moment. That's really special. [. . .] It's a closeness to another man that for me I feel I don't really get from a casual kind of thing.

What is especially interesting about Garth's description of his experience of anal fisting is the way in which he discursively reframes it as a mode of gay sexual intercourse which is distinct from, in his words, 'regular [anal] sex'. What this extract draws attention to is how Garth experiences the material configuration and corporeal relations of anal fisting as mutually intertwined with affective sensations of what he identifies as 'trust and respect'. This remarkable articulation of tenderness and respect for bodily integrity stands in sharp contrast to what many people may at first glance think/feel about fisting. For Garth, the erotic and relational sense of 'closeness' with a person who fists him is experienced far more intensely than when compared to what he now regards as the more normative and conventional form of penetrative anal sex.

To this effect, Garth's description of anal fisting crafts a narrative account of affection and gentleness between gay men that is often absent in representations of gay men's sex, especially in the kinds of phallogentric sex/uality and toxic masculinity which dominate contemporary commercial gay pornography (Dyer, 1992; Mercer, 2017). Garth's experience of being fisted appears to enact both a potent and a poignant counter-narrative of gay love-making which Queers the heteronormative and homonormative⁹ representations of gay sex/uality by forging a deeply relational mode of sexual pleasure and intimacy between gay men which is predicated on a non-adherence to those more (hetero)masculine/ist values around force, power, and dominance, which often inform men's approach to sex/uality (MacKinnon, 1987).

Not-so-Queer sex/uality/ies: reproducing heteronormative gender roles and power relations

While anal sex(/uality) between (gay) men is often treated as one of the most potent 'threats' to the ways in which the dominant or hegemonic modes of heteromascularity and heterosexuality are constructed and performed by men in a heteropatriarchal¹⁰ society (Connell, 1995), one of the significant ironies of gay sex(/uality) continues to be the way heteronormative tropes have come to underpin gay men's talk about, and practices of, anal intercourse, in large part through the discursive designations of 'Top', 'Bottom', and 'Versatile', among others.

Not only have these terms become the most popular and common (self-)labels denoting sexual preference and position among gay men, but they have also come to be understood within the gay community as having some kind of connotation with a gay man's sense of gender(ed) identity, often as more or less masculine and feminine (Underwood, 2003). In this regard, it is not surprising for research on the subcultural understanding and use of these terms to reveal that gay men typically identify so-called 'Tops' as more masculine (or straight-acting) and 'Bottoms' as more feminine (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2018). In a similar way, this became evident in an exchange with Gordon

when he discussed some gendered and relational dynamics informing how he and his partner (Gwede) negotiated sexual preferences during fisting:

I don't mind being the Sub[missive]; but I would like to try being the Dom[inant]. [Gwede] is not so keen . . . [H]e likes to feel more masc[uline] and in control. And being the Dom[inant] gives him that. Maybe he sees me as more fem[inine] and so it's like I should be the Sub[missive]. [. . .] The problem is I'm expected to follow that same fucking thing all the time. There's nothing different or exciting in that.

From this data extract, it is evident that both Gordon and his partner Gwede appear to discursively reinscribe the roles typically entailed in dominance and subordination play, which is often commensurate when anal fisting is employed in BDSM-themed sexual relations, with rather conventional and heteronormative stereotypes of gendered sex roles. In the extract, Gordon uses both direct ('masc' and 'fem') as well as indirect ('control') references to gender when characterising how the BDSM-styled role-playing typically ensues between Gwede, as the 'Dom', and Gordon, as the 'Sub', and, moreover, how these roles have come to reinforce particular forms of gendered and sexual subjectivity in their relationship. What is especially fascinating about Gordon's narrative is how he describes the impact that this heteronormative role-play has on his experience of anal fisting. What is telling here is the way Gordon expresses his frustration and boredom with what has evolved into an almost predictable script of gendered roles that he feels he now has to perform when he is fisted. In doing so, Gordon articulates the power of such heteronormative expectations and performances as a force which divests the fisting experience of the erotic novelty and excitement it is seemingly supposed to have.

What is interesting to note here is the way the unconventional and non-normative erotic practices and relations of gay BDSM-themed sex/uality can themselves become subsumed within the regulatory power of 'the heteronormative matrix' (Butler, 1990, p. 5) of socio-sexual life, with the effect that the gendered subjectivities as well as sexual desires and practices of sexually Other(ed) people become reproduced in terms of heteronormativity. For Gordon, the consequence of this is that anal fisting has its Queer potential sedated and its heady erotic punch denuded.

Recuperating femiphobia: rejecting the feminine/femininity/feminisation

Gay masculinity/ies are complicated (Nardi, 2000). While, on one hand, gay men are forged through a contradicting complex of gendered tropes and power relations which regard them as always already secondary and subordinate to heterosexual men, on the other hand, gay men are still granted (varying degrees) of social, political, and economic capital by virtue of them being males/men in a patriarchal society. Thus, while some gay masculinities can be remarkably progressive in cultivating gender-transgressive and even gender-Queer forms of gendered and sexual subjectivity, it remains critical to never overlook the fact that some gay men/masculinities can be retrogressive, anti-woman, and misogynistic – especially when these men/masculinities may be structurally privileged through institutionalised and commercial forms of power, such as Whiteness, economic advantage, and able-bodiedness.

In research on gay masculinity/ies, it has not been surprising to find that some gay men actively express the kinds of anti-feminist and femiphobic sexism typical of heteropatriarchal masculinity/ies to construct or perform forms of gay sex/uality which are more likely to accrue greater gender and, in particular, masculine capital (Ward, 2000). According to Klein (1993), femiphobia is, in its simplest form, 'the fear of appearing female, or effeminate' (p. 269). Beyond this, however, it is a fear rooted in the patriarchal subordination, devaluation, and exploitation of women and, moreover, 'is perhaps the most important ingredient in the fashioning of . . . masculinity' (Klein, 1993, p.

269), because it principally defines women/femininity as the trans-historical abjected other of male/masculine/man's power and in its various guises, maleness, masculinity, and manhood.

How femiphobic sentiments are often expressed within heteromasculinist discourses is through the denunciation and rejection of almost any gendered quality typically associated with women and, by extension, the feminine/femininity/feminisation. In one such instance during an interview with Gatón, it was clear that a number of femiphobic tropes were deployed when discussing his preference for being fisted:

- Gatón: I think there's that assumption that [the] more effeminate guys kinda like Bottoming. But I'm a pretty masculine looking guy and think I'm pretty straight-acting. But just because I want a guy to fuck me or fist me doesn't mean I now wanna be treated like his bitch.
- Jarred: So, you don't like being dominated?
- Gatón: No. I do. That feeling of being dominated is a big part of it for me. But it's a different kind of domination. I'm not going to be submissive. I make it very clear: yes, I want to Bottom, but I don't have a pussy – so don't go thinking . . . I'm your bitch.

Interestingly, from the above extract, it is evident that Gatón discursively dislocates his preference to 'Bottom' as well as his desire to be dominated from any connotation of effeminacy. In fact, throughout the exchange it is apparent Gatón puts a significant degree of rhetorical work into reiterating the disassociation between his sexual(ised) subjectivity, as a 'Bottom' who enjoys being fisted, from what he clearly perceives is, in his words, the 'submissive' status of femininity, generally, and effeminate gay men, in particular.

What is especially interesting is the way Gatón discursively characterises his corpo-erotic openings/openness to being anally penetrated and fisted as not akin to possessing female genitals, in particular, a vagina or, in his words, 'a pussy'. The use of the colloquial and derogatory term 'pussy' is insightful here. In research on masculinity and the ways in which the epithet 'pussy' is used by boys/men, Fair (2011) has found that the term often 'functions as an all-encompassing trope for failed masculinity—the "pussy" is the feminine, passive, . . . penetrated "other," set apart from normative masculinity' (p. 494). Perhaps, in other words, while Gatón may proudly identify as a 'Bottom' he is, by no means, effeminate nor a woman.

If almost to emphatically emphasise this point, Gatón couples his rejection of possessing a 'pussy' with an equally explicit rejection of being designated a 'bitch'. While the phrase 'bitch' has evolved in contemporary gay subculture to possess a variety of meanings, it is – in the context of gay sex and sex between men – that invoking the word 'bitch' cannot be divorced from the history of its gendered and misogynistic use in expressing male/masculine/men's 'dominance over a person or object' (Kleinman et al., 2009, p. 47) – most often that person being a woman or a less masculine man.

It is interesting to note that my exchange with Gatón could be read as a genuine attempt on his part to subjectively construct his desire to be anally penetrated/fisted in a way which does not settle within the heteronormative optics of him also being conventionally coded as more submissive, subordinate, and less male/masculine than the man penetrating/fisting him¹¹ – an aim not entirely devoid of gender-transgressive merit or Queer potential. What does however remain problematic is the way in which Gatón does this through the articulation of misogynistic discourses which recuperate a toxic form of heteromasculinism that reiterates the heteronormative gendered(/ing) binary of masculinity and femininity and with this, gender tropes which rhetorically reproduce (in language and sentiment) the devaluation of women.

Conclusion

By drawing from unstructured individual interviews with a sample of South African gay men who regularly incorporate anal fisting into their sexual relations, this study sought to explore the ways in which discourses around gender and masculinity/ies interplay with/in the erotic meanings and practices of anal fisting.

Not only is the critical social scientific study of anal fisting (be it with gay, straight, or other identifying people) virtually absent, but, moreover, what little academic literature exists is often sharply divided in disciplinary approach, tone, and audience. On one hand, medico-forensic case studies of anal fisting frame it as violent sexual practice with the outcome most likely to be either sexual injury, contraction of an STD, or death. On the other hand, Queer-inflected sexuality studies have attempted to craft an alternative anti-normative and counter-narrative which (re)frames anal fisting as a sexually transgressive practice that undercuts the dominant modes of heteronormative sex/uality by performing a radical act of corpo-erotic love/pleasure-making.

What the findings of this study highlight is that the tendencies to conceptually and empirically frame anal fisting among gay men in either completely pejorative ways or in transgressively Queer ways is in fact an oversimplification of how anal fisting is potentially understood and experienced by gay men, especially in relation to gendered discourses around gay men's masculinity/ies and sex/uality/ies. Indeed, the analytical work of this research revealed gendered contradictions which rhetorically circumscribe how the gay men participating in this study discursively construct and experience the corpo-erotics of fisting. Thus, while the findings of this study support the contention that anal fisting fashions an alternative (non-heteronormative) mode of (anal) sex/uality through which intimacy, vulnerability, trust, and pleasure can be experienced by gay men, particularly in the way fisting radically (re)makes the material possibilities and connections of gay men's bodies, this however does not mean that anal fisting (for all gay men or in all instances) can be defined, in personal or political ways, as inherently Queer sex.

In this regard, this study also found that gay men's understandings of anal fisting can be discursively invested with, and reiterative of, heteronormative tropes akin to those which commonly appear in gay men's talk about anal sex, such as in the gendered role expectations and performances of sexual positionalities including so-called 'Top' and 'Bottom' preferences. In this way, the deployment of gendered discourses which underwrite the subjective construction and relational experience of masculinity and masculine power for some gay men with/in anal fisting appears to undercut the gender-transgressive or Queer potential of anal fisting by recuperating problematic forms of heteromasculinism and femiphobia.

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Notes

1. Anal fisting is, however, in no ways solely limited to self-identified/declared members of the BDSM community.
2. It should be noted that anal fisting is not a form of sexual activity localised to the erotic predilections of gay men, non-gay identifying men who have sex with men (MSM), or, for that matter, men altogether. In actual fact, there exists a body of sexual health and erotic literature which details the practice of anal fisting among straight (or heterosexual) men and women (Taormino, 2012), as well as lesbian women (Califia, 1988).

3. Here the hand and fingers are manipulated into a 'duckbill' form, as opposed to 'balling' the hand and fingers into a fully rounded fist. In the 'Silent Duck', the fingers of one hand are held straight and closed together, with the thumb then placed flat against the palm of the hand. This usefully reduces the diameter of the hand when moving through the sphincter muscle of the anus.
4. However, Rubin's work has since stood virtually alone in its empirical contribution on the subject.
5. Reference to the terms 'Top', 'Bottom', and 'Versatile' here should not be read as an uncritical acceptance or endorsement of them. Gay men's (anal) sex/uality is far more imaginative than these terms allude. For example, not only has there been a growing reworking of the three dominant (self-)labels, such as with the emergence of identifiers like 'Power-Bottom', 'Versatile-Top', 'Versatile-Bottom', and 'Power-Top' among others, but there has also been a move by some Queer commentators to argue in favour of abandoning these (self-)labels in recognition of their (hetero)normative roots and the harmful stereotypes they perpetuate. With that said, the use of these three terms here recognises not only how the participants in this study continued to employ these (self-)labels, but also the powerful status and (commercial) symbolism these terms have within the gay community, gay pornography, gay relationships, and gay (online and app-based) hook-up culture.
6. Pseudonyms are employed for all participants throughout this article.
7. This, however, is to be explored in future work.
8. Here, heteronormative refers to the explicit and implicit operation of global and local systems of social, political, and economic relations which reaffirm and reinforce heterosex/uality as the normative standard and preferred mode of sexual identity, sex/uality, and sexual orientation.
9. Within gender and sexuality/ies scholarship, the term 'homonormative' brings with it a wide set of often disparate cultural connotations and implications. Here, I use the term to refer to the ways in which 'hegemonic heteronormative assumptions' (Lasio et al., 2019, p. 1058), in particular those which normalise heteropatriarchal gender regimes within and outside of gay culture, marginalise and silence less powerful or less commercially viable forms of Queer identity, life, and practice.
10. The term 'heteropatriarchal' conceptually couples together the system of gender relations which maintains the dominance of men (i.e., patriarchy) with the dominant status of heterosexuality within that system (i.e., heteronormative).
11. Something which can also be found in Hoppe's (2011) work with 'Bottom-identifying' gay men who reject the status of being 'passive' or simply 'receptive' during anal sex.

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