


# Fisting Subjectivity: Narratives of Sexual Subjectivity Among Gay Fist-Fuckers

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## ABSTRACT

Studies of sexuality have long been interested in understanding the construction of sexual subjectivity, especially amongst people whose participation in more nonnormative and kinkier forms of sex/uality have been discursively framed in terms of sexual and health “risk.” Here sexual subjectivity refers to a person’s sense of themselves “as a sexual being who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being” (p. 6). This study explored what meanings fist-fuckers narratively draw on in understanding and interpreting their sexual subjectivity. Unstructured individual interviews were conducted with 32 gay South African men who fist-fuck. Guided by narrative theory and a thematic narrative analysis, six narratives were identified through which this sample of fist-fuckers constructed their sexual subjectivity as: kinkster, explorer, athlete, expert, lover, and community member. The results highlight that fist-fuckers construct and understand their sexual subjectivity through multiple and overlapping narratives of erotic desire and practice. These narratives not only work to affirmatively constitute the pursuit of fist-fucking as a personally meaningful, sexually fulfilling, and erotically legitimate form of satisfaction and play but, furthermore, facilitate identification with and membership of a distinct community of kink.

## Introduction

In this study, I aimed to explore what meanings gay fist-fuckers narratively draw on in how they understand their sexual subjectivity. The concept of subjectivity in critical and queer studies of sexuality is often derived from Michel Foucault’s (1978b) formulation which draws attention to the social, cultural, and historical forces that productively shape a person’s sexual identity, embodiments, and experiences. Shifting from this conceptualization in the present study, I applied Deborah Tolman’s (2002) definition of sexual subjectivity that concentrates on how someone understands themselves as an active, desiring, and agentic sexual and erotic subject, particularly in the face of social discourses which constrain, sanction, or deny non-normative sexual and erotic desires.<sup>1</sup> For Tolman (2002), sexual subjectivity is a person’s experience of themselves as a “sexual being who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being” (p. 6).<sup>2</sup>

The ways in which people understand their sexual subjectivity has long been shaped by social constructions of sex and sexuality organized by a reductive and binarising logic of normality versus deviance, particularly in the Global North, West, and places subjected to European colonialism (Foucault, 1978b). Scaffolded by heteronormative, moralizing, medical, and psychological discourses, a master narrative has taken shape which establishes and reinforces distinctions of natural/unnatural,

normal/abnormal, respectable/perverse, superior/inferior, and healthy/risky sex (Hughes & Hammack, 2019). This meta-narrative defines and institutionalizes a procreative and vanilla form of romantic sexual intercourse between a pair of monogamously coupled and biologically male and female bodies as the sexual norm. It is therefore unsurprising that queer, non-monogamous, and other alternative modes of sex have been cast as sinful, a consequence of mental disease, or even criminal (Rubin, 1984). This is particularly evident in the ways that kinked sex and sexualities have been historically treated by socio-cultural, medical, and legal authorities (Khan, 2014).

Kink is an umbrella term encompassing various unconventional erotic interests, identities, behaviors, practices, and relationships (Vivid et al., 2020). These elements may intersect with sexuality but may also be distinct from it (Williams & Sprott, 2022). Although the term kink is often used interchangeably with that of fetish and the compound acronym of BDSM (bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism), it distinguishes itself as having emerged from within communities of kink-identified people, while the latter two have origins in medical and research discourses (Ortmann & Sprott, 2013). There is, however, no single, homogenous kink “community” but, rather, a diverse and evolving field of different (and sometimes overlapping) erotic niches that are often embedded in more and less established subcultural communities which have their own

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<sup>1</sup>Tolman’s (2002) theorization of sexual subjectivity was borne from her writing on adolescent girls and the heteropatriarchal structures and discourses which render them passive objects of (male/men’s) desire rather than subjects who experience it.

<sup>2</sup>It is important to clarify that sexual identity is not necessarily synonymous with sexual subjectivity. While sexual identity tends to refer more narrowly to a person’s specific categorization of their sexual orientation, sexual subjectivity is a more expansive concept that refers to “how people think about themselves as sexual beings. It includes their experiences of sex and eroticism, as well as their conception and assessment of their own erotic and sexual desires, acts, and fantasies” (Dimen, 2016, p. 1).

histories, norms, and values that regulate membership, identification, and practices. While it is impossible to list all the distinct erotic characteristics of various kink communities here, Sprott et al. (2023) offered a general overview of common elements typically found in kinks. These include deriving sexual pleasure from aspects such as painful sensations and power dynamics, finding arousal in body parts and objects, enacting or enhancing erotic scenarios, and engaging in activities that alter or heighten states of consciousness.

Early perspectives of kinked sex/ualities were significantly influenced by the work of Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1886/1965), Ellis (1905) and Freud (1923/1961). This work postulated that “deviant” sex/ualities were a consequence of disordered psychology and deleterious to personal well-being, requiring curative interventions of medical and psychotherapeutic treatment. However, since the latter 1960s, social movements advocating for sexual liberation, developments in the science of human sexuality, liberalizing attitudes (at least in some places) to sexual and gender diversity, and the role of the internet in promoting local and global community building amongst kinksters, has resulted in kinkier/ed sexualities gaining greater visibility and acknowledgment as valid expressions of sexual diversity (Hughes & Hammack, 2019). This evolution has also been supported by more contemporary studies which have, on the one hand, found little empirical support for psychopathology as a determinant in the pursuit of kink (Connolly, 2006; Moser, 2002) and, on the other, established clear differences between sexual violence and kinked/ier sex (Moser, 2023). Informed consent, a priority on participant safety, role flexibility amongst kink participants, and the value of reciprocal and mutual satisfaction typically delineate kink from sexual violence (Faccio et al., 2014). There is now also a greater appreciation of the positive motivating forces that lie behind participation in kink, including expressions of identity, physiological release, a sense of personal empowerment, stress reduction, the experience of intimate connection, the thrill of pain, and the desire to break free from the monotony and mundane aspects of everyday existence (Meyer & Chen, 2019).

Despite these developments, kinksters continue to report experiences of social stigma (Goerlich, 2022). In Brown’s (2010) ethnographic study of BDSM across 11 states in the US, they found that BDSM practitioners reported four distinct kinds of stigma, including negative public portrayals in the media and news, experiences of diminished value in healthcare settings, mockery and shunning by non-BDSM family members, and being targets of discrimination or prejudice. Similarly, in a study of over 3058 kink practitioners from the US, UK, Germany, and Norway, 37.5% of survey respondents reported having experienced discrimination, harassment, or violence due to their kink orientation (Wright, 2008). In a qualitative study of 115 kink-oriented San Franciscans’ experience with health and healthcare, Waldura et al. (2016) found that only 38% of their sample disclosed their kink orientation to their primary healthcare provider, with anticipated stigma cited as the primary reason for nondisclosure. Most recently, in a survey study of 252 non-BDSM practising and heterosexuals, Hansen-Brown and Jefferson (2023) found

that there were statistically significant higher degrees of stigma directed toward BDSM practitioners compared to attitudes toward the gay/lesbian community or people in romantic relationships generally. It is, however, worth noting that much of the forementioned research is based on samples drawn from the US and Europe.

Kinksters, fetishists, and BDSM practitioners within the gay community have also not been immune from similar forms of stigma (Slagstad, 2023). Members of these sexual subcultures have often been ostracized within mainstream gay communities as an effect of a politics of respectability that stresses assimilation and de-sexualization, especially in public representations of the gay community (Wignall, 2022). One community of gay kinksters which has faced varying forms of pejorative misrepresentation both in and outside of the broader gay community since its organized inception are fist-fuckers (Rofes, 1991; Rubin, 1994).

### ***Fisting: Practice, Culture, and Identity***

Anal fisting, also referred to as fist-play, handballing, fist-fucking, or by the online abbreviation “FF” or “ffun,” is the solo and/or partnered erotic practice of having the hand (typically up to the wrist) and/or portions of the arm (potentially to the shoulder) inserted through the anus and into the rectum and colon. In fist-fucking a fist-top (insertive partner) employs a repertoire of toys and techniques which change the depth, width, speed, and duration of their insertive play in conjunction with altering the form, size, position, and placement of their fingers and hand(s). For the fist-bottom (receptive partner), this play produces powerful sensations of internal fullness, pressure against bodily organs, and stretching of the anus. Fisting aficionados have detailed that sessions of fist-play are characterized by psycho-physiological and quasi-spiritual experiences of intense pleasure, fulfillment, as well as partner connectedness (Brough, 2005; Herrman, 1991; Niederwieser, 2013; Shockey, 2009).

An organized subcultural community of fist-fuckers is considered to have emerged from within the evolving set of sexual practices developed by the gay leathermen who congregated in the urban centers of San Francisco and New York City in the early 1970s (Califia, 1994; Rubin, 1991). It was during this time that the first formal networks (e.g., Fist Fuckers of America) and dedicated clubs (e.g., The Catacombs and Mineshaft) for fist-fuckers were born (Stein, 2021). Soon thereafter, with the arrival of AIDS as well as the homo-and ano-phobic moral panic that surrounded it, gay bathhouses and clubs known for fisting became a target of public health officials who blamed it for the spread of HIV (Barcelos, 2023). Medical reviews and case studies on anal fisting have highlighted the potential for serious internal injury as well as the heightened risk of STI transmission (Agnew, 2000; Cappelletti et al., 2016; Sylla et al., 2020). It is, however, the unique configuration of bodily parts and practices entailed in fist-fucking that not only disrupts what we conventionally understand the sexual capacities and capabilities of our bodies to be (Martin, 2023a) but, perhaps more potently, provides an evocative instance of erotic body horror in which bodily boundaries are transgressed (Martin, 2023b).

Fisters have themselves attested to the stigma and kink-shaming they often face within communities of vanilla gay men (Bigbuttgeek & Jazzmatazz, 2023). Research on identity formation emphasizes how individuals in the kink community construct their sexual identities amidst normative discourses that often pathologise and devalue expressions of their sexualities (Hughes & Hammack, 2019). In the context of meta-narratives informed by hetero- and homo-normativities around sex (Maine, 2022), kinksters draw on subculturally-specific alternative narratives which affirm their kinks. This enables kinksters to creatively reconstitute “a new sexual story that possesses meaning and psychological value” (Hughes & Hammack, 2019, p. 151) – something which has been evidenced in studies with leathermen (Mosher et al., 2006), rope bondage practitioners (Jones, 2020), and pups (Wignall, 2022). Similarly, in my previous work with fisters, intimacy has emerged as a significant aspect of their subcultural beliefs and erotic practices (Martin, 2020, 2022, 2023a, 2023b). Here, intimacy appears to function as a counter-narrative that fisters employ in the context of pejorative discourses that invalidate their fantasies, desires, and practices. However, what remains to be explored is if other stories and meanings underwrite how fist-fuckers understand and interpret their sexual subjectivity as personally meaningful, sexually fulfilling, and erotically legitimate. This was the aim of the present study.

In this study, I employed a narrative theory perspective and thematic narrative analysis following the work of Catherine Riessman (1993, 2004, 2007). Broadly speaking, narrative inquiry is interested in how people understand

the world, others, and themselves through the stories they construct and communicate (Riessman, 2007). Epistemologically underpinned by an interpretivist and constructivist approach, narratives are seen not merely as reflections of an independent reality but as active contributors to the construction of reality within the dynamic relationship between the narrator and their external world (Esin, 2011). Narrative analysis therefore takes as its central focus how a person makes meaning of their experience and world through the construction and composition of their narratives (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). However, narratives are not considered to simply “spring from the minds of individuals” (Murray, 1999, p. 53), but are shaped by the overarching meta-narratives present in one’s time and place (Crossley, 2000). For Riessman (2007), it is through the process of storytelling that those prevailing ideologies become enfolded with our own lived experience as we story (or actively organize) our understanding of an experience or event. This is how the norms, values, and even contradictions in the dominant discourses of one’s milieu become inflected into and negotiated within one’s own sense of self (Riessman, 2007). For this reason, narrative approaches have proven analytically useful in studies of kink because of the emphasis they place on how people weave together a coherently meaningful sense of themselves as a sexual subject that nonetheless remains textured by multiple, intersecting, and sometimes conflicting stories of social norms, sexual life, and erotic experience (Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Hammack et al., 2013).

**Table 1.** Participant profile.

Pseudonym	Age	Race	City of Residence	Relationship Status	Preferred Role	Years Fisting	Number of Scenes Over an Average 6-Month Period
James	32	White	Cape Town	Single	Bottom	1	6
Harry	34	White	Cape Town	Single	Bottom	4	4
Mick	56	Coloured	Cape Town	Single	Versatile	7	8
Mark	36	Black	Johannesburg	Single	Top	3	3
Cameron	29	Indian	Durban	Single	Bottom	2	2
Jerry	48	Coloured	Cape Town	Single	Bottom	6	4
Calvin	31	Indian	Durban	Single	Bottom	12	4
David	52	White	Pretoria	Monogamous Partnership	Top	23	15
Viren	37	Indian	Durban	Single	Bottom	6	5
Roger	28	Coloured	Johannesburg	Consensually Non-monogamous Relationship	Bottom	8	3
Anthony	39	White	Cape Town	Single	Bottom	5	10
Mitch	37	Coloured	Durban	Single	Bottom	5	5
Kevin	42	Coloured	Johannesburg	Consensually Non-monogamous Relationship	Top	14	10
Tom	31	White	Durban	Single	Bottom	1	4
Saul	48	White	Pretoria	Monogamous Partnership	Bottom	18	4
Tim	26	Black	Johannesburg	Single	Bottom	0.5	2
Velaphi	37	Black	Johannesburg	Single	Bottom	5	4
Gwede	35	Black	Johannesburg	Single	Top	3	6
Josh	31	Coloured	Cape Town	Monogamous Relationship	Top	1	4
Romeo	29	Coloured	Cape Town	Single	Top	1	2
Paul	28	Coloured	Johannesburg	Consensually Non-monogamous Relationship	Bottom	2	6
John	44	White	Durban	Single	Bottom	6	7
Theo	29	Black	Johannesburg	Single	Top	4	8
Jason	25	White	Johannesburg	Single	Bottom	0.5	3
Maurice	62	White	Johannesburg	Single	Bottom	11	6
Devin	33	Black	Johannesburg	Single	Bottom	6	4
Grahame	34	White	Cape Town	Single	Bottom	3	2
Humphrey	37	Coloured	Cape Town	Single	Bottom	13	6
Frikkie	44	White	Bloemfontein	Monogamous Partnership	Top	10	8
Louie	41	White	Bloemfontein	Monogamous Partnership	Bottom	10	8
Matthias	39	Coloured	Gqeberha	Consensually Non-monogamous Relationship	Top	5	7
Remy	39	Indian	Gqeberha	Single	Bottom	4	5

## Method

### Participants

In total, 32 self-identified cisgender gay men between the ages of 26 and 62 consented to be interviewed. While all the participants were South African and lived in an urban or suburban area of a major South African city (Table 1), there was some variation in the sample concerning the total number of years each participant had been fisting (0.5–23 years) as well as the number of scenes each interviewee estimated to have participated in over an average 6-month period (2–15 scenes). There was also some degree of diversity within the recruited sample around their ethno-racial identity, relationship status, and play preference: 22 bottoms, 9 tops, and 1 versatile.

Interview-based qualitative studies into alternative sex/ualities have often entailed a purposeful sampling approach that aims to recruit interviewees who identify with and actively participate in the kink under study and who are well placed to draw from both their own and subcultural knowledge, understandings, and meanings. The method of purposeful sampling employed for this study was chain sampling (Patton, 2002). This involved prospective interviewees being identified through 7 preexisting contacts developed from a series of research projects with South African gay men who fist-fuck (Martin 2020, 2022, 2023a). These research contacts were approached by the researcher and asked if they could reach out to and gauge the interest of playmates within their respective circles to participate in the study. The research contacts were asked to identify possible participants using the following inclusion criteria: (1) participants needed to be at least 18 years of age in order to be considered a consenting adult, in terms of South African law; (2) participants needed to have active interest in and experience with fisting, be it as a top, bottom, or versatile, as a part of their personal repertoire of preferred sexual behavior; and (3) while I did not specify the regularity with which participants needed to be fist-fucking, I set a minimum of at least two separate occasions to refrain from recruiting participants who had only tried fisting as a once-off “experiment.”

Prior to recruitment commencing, ethical clearance was provided by the University of Pretoria’s Humanities Research Ethics Committee (reference: HUM002/1022).

### Procedure

An exploratory qualitative design using unstructured individual interviews and a thematic narrative analysis was employed for the present study. Exploratory designs have proven adept for qualitatively oriented research which explores the intimate lives of people whose erotic practices and communities have been subjected to pejorative misrepresentation, such as, sexual minorities (Bowling et al., 2016) and people whose sex/uality is kinked (Prior & Williams, 2015).

An unstructured format for the interviews was selected not only because it promotes the kind of conversational interview key to narrative inquiry (Mishler, 1986), but it does so by enabling interviewers to facilitate a rhetorical space that encourages an interviewee’s story to unfold in their own words, with little prompting from the interviewer (Riessman,

2007). Moreover, unstructured interviewing is “underpinned by distinctive ideas about the autonomy of the subject in research” (Mulcahy et al., 2021, p. 104) and, for the purpose of this study, marked a methodo-ethical commitment to situating the power for telling personal stories of sexual and erotic life in the hands of each participant. To this effect, all the interviews were initiated with a standard opening question to frame the conversation: What does being a fist-fucker mean to you? Although there was no structured schedule of interview questions that followed from the opening question, I did prepare an *aide memoire* (agenda) that served as a reminder of the general areas I was interested in covering (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). These included: (1) history, i.e., how the participant was introduced to fisting; (2) preference, i.e., how they understood their preference or desire to play as a top and/or bottom; (3) pleasure, i.e., what kinds of (physical/psychological, personal/social, and non/sexual) pleasure they derived from fisting; and (4) challenges, i.e., what (if any) challenges had participants experienced by virtue of being a fister. When I needed participants to elaborate on responses, I reverted to rephrasing the framing question by, for example, asking them to tell me about what a recounted experience or event meant for them being a fister or how they made sense of it as a fister.

All the interviews were face-to-face individual interviews conducted by the researcher and varied between 60 and 120 minutes. Each interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed by myself for analysis.

### Data Analysis

An inductive thematic narrative analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts. Personally articulated narratives are an entry point for a researcher into the processes by which an individual comes to understand their sense of self, or an aspect thereof (Riessman, 2007). For Riessman (2007), it is the content of the narrative or “the told” (p. 54) rather than its construction or “the telling” (p. 54) which forms the focus of analytical attention. Yet, as Riessman (2007) noted, “narratives don’t speak for themselves . . . they require close interpretation” (p. 22) through procedures of analysis to identify the core strands of meaning making within a narrative and, from there, whether these strands appear recurrent in different narratives. While the application of a thematic analysis may appear to “fragment” narratives, thematized narratives offer an opportunity to identify the multiple kinds of stories that a single fister may employ to make meaning, the relationships between different types of stories (reinforcing or conflicting), as well as the collective storylines that circulate and are called on within the sexual subculture of fist-fuckers (Bengtsson & Andersen, 2020, Josselson, 2011).

Following Braun and Clarke’s (2021a, 2021b, 2022) work on thematic analysis, the analysis employed six steps. First, I familiarized myself with the data by re-listening to all the recorded interviews as well as transcribing and re-reading them. Second, I generated an initial set of codes based on notes made during transcription. Third, by employing a line-by-line coding approach, I searched for an initial set of themes. During this step, I rhetorically asked myself what story was being told by the participant in order to help me identify

**Table 2.** Example of inductive map for generating the expert narrative.

Initial codes	Story (What story am I being told?)	Draft narrative (What does it mean to be fist-fucker?)	Final narrative (based on participant feedback)
Anatomy	<b>A story about knowledge:</b>	A technician	An expert
Lubricant	● Anatomy		
Injury	● Lubricant		
Technique	● Injury		
Blood	● Blood		
Emergency	● Emergency		
Douching	● Douching		
Gloves	● Gloves		
Foreplay	● Hygiene		
Hygiene	● Towels		
Cleaning up	● Nail clipping		
Towels	● Puppy pads		
Nail clipping	● Reading/research		
Puppy pads	● Advice (online)		
Reading/research	● Nail filing		
Advice (online)	● STI prevention		
Guidance (mentor)	<b>A story about skill:</b>		
Experience	● Technique		
Partner feedback	● Foreplay		
Nail filing	● Cleaning up		
STI prevention	● Guidance (mentor)		
	● Experience		
	● Partner feedback		

specific stories that were shared and recurring about the meaning of fisting. Fourth, I revised the overall thematic picture by comparing initial and emergent themes against one another and extant literature. Fifth, I consolidated and named a final set of main narrative themes. Lastly, I identified suitable extracts of data within each theme for inclusion in this paper. I also conducted two rounds of interviewee feedback (by e-mail). The first, after step 2, invited participants to provide feedback on the initial set of codes. The second took place during step 5, where participants were asked to provide their opinions on the final set of themes. Despite the diminishing degree of participant input with at first 15 and then only 6 participants providing written feedback, this input proved helpful in refining the initial codes and naming the final themes. An abridged example of how this took shape for the expert narrative is outlined in Table 2.

### Social Positionality and Reflexivity

According to Esin (2011), narratives are not crafted in isolation but emerge through social interactions among individuals. This is particularly relevant for interview-based narrative inquiry where the interviewee (narrator) may reposition themselves and reproduce their stories differently depending on who the interviewer (audience/interlocutor) is (Wesely, 2018). As a White cis-gay man, I was particularly mindful of how my racial identity may have informed participants' narratives on the subject of community membership and, in particular, how experiences of racism had reportedly shaped community access and connectedness for some fist-fuckers of color. In one interview, Devin, a 33-year-old Black fist-bottom from Johannesburg, said to me: "I don't want to offend you by telling you about this White guy," before going on to recount a difficult experience in which he had been racially fetishized by a White playmate. Devin's care in not wanting to offend me sat with me for the remainder of our interview and has done so beyond the present study. As Saville Young (2011) has

observed: "[r]ace *does* things between people" (p. 53, italics added), and perhaps most especially in interview contexts where the interlocutors are located in and shaped by a history of violent racialized oppression and White supremacy, such as in South Africa. While not all the participants of color had reported experiences of racialized discrimination during our interviews, I have continued to wonder if this was a consequence of their own self-editing or selective muting of these stories in my presence. I have continued to wonder what my racial identity or, more pointedly, my Whiteness, may have done, or will do, in interview exchanges where it may very well work to "block other narratives from forming and emerging" (Said, 1993, p. xiii).

## Results

### Kinkster

The narrative of fist-fucking as a kink and fist-fuckers as kinksters emerged in all the interviews for this study. By narratively circumscribing anal fisting as a kink, it was evident the participants sought to define their sense of desire, their repertoire of practices, as well as their erotic experience of satisfaction when fisting/being fisted in terms of difference from the norm, i.e., by contrasting it with more normative understandings and experiences of sexual intercourse and, in particular, gay (anal) sex. In doing so, the participating fist-fuckers sought to distance (if not uncouple) themselves and fisting from the hetero/homonormative lenses typically employed to understand sexual and erotic desire, pleasure, and practice. Not only would fisting be described as a form of sexual play, as opposed to sexual intercourse, but this would often be accompanied by further rhetorical qualifiers, including references to fist-play being "weird" or "freaky" in an effort to emphasize its differentness from the normative conventions of gay sex:

[F]isting is seen as weird because it's compared it anal [sex]. But, I mean, why does sex get to be the norm? You can't compare it to

sex. Is it sexual? Yes, but it's not the same as sex. It's a kink, fisters are kinksters. (Mick, 56, Coloured, Vers)

I guess like a lot of fetish stuff it's a bit freaky because it's so different. It's not the usual. It's a hand up your butt, you know. It's very different, and sometimes people are afraid of different. (Josh, 31 Coloured, Top)

The desire to get fisted is not same as the desire to get fucked. I'm not looking for someone to cum inside me and I'm also not really concerned about cumming. It's more on the kinkier side. I'm needing to have my hole played with. I'm wanting to be stretched and filled. I'm looking for a different pleasure. (Anthony, 39 White, Bottom)

In understanding their sexual selves and play as kinked, most of the participants recurrently likened fisting to kink. Here it was evident that fisting was considered similar to other kinks in the way that kinks, broadly, and fisting, specifically, were sexually subversive and disruptive in character. Most notably this included a focal shift away from the genitals and, specifically, the penis, as a means of erotic pleasure-making. In addition to this, participants called attention to how the decentering of the penis necessitated other non-normative shifts in how sexual roles and relational power dynamics were conceived and practiced:

Vanilla gays get nervous the moment a cock is not the centre of attention. They lose their minds. I've been asked how I get pleasure if I'm not fucking someone with my cock. It's like their brain literally cannot compute pleasure without a penis. Almost all kinks are kind of like that. You're not depending the parts [of the body] you always associate with sex. (David, 52, White, Top)

[K]inks like fisting are disruptive. They disrupt the traditional gay roles. The dom-top and sub-bottom power dynamic doesn't really apply. The bottom's in complete control, the top is actually there to serve them. (Jerry, 48, Coloured, Bottom)

### Explorer

The majority of participants in this study often described themselves as explorers or as people engaged in exploring what experiences of pleasure and sensation were possible beyond gay anal sex and genital orgasm. The freedom to explore beyond the conventional practices and pleasures of sexual intercourse was a recurrent motif within this narrative. Thus, while the aim of fist-fucking was certainly the pursuit of pleasure, this was often considered to be through a liberatory pushing of the conventional boundaries and limits of sexual and erotic practice:

[Y]ou're exploring the limits of pleasure and what your body can do and feel. You're pushing boundaries. What people on the outside don't always get, is that we don't exceed those boundaries. Yes, you get pushed to the limit, but the limit never gets crossed. (Paul, 28 Coloured, Bottom)

I'm not saying an orgasm is out of the question but the whole thing is not about orgasm. That gives you a lot of freedom to explore what else is with someone else. (James, 32, White, Bottom)

Through the explorer narrative, fist-play was often considered as a multidimensional erotic activity that entailed the exploration of corporeal, psychological, and spiritual aspects of sexual pleasure and partnership. In this regard, the limits that fist-

play pushed were bodily, mental, and metaphysical, enabling participants to explore qualitatively new and often unrivaled experiences of physical sensation, emotional connection, and altered or "higher" states of consciousness:

You'll have a connection that's not just physical. There's a physical element, but it's also psychological and spiritual. (Mark, 36, Black, Top)

It has to be the most satisfying experience because it's the most holistic pleasure you can experience. There is intense [physical] stimulation that you experience. But that's also with a psychological connection that is very emotionally intense and stimulating. (Cameron, 29, Indian, Bottom)

[Y]ou slip outside yourself. It's just so intense. You just throw your head back and growl and it's like you're being transported somewhere else. You can go into this Zen-like state. (Saul, 48, White, Bottom)

### Athlete

For most of the fist-fuckers in this study, fisting was interpreted as an elite form of sexual and erotic activity. Tropes of elitism and athleticism were recurrent in participants' references to the erotic exactitudes of fist-fucking, in effect rendering non-fisters more "ordinary" sexual beings. Fist-fucking emerged within this narrative as the kind of activity for which the erotic eligibility to participate was ultimately so rigorous and out of the ordinary that it conferred a special and unique status on those who qualified:

The difference is that sex is a sprint, and fisting is a marathon. We're the only sexual athletes because the endurance you need for a [fisting] scene would tire out an ordinary top or bottom. (Maurice, 62, White, Bottom)

Not everyone can do this and I think that's what makes us pretty special. It's an elite club that you can only be a part of when you've earned your way in. (Jason, 25, White, Bottom)

Intertwined within the narrative of the fist-fucker were themes of endurance, perseverance, and dedication. Together, these narratives worked to reinforce the trope of the sexual athlete and curated an interpretation of fist-play as an advanced type of kink that required ongoing and sustained (bodily and psychological) preparation or "training" in order to participate meaningfully and safely:

[I]t's months of training. I think I'd been sitting on bigger and bigger toys for about 8 months before my hole could take a full fist. (Mitch, 37, Coloured, Bottom)

Patience and perseverance are the most important qualities for a [fist-]bottom because you think you'll be taking doubles overnight, but it needs a lot of dedication and work. (Louie, 41, White, Bottom)

Training is also mental. The larger the toy, the more confidence you gain. You need that confidence to help you relax when you start to start play with others. (Roger, 28, Coloured, Bottom)

### Expert

It is common for most kink and fetish play to require the acquisition and mastery of kink-specific knowledge and skills which help the kinkster to navigate the customs and repertoires

of play. For all of the participants in the present study, fist-fuckers were narratively crafted as sexual experts because of the technical knowledge and skills that underpin the practices of anal fisting. Across the interviews it was clear that most of the participants considered their ideal playmate to possess this expertise, regardless of whether their playmate was a fist-top or fist-bottom. Amongst all the fist-fuckers interviewed, it was clear that the expertise required for fist-play implied that serious fisters become life-long learners who were prepared to commit themselves to an ongoing educational journey of research and knowledge acquisition. Participants stressed that the expertise to participate in a fisting scene ranged across a variety of subjects, including knowledge of colo-rectal anatomy; hand and nail care; techniques of stretching the anal sphincter to enable comfortable fist-play; hygiene practices before, during and after play; procedures for mixing and applying different types of specialized lubricants to allow for shallower or deeper play; and approaches to fist insertion, including how to alter the pace, depth, and rotation of the hand during fist-play:

I would say there's a degree of expertise you need for fisting that isn't really the case with sex. A dick is just never going to go as deep, so you've got to know where your hand is going. You'll need to know how the rectum and colon connect together and where they bend in places. (Frikkie, 44, White, Top)

A lot goes into making a session and play space hygienic. The bottom does their bit, which is dieting the day before and they would have douched for an hour or more to clean out. But my bit is to play safe and use gloves to make sure my bottom is not exposed to anything that's on my hands. The play space is set up to make sure the moment I touch anything that's not my bottom's hole then I have to re-glove. (Matthias, 39, Coloured, Top)

We're using specialised lubricants that you have to understand how to mix into very specific consistencies depending on the type of play. (Romeo, 29, Coloured, Top)

The importance placed on expertise was understood amongst the participants to be geared toward enhancing pleasure through the mitigation of risk. The narrative of the fist-fucker as expert was one in which the frank and forthright acknowledgment of the risks and injury possible in fist-play were evident. In this regard, the narrative of expertise also came to function defensively in rebuttal of the impression that fisting was inherently dangerous:

The perception of danger is not correct. We put so much time into prepping to play that I'm sure we play safer than most people fuck. (Theo, 29, Black, Top)

Safety is at the top of everyone's mind. I'm not going to tell you there no risks. That's why we take precautions. But, listen, all sex has some risk. So, you just have to be responsible by understanding what the risks are and how to avoid them. (Grahame, 34, White, Bottom)

Participants also highlighted that fisting only became risky when playmates had not achieved the requisite knowledge and skills. In one such account, it was evident that the acquisition of expertise became a central and defining feature of what it meant to be a "true" fist-fucker:

There are guys out there who don't really know what they're doing. For them, I think it's more just wanting to be able to say they fisted someone. They're not really true fisters. They give the rest of us

a bad name. Fisting is only unsafe if you don't know what you're doing. (Calvin, 31, Indian, Bottom)

### Lover

While the narrative of the fist-fucker as expert positioned fist-fuckers as informed and responsible sexual subjects engaged in considered and serious practices of sexual play, the narrative of the fist-fucker as lover emphasized the premium placed on intimacy and pleasure in fist-play. In this narrative, love not only formed a crucial subcultural value amongst fisters but, furthermore, a psychological motive force to play:

Fisting tops are the most loving tops, because everything they do is about taking care of their bottom. They want to be of service. Being a good fisting top is 50% technique and 50% attitude, and that attitude has to come from a space of wanting to give pleasure. If you're not topping from a space of love then it's going to show in the technique. (Velaphi, 37, Black, Bottom)

Often the emphasis on pleasure was articulated in reference to the misconception that fisting was violent or painful. Participants highlighted that non-fisters would likely misperceive some of the settings, signs, and discourses of fist-play as indicative of violence or pain because they did not fully understand how central love, pleasure and care were to fist-play. Even in instances where "aggressive" talk and banter occurred between playmates, the desire, intention, and practice of play would remain centered on pleasure:

I guess if you see some [fist-]bottom on his back and he's groaning loudly, you're probably gonna assume he's in pain. That groaning is not pain, it's just that the pleasure is so much that the only way to vocalise it is to shout it out. (John, 44, White, Bottom)

The language can be misleading. Like, if I say I want you to "wreck my cunt" or "destroy my hole," you can misinterpret that and think, fuck, that's pretty violent. I'm not actually saying I want you to hurt to me. No. I'm communicating an intense desire to have my hole played with. The talk is rough, but the play never is. It's always gentle, it's always slow. (Humphrey, 37, Coloured, Bottom)

The narrative of the fist-fucker as lover was underpinned by emphases placed on intimacy, connection, and mutuality as important personal and interpersonal dimensions of fisting. Trust was a prominent reference point in this narrative and accentuated the intimacy work that playmates (particularly fist-tops) put into creating a scene wherein trust eased and contained the bottoming playmate's corporeal and psychological vulnerability:

It's the most intimate connection you'll have with another person and, ironically, it's not because they're elbow deep in you. Our play requires trust; trust that the bottom is ready to be vulnerable and trust that the top is ready to handle that vulnerability. The foundation of any play is trust. (Devin, 33, Black, Bottom)

For some participants, the intense and immersive nature of the intimacy experienced during fist-play also formed a vital part of their own sexual self-care and well-being:

Over the years it's become a mental health thing for me. . . . [F]isting is the only moment where I get to completely surrender myself into someone's hands. It's become a really important part of my own self-care. (Remy, 39, Indian, Bottom)

## Community Member

The narrative of community loomed large for many of the participants in this study. Most of the fist-fuckers here narratively placed themselves within the “fisting community,” broadly, and a community of playmates, in particular. While the former of these often represented a national and global sense of connectedness, camaraderie, and support amongst kinksters through contact and non-contact (i.e., virtual and online) networks, the latter typically referred to more immediate and close contact groups of regular and trusted playmates and fist-friends. In both instances, these communities were considered to play a vital educational role in socializing “newbies” or neophyte fisters into the distinct values and practices of fist-play:

Becoming a fister is more than just taking or giving a fist. Don't get me wrong, that's definitely part of it, but it's also about understanding our kink has its own history and culture behind everything we do, like pups or the bondage guys or even piss play. We're all part of the kink family, but we communicate and behave in different ways. Fisters talk and act in specific ways and we expect other fisters to do the same. (Kevin, 42, Coloured, Top)

Having a community of people who you trust is important because when you first get into [fisting], it doesn't always go as planned. You make mistakes. The first time I bottomed, I didn't really know how deep and long I had to douche for. I douched as if it was normal anal and, let's just say, things got messy. But I was lucky to be playing with guys who were super cool about it and turned it into a teaching moment. That's how I learnt to douche. (Harry, 34, White, Bottom)

In addition to the educational role, many of the participants also pointed to the affirmative role that the fisting community had played in normalizing their desire and establishing forms of social support, especially in light of the stigma faced by fisters:

I really did think I was just sick. Like, why would someone want a fist inside them. There must be something wrong in my head to want that. There's a lot of kink-shaming, but connecting with people online was eye-opening for me. It made me realise I wasn't alone, that I wasn't sick, and that there were other people who had the same desires as me. (Viren, 37, Indian, Bottom)

There's a lot of myths about fisting. I've literally had a boyfriend of 6-months break-up with me because I finally worked up the courage to tell him I was into fisting. [...]. The people who were there to support me were other fisters because they get it, they understand the prejudice. (Tom, 31, White, Bottom)

Although most of the participants described the role of communities in which they played as having a positive impact in formatively shaping their sense of sexual subjectivity as a fist-fucker, some of the participants of color highlighted a mix of both positive and negative experiences concerning inclusivity. For these fist-fuckers, their racialized subjectivity as a Black or Brown person often meant having their race or ethnicity centered in anticipation of racism or racial discrimination when negotiating their way into different communities of fisters and play spaces:

I was expecting [Club X]<sup>3</sup> to be a bit exclusionary the first time I went. I really did think it was going to be full of old white dudes who were going to give me *net blankes*<sup>4</sup> vibes. [...]. [But] I felt so welcome. It was such a surprise because most gay bars are still very

racially exclusionary, but the fetish clubs are actually quite mixed and inclusive. (Tim, 26, Black, Bottom)

There are people who won't play with me because I'm black and there're guys who want to play because I'm black. I'm navigating race constantly. I'm either getting discriminated against or getting fetishized. (Gwede, 35, Black, Top)

## Discussion

Narratives of sexual subjectivity call to attention the ways in which sexuality is not biologically or psychologically innate or passively imprinted through forms of socialization, but actively hewn and negotiated through the work of subjective sense-making (Riessman, 2007). The findings of the present study reveal that gay men who fist-fuck draw from interpretations of sexual and erotic desire, pleasure, and practice within the kink community broadly and the fisting subculture more specifically, in narratively constructing a sexual sense of self that affirms and validates their sexual and erotic lives, relationships, and community.

With the kinkster and explorer narratives the fist-fuckers participating in this study made concerted efforts to disarticulate their understanding of fist-fucking from hetero- and homonormative conceptualizations of gay anal sex. Not only is the assumed normative status of gay anal sex questioned within the kinkster narrative, but fist-play is itself dislocated from what these participants contend are the conventional reference points of sexual intercourse between gay men, namely, a decentering of the penis as the principal site of/for pleasure-making, a deemphasising of (genital) orgasm as the desired outcome of erotic activity, and a decoupling of the top and bottom identities from the expectations and performances typically associated with these sexual roles in penile-anal penetrative sex. The kinkster and explorer narratives that articulate kink *as* play (and rhetorically distance it from sex) are not unique to fist-fuckers. Where sexual play is employed amongst kinksters as a framework for erotic meaning- and pleasure-making, normative blueprints are overtaken by a new subcultural frame of reference for their sexual desires and practices (Paasonen, 2018). In findings presented here, these narratives not only foreground fist-fucking as non-normative erotic play but deliberately engage “strategies of enfreakment” (Richardson & Locks, 2014) through references to fisting as “weird” and “freaky.” This narrative enfreaking of fist-play leans into the trope of non-normative differentness, positively queering the pejorative construction of freakishness and allowing fist-fuckers to invest an affirmative erotic value into what it means to be cast as “the sexual other” (Khan, 2014, p. 20).

In the kinkster and explorer narratives it is particularly evident that the disarticulation of fist-play from the penis gives rise to a “different economy of bodies and pleasures”

<sup>3</sup>“Club X” (a pseudonym), based in Gauteng Province, is one of only a few gay bar/club spaces in South Africa that accommodate nudity, cruising, as well as public sex that are kink friendly.

<sup>4</sup>The phrase “net blankes” is an Afrikaans phrase which translates roughly as “Whites only,” in English. This phrase was typical of Apartheid-era racial segregation in South Africa and would be found on signs designating public buildings, amenities, transport systems, and other recreational spaces for the sole use of White South Africans.

(Simula, 2019, p. 209) and provides a less phallogocentric framework for making sense of desire, practice, and pleasure. Here, fist-fucking does not appear to be a “narrow” project simply seeking to achieve (genital) orgasmic release, but a more holistic, fulfilling, and multidimensional project of exploring erotic intensities that enable fist-fuckers to tap into otherwise inaccessible physical, psychological, and spiritual horizons. There is a distinct sense in the explorer narrative that this elevates the status of fist-play over the more derisively ordinary, mundane, and vanilla modes of gay sexual intercourse. The fist-fucker is recast here as a kind of sexual pioneer not simply interested in base gratification but psycho-spiritual growth. This narrative frames the pleasure of fist-fucking as largely derived from the sensations of the exploratory play journey and not (genital) climax (Halperin, 1995). In this sense, the explorer narrative positions fist-fucking as a positive project of personal and partnered exploration that appears to only become possible through a liberatory displacement of genital orgasm. While it is emphasized that a new sense of erotic freedom to explore is borne from destabilizing the penis as a sexual lodestar, the exploring of new erotic territories is not hedonistically unfettered. For fist-fuckers, erotic limits may be pushed but they are not crossed. Play still occurs within subculturally-informed but interpersonally negotiated ground rules that are established and agreed prior to play (Weiss, 2011). The explorer narrative therefore brings into acute relief how fist-fuckers regard themselves as engaging in a form of edgeplay that, while bearing possible risks, nonetheless remains firmly rooted in the acceptable conventions of a collaborative kink relationship that prioritizes consent and mutual respect for the agreed terms of play (Hammack et al., 2019).

The understanding that fist-play takes a fist-fucker to the edge of their erotic boundaries but does not exceed them is strategically important for the way it narratively reproduces the fist-fucker as a responsible and disciplined sexual subject. This is further evidenced in the narratives of athlete and expert which stress the shaping of sexual subjectivity through different disciplinary regimes of knowledge and skill acquisition. In the athlete and expert narratives the personal and subcultural status of being a fist-fucker is interpreted as one which is earned through the disciplinary readying of one’s body and mind to play as well as gaining the expertise to play enjoyably and safely. These narratives allude to the ways in which fist-fuckers submit their bodies to elaborate processes of corporeal discipline that render their bodies and parts thereof subculturally intelligible (Foucault 1978a, 1978b). However, the narratives of athletic discipline, perseverance, and accomplishment as well as studious expertise also give rise to meanings of exclusivity, conferring on the fist-fucker’s subjectivity a superior erotic status and capability that is only achieved by an elite few. Similar to Shogan’s (1999) analysis of high-performance athletes, where meaning is found in the commitment and sacrifice shown during the extensive training to compete, fist-fuckers also derive value and meaning from the endurance, perseverance, and dedication needed to prepare to play.

Interestingly, the narratives of expertise and athleticism also appear deliberately used to cast fist-fuckers as knowledgeable

and informed sexual subjects. Barcelos (2019) asserted that narratives are “always constructed and strategic” (p. 1403) and, in this instance, narratives of expertise may be strategically deployed to guard against views that fisting is a dangerous sexual activity pursued with little cognizance of the possible risks. The narrative that fist-fuckers rely on technical knowledge and skills to navigate their activities is also echoed in the stories shared in Ortmann and Sprott’s (2013) examination of BDSM practitioners. It is the highly technical nature of many kinks that have led some scholars to conceptualize kink as a form of “serious leisure” (Newmahr, 2010), that is to say, a culture and practice that should not be reduced to just “kinky sex” but one that is defined by a committed lifestyle to mastering kink-specific knowledge and skills in order to participate in particular roles and achieve the desired pleasures.

In some ways sitting alongside the narratives of expert and athlete is the narrative of the fist-fucker as a lover. The lover narrative underlines the centrality of intimacy, connection and care as guiding motive forces in fist-fucking. Together, the athlete, expert, and lover narratives offer a subcultural counterweight to pejorative misrepresentations circulating in mainstream public discourse that kinks are solely an exercise in sadistic or masochistic pain-seeking – a view also highlighted in van der Beek and Thomas’s (2023) study of Dutch poly-kink-identified peoples’ impressions of mainstream media representations of their community. Rather, fist-fuckers desire and seek pleasure while actively avoiding pain, considering it a sign of the need to immediately halt play (Shockey, 2009). The lover narrative encodes the partnered connection between playmates as one which is not organized around a consensual exchange of power, like that seen in BDSM relationships (Parchev, 2023), but a mutual exchange in (physical and psychological) vulnerability through the intimacy of the connection (Martin, 2020, 2022, 2023a, 2023b). The lover narrative points to the positive emotional experiences of connection as well as of self- and partner-care that are derived from this intimate exchange. This offers support to Hughes and Hammack’s (2019) finding that “kink identities generate *positive emotionality*” (p. 158, italics original) in their study of identity sentiment in an international sample of 265 kink-identified individuals. For fist-fuckers to narratively construct their fist-play as an emotionally enhancing practice of care points to an interpretation of their erotic practices as a kind of “wild self-care” (Clay, 2022) which unsettles and revises the connotations of riskiness attached to fisting into those of meaningful personal self-care.

The narrative of fist-fuckers as community members highlights how fist-fuckers in the present study rooted their sense of sexual subjectivity within networks of membership to the broader kink community as well as the fisting community. The meaningfulness of community membership mirrors the contention of Hammack et al. (2019) that community “provides resources, support, and a system of cultural meaning” (p. 578) for kinksters. In much the same way, fist-fuckers regard the communities in which they play as an important source of education. The community member narrative situates and connects the repertoire of practices which constitute anal fisting to a unique history and culture that (at least some) fist-fuckers understand to underwrite the erotic logic of fisting.

Meaning is embedded in the collective subcultural history of the kink and it becomes the role of fisting communities to perform an educational function in the socialization and acculturation of a fister into the values, etiquette, and practices of the community. In addition to this, the community's educational role is practical, helping fist-fuckers establish the technical knowledge and skills of how to fist (or be fisted), especially for neophyte fisters. At the same time, fist-fuckers view their communities as affirmatively shaping their sexual sense of self. The community functions socially and protectively to provide a collective and alternative narrative of positive regard for a fister's kinked desires and play practices, buffering experiences of personal shame or social stigma.

Although the community member narrative works to engender a sense of affiliative meaningfulness for fist-fuckers, it is not necessarily interpreted and experienced in the same way for all fisters. For some of the fisters of color participating in this study, negotiating community access and membership was also a process of negotiating their racialized subjectivity and what this would mean for opportunities to connect and play with other fisters. In a survey study of 398 US-based BDSM practitioners' experiences of racial and ethnic discrimination, fetishization, and inclusivity, Erickson et al. (2022) found that people of color were 16 times more likely to feel discriminated against at BDSM events and 17 times more likely to feel fetishized compared to non-people of color. Thus, while communities of kink may consider inclusion a "foundational principle," it is more often than not only achieved with "mixed success" (Erikson, 2022, p. 1064). Given that this study was based in South Africa, it is important to acknowledge how the long history of colonialism and apartheid still informs much of that racialized inequality that defines and organizes South African life, spaces, and identities, with the construction, expression, and experience of sexuality not immune from this (Ratele, 2009). It is perhaps unsurprising then that the Black and Brown fist-fuckers in this study would need to navigate their racialized subjectivity in spaces and relationships of play. Studies with kinksters of color have drawn attention to the overt and covert forms of racism they face, including fetishization and exoticisation (Cruz 2016, 2021; Erickson et al., 2022; Liang, 2022; Williams & Sprott, 2022). Although within the community member narrative there were instances of (unanticipated) social inclusion as well as exclusion, a common theme was that fist-fuckers of color experience their racial(ised) identity as indivisible from their sexual subjectivity – something which stood in contrast to the White participants of this study who did not reference their race in relation to what it meant for them to be a fist-fucker. What this narrative suggests is that constructions of race and in particular Black and Brown subjectivity and embodiment remain powerful rhetorical as well as material and affective forces in shaping how fist-fuckers understand and experience membership, with White fist-fuckers enjoying a taken-for-granted status of membership to the spaces and people that make up the fisting community.

In exploring how gay fist-fuckers narratively construct and understand a sense of sexual subjectivity that affirms their erotic desires, pleasures, and practices, this study breaks from deficit-focused models which have historically informed studies of alternative sexualities (Cornell et al., 2023). The deficit-

focused paradigm of sexuality has had a longstanding impact on communities, practitioners, and participants of kink by theorizing their fantasies, desires, and behaviors as emerging from biological or psychological disease, parental dysfunction, or moral disorder. An effect of this has been that those sexual and erotic experiences, subjectivities, and practices falling outside (hetero)normative conceptions of sex have come to be regarded as deviant, ill, risky, or even criminal and, therefore, requiring curative treatment or carceral correction (Kleinplatz & Diamond, 2014). In contrast to this, critical (Fahs & McClelland, 2016), positive (Williams et al., 2013), and queer (Bauer, 2014) approaches to sexuality have challenged the dominant assumptions which confine definitions of healthy and meaningful sex and pleasure to "sex as intercourse, sex within the context of heterosexual marriage, sex as necessarily penetrative . . . , and sex as producing [genital] orgasm" (Fahs & McClelland, 2016, p. 394). These approaches have helped foreground a kink-positive paradigm that recognizes sexual and erotic diversity and appreciates the positive and protective roles that kink participation can have for the mental health and well-being of kink-identified people (Mosher, 2017). The narratives presented in this study endeavor to extend the work of kink-positive scholarship by drawing specific attention to a community of kinksters who have long been considered to have "pathological attitudes" to sex and pleasure (Denman, 2003, p. 194). Fist-fuckers, like other kinksters, understand their sexual and erotic lives as fulfilling and meaningful, recognizing this is not just a matter of sex-positive sentiment, but sexual justice (Hearn et al., 2018).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This qualitative exploration into the meanings that South African gay fist-fuckers narratively engage in understanding and interpreting their sexual subjectivity draws attention to the construction and experience of alternative and kinkier sexualities in the Global South. Extant literature on kink remains dominated by scholarship from the Global North and West, with comparatively little known about kink and kinksters in the Global South (Weinberg, 2023). This continues to be an important focus for future work as it draws attention to the ways in which Southern sexualities and sexual subjectivities take shape and find expression in consonance with or divergence from trajectories of kink in the North and West. Furthermore, work within the Global South that specifically highlights Black and Brown practitioners and participants of kink gives needed insight into how racialized forms of subjectivity and embodiment are navigated in kink communities and through kink practices. This is important given the lingering legacies of colonial violence, White supremacy, and racism that continue to frame Black and Brown bodies, sexualities, and pleasures (Tamale, 2011).

However, it is worth noting that the chain sampling strategy employed for this study largely delimited the recruited fist-fuckers to those who already formed part of regularized and relatively close contact networks and communities of playmates residing in major metropolitan areas. McCormack et al. (2022) have cautioned that studies which principally use participants who are already embedded in kink

communities gives rise to a “bias in research toward understanding kink practice as it occurs within communities” (p. 1761). A consequence of this is that there is less of an understanding about how the “non-community participant” (Wignall, 2022, p. 199) i.e., those who participate in kink but are not immersed in a subcultural community, construct and practice their kink experience. In terms of meaning making, Wignall (2022) has found that non-community participants in kink tend to place greater emphasis on the sexual dimensions of their kink practice than the subcultural, social, and affiliative dimensions. The findings of this study may therefore not be generalizable to those who are not as rooted in a community of playmates.

Lastly, the narratives found and explored here should not necessarily be considered an exhaustive account of all possible stories that fist-fuckers may employ in making meaning of their sexual subjectivity. This may specifically be the case for kinksters who might engage in fist-play but not regard themselves as a fister or for those who may center other subcultural identifiers as being more significant to their sexual subjectivity, such as, with so-called “pigs.” In their recent analysis of pig masculinities, Florêncio (2020) highlighted that self-identified pigs who engage in fist-play, i.e. “fist-pigs,” appear to place emphasis on “sexual excess and a relentless violation . . . of the boundaries of the body proper” (p. 10). While the kinkster, explorer, and even athlete narratives in this study may carry some of the transgressive meanings that fist-pigs engage in understanding their sexual and erotic boundary pushing, the defining excess of pigginess did not emerge as a central narrative of meaning making for fisters in the present study. Given that fist-fuckers do not hold a monopoly on anal fisting, future research may need to consider how fisting comes to carry meanings which are contingent upon the sexual subcultures in which it is practiced.

## Conclusion

This study explored how a sample of 32 South African gay men who fist-fuck narratively construct and understand an affirmative sense of their sexual subjectivity. The results revealed that the participating fist-fuckers resisted hetero- and homonormative discourses that frame their sex/uality in pejorative terms by rhetorically recrafting their erotic desires, practices, and pleasures through six affirming narratives of sexual subjectivity. Through these narratives, fist-fuckers come to understand themselves as kinksters, explorers, athletes, experts, lovers, and community members. The findings of this study highlight that these alternative narratives enable individual fist-fuckers to frame their sexual subjectivity and play as personally meaningful and sexually fulfilling. The findings also point to shared narratives of subcultural values and discourses that positively scaffold personal subjectivity (as a fist-fucker), interpersonal conduct (with other fist-fuckers), and communal membership (to the fisting community). In doing so, fist-fuckers are able to rebuff experiences of shame and stigma by interpreting their desire for, and pleasure derived from, fist-play as erotically legitimate. With that said, the narratives found in this study did not always carry the same affirmative meaning for all fist-fuckers. It was evident that the community membership narrative was open to contestation depending on the specificities of each fist-fucker’s

subjectivity (i.e., race) and their lived experiences in and outside of fisting spaces (i.e., racial discrimination).

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