


Preparing to play: a thematic analysis of bottom training in gay men's fist-play

Jarred H. Martin 

Department of Psychology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Anal fisting amongst gay men has been characterised as a risky form of sexual play, particularly for the bottoming (receptive) playmate. This view may be oversimplistic and fail to recognise how fist-bottoms ready themselves for fist-play through preparatory journeys of bottom training. This study explored how gay men who bottom in fist-play understand bottom training and how this understanding informs their personal sense of pleasure, risk, and safety. Unstructured individual interviews were conducted with 8 gay men who play as fist-bottoms. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted on the data, from which four main themes were developed: (1) training the body to play; (2) training for headspace; (3) training to understand pleasure; and (4) training by rules. Taken together, the findings highlight how fist-bottoms understand their bottom training as both a formative and transformative process that shapes their corporeal, psychological, erotic, and subcultural knowledge and skills to navigate play. Through bottom training, fist-bottoms explore and attune their understanding of what is safe and pleasurable, as well as riskier play.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 June 2024
Accepted 20 September 2024

KEYWORDS

Bottom; bottom training; fisting; gay; kink

Introduction

Anal fisting amongst gay men has been characterised as a risky form of sexual play, particularly for the bottoming (receptive) playmate. As a form of edge-play¹, fisting has been described as 'dangerous and could result in complications that lead to death' (Silverstein and Picano 2004, 95). For this reason, bottoming in fist-play requires an enthusiastic consent that is predicated on knowledge of the risks and an expertise to navigate those risks in ways which maximise safety and pleasure (Brough 2005; Niederwieser 2013; Shockey 2009). Little however is known about the preparatory learning journey that 'fist-fuckers' embark on in readying themselves to bottom. To close this gap, this study explores how gay men who fist-fuck understand the sub-cultural practice of bottom training and how this practice shapes their knowledge, skills, and readiness to play as a fist-bottom.

CONTACT Jarred H. Martin  jarred.martin@up.ac.za

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Anal fisting involves the insertion of the hand, wrist, and parts of the forearm of the topping (insertive) partner through the anus and into the rectum and sigmoid colon of the bottoming (receptive) partner². For the bottoming partner, fisting produces intense sensations of ano-rectal stretching and fullness as well as overwhelming feelings of interpersonal connectedness and, for some, altered states of consciousness (Herrman 1991). Although gay men do not have a monopoly on the practice of anal fisting (Valverde 1980), Norton (2006) contends that:

Surveys of diaries, news reports, and the gay media have established that fisting was invented in the summer of 1971, in the 'backroom' of a gay bar in New York City. The practice quickly spread to the backroom bars of San Francisco and was exported thence to Japan and Europe. (para 15, quotations original).

While public health discourse around the effects of AIDS would reshape the perception and practices of those early fisting communities as unsafe (Barcelos 2023; Rubin 1997), in contemporary gay culture, Rehberg (2023) anecdotally observes that it appears 'virtually impossible to talk about gay sex without talking about fisting' (123).

In research, anal fisting has largely appeared as an item on a menu of more 'extreme' sex acts practised amongst GBMSM (gay, bisexual, and men who have sex with men) during 'riskier' forms of sexual congress such as group sex and sexualised drug use (Knox et al. 2020; Maxwell, Shahmanesh, and Gafos 2019). Fisting has also featured in studies of gay sexual subcultures such as leathermen (Rubin 1991), bears (Moskowitz et al. 2013), and pigs (Florêncio 2020), where it becomes encoded with different meanings in constituting specific sexual identities. Fisting has also received attention in theorisations of how gay and queer bodies and practices disrupt heteronormative codes of vanilla and genital-centred sex in the production of pleasure (Foucault [1984] 1997; Halperin 1995; Thorneycroft 2020). Martin's (2020, 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2024) qualitative studies with fisters probably represent the most sustained focus on this community. Martin (2024) has found that fisters think of themselves as erotic explorers and sexual athletes who, while pushing the boundaries and limits of hetero- and homo-normative sexual practice, understand their kink and play as underpinned by ethics of intimacy, care, and informed pleasure-making.

Fisting does carry some degree of risk, especially where the participants may be inexperienced, intoxicated, or when interpersonal violence may be a factor (Cappelletti et al. 2017; Cohen et al. 2004; Navin 1981). Practised improperly, such as with inadequate lubrication, neglecting nail filing, or attempting to expedite insertion without having sufficiently stretched the anal sphincter, can result in serious sexual injuries to the bottoming partner including tears to ano-rectal tissue or perforation of the colon (de Bakker and Bruin 2012; Shook, Whittle, and Rose 1985; Sohn, Weinstein, and Gonchar 1977). While some research has implicated fisting in fatal and nonfatal injuries (Cappelletti et al. 2016), this work tends to draw from medico-forensic case studies and acknowledges that injury or death from fisting is rare.

In the sexual subculture of gay men who fist-fuck, bottom training (also referred to as hole or anal training) is a process through which a fist-bottom gradually readies themselves and their body to comfortably take (and hold) either their own or a playmate's whole hand (Cheves 2018). Typically, bottom training involves a fist-bottom engaging in regularised sessions of either solo or partnered anal play

over weeks and possibly months. During this play, fingers, hand(s), and sex toys are used to stretch the anal sphincter to the point of being able to comfortably accommodate a full hand. For the neophyte bottom, training is geared towards achieving the milestone of safely taking one's first fist. For the more experienced, training can become a lifelong ritual that enables progress to more advanced forms of fist-play.

Despite the apparent importance of bottom training in preparing a fist-bottom to play, the practice has not been explored extensively in the extant literature on fisters. In one study of BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, and Sadism and Masochism) practitioners who fist, Holmes et al. (2018) found that bottom training was considered a means of 'disciplining the anus' (128) to withstand the rigours of play. This study however explores the multifaceted roles that bottom training is understood to play in forming a fist-bottom's personal sense of risk, safety, and pleasure as they prepare to play.

Materials and methods

Study design

The present study employed an exploratory qualitative design, epistemologically oriented by an interpretivist paradigm that aimed to analyse how fist-bottoms understand their bottom training and how this understanding shapes their personal sense of risk, safety, and pleasure. Ontologically, an interpretivist lens assumes that reality is subjective and socially constructed (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013). People are therefore seen as creating their own understanding of their world through their interpretations of lived experiences and the meanings they construct around these experiences. From this vantage, the researcher (JHM) sought to explore the subjective practices of meaning-making that fist-fuckers employed in understanding their bottom training.

Ethical considerations

Prior to commencing with the recruitment of participants, ethical approval for the study was received from the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee at the University of Pretoria (reference: HUM041/1023).

Participants

To recruit participants for this study, a convenience based purposive sampling strategy was used. This involved identifying potential participants through a network of already established contacts developed from previous research projects involving fisters (Martin 2020, 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2024). The researcher reached out to these contacts and requested their assistance in gauging the interest of fisters within the social and sexual networks in which they themselves play. These contacts were asked to approach potential participants who they knew identified/played as an exclusive fist-bottom or, if they were a switch/versatile, had a preference for bottoming in scenes of fist-play.

Fist-fuckers who had never bottomed or who were exclusive tops were excluded from recruitment.

In total, eight self-identified gay men between the ages of 28 and 52 agreed to be interviewed (see Table 1; mean = 35.13 years of age). Seven of the participants identified as exclusive bottoms, while one was switch/versatile with a preference for bottoming during fisting. Three of the participants identified as Black (ethnically African) and five as White (Caucasian). All the participants were South African nationals and lived in either Cape Town or Johannesburg, with the majority (six) being single. There was some variation in the sample concerning the total number of years each participant had been fisting (range: 1–25 years; mean = 7.25 years of experience).

Data collection

For the purpose of the present study, the researcher employed unstructured individual interviews. Rather than being rhetorically ‘hemmed in by the fixed scope, order, and wording of items’ (Soss 2006, 142) that is typical of more structured interview schedules, unstructured interviews offer the opportunity for a conversational space that is flexible for the interviewer and interviewee and, more especially, provides the interviewee the discursive room to determine the direction of the dialogue and how much they choose to share. This kind of consideration is important where potentially sensitive topics such as the intimate details of an interviewee’s sexual and erotic life form the focus of the interview.

All the interviews were held online, audio-recorded, and conducted by the researcher. On average, the interviews tended to run between 60 and 90 min in length. Following an unstructured format, the substantive component of each interview was initiated with a framing question:

For this research study, I am interested in exploring how fist-bottoms understand their bottom training and what it means for them. If you don’t mind, could we start off by you telling me how you understand bottom training?

Following the recommendation of Zhang and Wildemuth (2009), and to keep the interview within the framing topic of bottom training, the researcher prepared an *aide memoire* (agenda) which included the following items: reason(s) for training,

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Pseudonym	Age	Race	City of Residence	Relationship Status	Preferred Role	Years Fisting
Asive	32	Black	Johannesburg	Single	Bottom	1
Ash	28	White	Cape Town	Consensually Non-monogamous Relationship	Bottom	8
Carl	40	White	Cape Town	Monogamous Partnership	Bottom	10
Kyle	35	White	Cape Town	Single	Bottom	5
Paul	33	White	Johannesburg	Single	Bottom	4
Rex	52	White	Johannesburg	Single	Switch-Bottom	25
Sizwe	31	Black	Johannesburg	Single	Bottom	2
Xolani	30	Black	Johannesburg	Single	Bottom	3

personal history of training, training techniques, challenges in training, and lessons learned from training.

Data analysis

The audio-recording from each interview was transcribed verbatim. Thereafter the researcher de-identified the transcript, removing participant names and other references that could clearly identify participants. The de-identified transcripts were then imported into the NVivo™ 12 software package for coding.

The researcher conducted a thematic analysis using an inductive approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). Initially, the researcher re-read the interview transcripts alongside the audio recordings. Using a line-by-line approach, different features of each transcript were labelled and then, working across all the labelled transcripts, common features were identified. Hereafter an initial set of codes was generated by extracting data excerpts. To render the codes into a set of themes the researcher iteratively grouped together codes to determine if codes could be consolidated on the basis of a shared understanding of bottom training.

From the analysis, four overarching themes were generated: (1) training the body to play; (2) training for headspace; (3) training to understand pleasure; and (4) training by rules. Each theme formed a distinct dimension of training, namely: (1) the body; (2) psychological and emotional considerations; (3) sensual and erotic experience; and (4) the subcultural norms and values of bottom training.

Findings

Training the body to play

The first theme developed across all the interviews was how bottom training was understood to prepare the body to play. All participants described fist-play as a physically demanding kink that ultimately needed a bottom's body to perform in ways that were not typical of the receptive position in anal intercourse. It was therefore suggested that the body had to be trained for the physical requirements of bottoming. All the participants made mention of two bodily sites that were a focus of their training: the anus and rectum. These were constructed as focal sites targeted through training to enable receptive fist-play:

... Your hole is a muscle. Like any muscle, you can train it to do something more. Just because it doesn't stretch like that every day doesn't mean it can't. (Ash, 28).

The rectum is biologically designed to stretch so it can store your poop before you take a dump. You can fit a hand in there pretty easily. (Asive, 32).

What is notable about these extracts of data is the description of these bodily sites as having inherent organic affordances capable of receptive fisting. For Ash, the anus was a muscle capable of being stretched and, for Asive, the rectum was an organ 'biologically designed to stretch'. Like most of the participants, Ash and Asive discursively invested an innate and perhaps unrealised potential for fist-play in the physiology of the anus and rectum. The assertion that the anus and rectum can be

trained, in Ash's words, 'to do something more', and that the anus and rectum possessed untapped anatomical potentials for fist-play was a belief expressed by most of the participants.

All the participating fist-fuckers also stressed the need to understand training as a full body exercise. Thus, while asserting the centrality of the anus and rectum to receptive fist-play, these corporeal sites could not be understood apart from the bodily systems and processes they were interlinked with. The training was constructed as a practice of preparing the entire body to participate in receptive play:

It's not just about your hole. You're getting your whole body ready to play. Training teaches you about how you need to diet before you play and how to clean out. You have to understand how your metabolism works, what your bowel movements are like, and how you need to eat before you play. All that helps you practise your cleanout because no one wants to play with a messy bottom. (Paul, 33).

In this account, Paul drew attention to the preparatory rituals of dieting and douching that fist-bottoms pursued prior to play. In a sentiment shared with other participants, Paul invoked the identifier of the 'messy bottom' as a pejorative status and product of inadequate training, seeing training as process of learning to master bottom specific expectations of cleanliness and the rituals of colorectal douching that signal their subcultural readiness to play.

Training for headspace

The second theme developed through data analysis was an understanding of bottom training as a process of psychological and emotional preparation. Recognising that bottoming in fist-play entailed physical and emotional vulnerability, training was often framed as a practice of acclimating to this reality:

A scene is a big leap of faith. ... [M]y training was more about feeling safe enough to give myself over to someone. [...]. You're lying there with a hand in you. That kind of vulnerability is scary. It's not easy to process on an emotional level. (Kyle, 35).

Kyle's assertion here highlights the dynamic of interpersonal intimacy in fist-fucking and the ways in which a bottoming playmate gives their entire self, in body and mind, over to their topping partner. Part of this is an understanding that bottoming involves ceding control to the topping playmate and reconciling with the anxiety and trepidation that this invokes, especially for some newbie fisters. Thus, for most of the participants, training was a way of gradually accepting the emotional and physical vulnerability associated with being in the receptive position.

Participants in this study also understood the emotional groundwork of training to be important by virtue of the close connection between a bottom's mental and physical readiness to play:

Are you going to be a good bottom? Are you going to get hurt? Are you going to be clean? All that runs through your mind. You can just become a stress ball and that turns your body off. There's a mind-body connection. Training yourself to get into the right headspace is training that connection. If you're feeling relaxed and your mind is calm, then your body is too. (Sizwe, 31).

The interconnection between mind and body in fist-fucking is well-documented in the communal literature of fisters (Brough 2005; Herrman 1991; Niederwieser 2013). For fisting aficionado Larry Shockey (2009, 9), fist-bottoms must ‘turn off the tapes’, that is, overcome the anxieties impeding their headspace. In communities of kink, headspace refers to heightened or altered states of consciousness that a kinkster may shift into during their play (Vivid, Lev, and Sprott 2020). For Sizwe, achieving the ‘right headspace’ for bottoming was aided by training to enter a headspace of complete relaxation and openness to their playmate.

Training to understand pleasure

The third theme to develop in the interviews was the role training played in enabling fist-bottoms to understand their bodies, the diverse array of sensations entailed in bottoming, and what they personally found to be sensually satisfying. For fist-bottoms, training formed an important process of learning to differentiate the sensations they might experience when being fisted and, in particular, what could be encoded as pleasurable:

Starting off, you have to get to know your body better. You have to train yourself to recognise every sensation. What’s a good feeling, what’s a bad one. What do you like, what don’t you like. What sensations are hard limits and what are your soft limits you can push a little further. (Xolani, 30).

When you’re getting [fist-]fucked there’s a very thin lines between like mind-numbing out-of-this-world pleasure, dull awkwardness, and a sharp pain. It can all be on the turn of a wrist. The only way you learn what those lines feel like for you is in training. (Paul, 33).

In the accounts offered by Sizwe and Paul, bottom training was understood as a process of exploring what is pleasurable and what is not. Much like for other participants, training was a technique for developing an embodied capacity to identify personal markers for how play should feel and how to avoid risks of injury. For Sizwe and Paul, the hard and soft limits of play are sensually constituted and the lines between safe and unsafe play have distinct feelings to them. For most of the participants, training developed a knowledge/feeling of these lines and limits, serving a protective function that mitigated risk.

For the participants in this study, bottom training was understood to be a formative method for neophyte fisters to establish their own sense of their pleasure. For more experienced fist-bottoms, training was understood to facilitate the accessing of new pleasures:

My training is more on depth [play] now. It comes with risks. The deeper you go, the more intense the fullness is. But when you go into the colon you can’t always feel what’s going on. [...]. I’m using tentacles much more now to get used what it feels like to go past my sigmoid [colon]. (Kyle, 35).

Kyle’s account demonstrates how his own training had evolved to (re)shape his desires. Much like Kyle’s move to depth³ play, this was also the case for participants who had experimented with more advanced forms of bottoming such as punching⁴ and taking doubles⁵. Yet, as Kyle pointed out, this necessitated modes of training

that equipped him with the skills to navigate this new horizon of pleasure and risk. Kyle's desire for depth play coupled together the prospect of more intense feelings of fullness with the risk of not being able to fully feel deeper play. Given the decrease in pain receptors as one heads deeper into the colon (Forgan-Smith and Leather 2023), the risk of not detecting a wayward hand is serious. For this reason, training helped to hone Kyle and other fist-fuckers embodied sense-and pleasure-making as their bottoming evolved.

Training by rules

The fourth theme developed in this study was an understanding of bottom training as a methodical process guided by communal lore. It was apparent that many fisters considered their training to be founded in values of care and respect (for the body) that were a central part of what it meant to be a fister:

I think people outside the community need to understand that we respect our bodies. None of us want to get hurt. We understand that to experience this really amazing pleasure we have to be careful. That's why we train before we play. We understand this is not something you can free style. (Carl, 40).

... [F]isters have been around for a long time now. We're not dying on mass. We've perfected a way to do this. [...]. There's a collective wisdom that sets the rules so you don't get hurt. The people who get hurt are the people who don't follow the rules and think there's short cuts. (Rex, 52).

Much like Carl's account, many of the fister-fuckers in this study emphasised that bottom training was a marker of the care that the community placed on a bottom's safety and pleasure. Most of the participants, as it was for Rex, regarded the subculture of fist-fucking to hold a 'collective wisdom' of expertise curated over years and had come to form 'the rules' of training. For Carl and Rex, as it was for other participants, bottoming only became unsafe when a fist-bottom did not adhere to the lore and protocols for training.

In accessing this subcultural knowledge to guide one's training, all the participants placed emphasis on utilising trusted sources of information. While the websites of well-known and reputable fisting porn performers were mentioned as useful sources of information, most highlighted the value of contact interactions with other fisters as integral to the training process, particularly for neophyte fisters. Older and more experienced fisters were identified as the safest and most valuable sources of communal and experiential knowledge, and were often seen as best placed to transgenerationally transmit this knowledge through (contact or online) advice, coaching, and mentorship:

The older guys make the best mentors. They're nice to train with. They've got all this knowledge from their own experience. (Xolani, 30).

For all participants, there was a broadly accepted principle that training was a gradual process defined by a slow and incremental approach:

It takes planning. You have to set hole goals that work for you. You start small with just a couple of fingers, playing around, and seeing how many you can ease in. That may not

be the most satisfying but as you feel comfortable, you push yourself a little more and gradually size up. Maybe you then start with some toys that have a wider and wider circumference. The point is, you're going slow and steady, it's precise and methodical. That's what makes it safe. (Rex, 52).

Rex's account here provides a summative outline of bottom training that was shared by all participants. A graded approach of steadily employing one's own fingers and hand as well as toys of larger sizes to stretch the anus and rectum was the most common training technique. Setting incremental 'hole goals' and the considered identification of different toys, butt plugs, dildos, and other objects to achieve those goals within a specific session of play was employed by most participants. While this approach was understood to provide a fist-bottom the necessary time to safely adjust to the increasing size of the toys, it also underscored the view of most participants that fist-bottoms tailor the pace of their own training within the generally accepted rules of training.

Most participants stressed that training was often iterative, characterised by progress and setbacks in not always meeting desired hole goals at the envisioned pace. Participants often expressed frustration born from their desire to play and, more often than not, a carnal 'hunger' they had to take a fist. This erotically impelling force of desire was however understood to also be potentially problematic, especially where the desire to take one's first fist or progress to more advanced play was not accompanied by the requisite expertise and skill. It is in this way that training featured as a disciplinary force that channelled and counterweighted a fist-bottom's desire:

My eyes have always been greedier than my hole. That can be a problem. I learnt that the first time I went online and bought my first [butt] plug. It was 15cm at its thickest point. It was way, way too big. [...]. ... [T]he fantasy was bigger than my hole. ... [Training] was a good way of humbling my hole. (Asive, 32).

The whole point of training is that it teaches you restraint, because you have to know when to stop. It teaches you discipline because you've got limits that you need to communicate to your top. You might be hungry but you can't let that run away with you. (Carl, 40).

In these accounts, training was understood to mould a fist-bottom's desire into something safer to manage. In Carl's account, fisters appear to understand training as a disciplined learning process that capacitated them with the skills to safely negotiate play. Apparent in these two accounts, and across all the interviews, training bridged the gap between fantasy and reality by establishing a fist-bottom's knowledge of limits which must be communicated to their topping partner.

Discussion

The findings from this study offer insight into how gay men who bottom in fist-play understand their bottom training. These forms of understanding not only shape how fist-bottoms ascribe meaning to their training but also how their training is considered to shape their sense of pleasure, risk, and safety as they prepare to enter scenes of fist-play. What the findings highlight is that bottom training does not solely focus on preparing the anus to participate in fist-play, as earlier work has suggested (Holmes

et al. 2018). Rather, bottom training comes to form and transform a fist-bottom's body in its entirety to partake in fist-play, in conjunction with their psycho-emotional headspace, their sensual and erotic experience, and the subcultural values that define what it means to be a fist-bottom. In this way, training formatively crafts a fist-bottom's understanding of the corporeal, psychological, sensual, and subcultural dimensions of fist-play as well as how these multifaceted dimensions co-constitute what it means to be ready to bottom.

The findings highlight how fist-fuckers employ an alternative 'pleasure-knowledge' (Preciado 2018, 21) of the body and, in particular, the anus and rectum. Accumulated in and transmitted through trusted subcultural resources, such as websites hosted by well-known fisters and interactions with more experienced fisters, this pleasure-knowledge is predicated on a subcultural understanding of the anus and rectum. This understanding constructs the anus and rectum as possessing a material malleability and queerer plasticity that permits erotic possibilities situated outside of (hetero)normative and genitocentric understandings of the (sexual) body. The genitals are displaced as the principal sites for pleasure-and lovemaking. In doing so, bottom training becomes framed as an enabling practice that works towards re-forming the corpo-erotic architecture of the anus and rectum by tapping into and extending 'natural' capacities for fist-play that are believed to be organically embedded in the biology of these bodily sites. What this understanding establishes for fist-bottoms is a new 'biocode' (Preciado 2018, 30) for the anus and rectum that transmogrifies them from orifices of excretion and faecal expulsion to organs of reception and erotic ingestion. This biocode not only re-writes the corpo-realities of the anus and rectum with a queerer capaciousness than they are normatively ascribed but, moreover, underwrites a shared understanding of the protocols which organise training as a careful, considered, and incremental process.

Although the anus and rectum are understood as proximal sites for receptive play, bottom training also shapes how fist-bottoms understand the embodied interrelations and interdependencies that characterise their readiness to play. Through training, fist-bottoms come to understand themselves as an 'orchestrated whole' (Merrell 2003, 16), constituted by a connection between their body and mind or, 'bodymind' (Merrell 2003). In the theme of training for headspace, bottom training was constructed as much a psychological process as it is a corporeal one. Furthermore, it was understood as a process through which the mind-body connection is formed and strengthened. The barriers to this connection must also be worked through and overcome in order to establish the appropriate headspace for bottoming. These include emotional risks and anxieties that a bottom must reckon with in training. Like in other communities of kink, the intense vulnerability experienced in the bottoming or submissive role is understood to potentially open a bottom to emotional harm (Hébert and Weaver 2015). Training appears to act as a protective and fortifying practice that acclimates a bottom for the emotional intensities and psychological demands of play.

The training was also understood to shape how fist-bottoms understand the interconnections within their body and how the entirety of their body participates in play. Bottom training acts as a disciplinary practice (Holmes et al. 2018) through which the whole body, including physiological processes of digestion and excretion,

become the object of training and (self-)surveillance. In a Foucauldian sense (Foucauld [1979] 2002), bottom training appears to form a subculturally circumscribed *dispositif*, or disciplinary apparatus. As a disciplinary regime, training produces a bottoming body and subjectivity which is subculturally coded as 'clean' through regulatory rituals of dieting and douching. In much the same way that pre-coital rectal douching is considered important in producing a more desirable receptive partner amongst men who prefer receptive anal intercourse (Schilder et al. 2010), the findings from this study highlight how 'cleanliness' operates as a powerful sub-cultural norm that confers readiness, expertise, and suffuses what it means to be a 'good' and desirable fist-bottom. In this sense, bottom training works towards regulating the fist-bottom's body into a (docile) body that is compliant with sub-cultural expectations.

The disciplinary quality of bottom training also features in the way that a fist-bottom is shaped as a disciplined subject through their training. This is apparent in the ethos of dedication and perseverance to training and the structured programme of training characterised by 'hole goals', regularised sessions of anal play, as well as established toys and techniques. This bears similarities with Martin's (2024) finding that some fist-fuckers understand themselves as sexual athletes whose training forms part of a narrative which constructs them as elite sexual beings. In the theme of training by rules, tropes of discipline and restraint also appear as important values for what it means to define oneself as a fist-bottom. For the fist-fuckers in this study, training was believed to temper the erotic force of a bottom's desire and the hunger of their 'desiring anus' (Dowsett 2000, 34). By ingraining an awareness of their limits, training transforms a fist-bottom's body, their corpo-erotic desire, and their sexual subjectification as a fist-bottom through a rhetoric of discipline. In discursively positioning the fist-bottom as a disciplined subject who is aware of and able to clearly communicate their limits to the topping playmate, the trained fist-bottom emerges as a responsible, knowledgeable, and safe sexual subject.

In this study, bottom training also appeared to enable fist-bottoms to attune their embodied capacity for 'visceral perception' (Leder 2005, 335). According to Leder (2005), the sensory world within the viscera of our bodies is one which is usually diffuse and vague because it lacks the perceptual acuity which characterises our sense perceptions of the external world. For fist-bottoms, the knowledge and skill of understanding what they feel when they are being fisted and whether these feelings sensually signal safe or unsafe play, guides them in determining the pace and progression of play. Fist-play is unlike other forms of kink that create sensory stimulations that are registered on or just beneath the surface of the skin such as electrical shocks or clamping sensitive parts of the body. The erotic work of fist-play principally takes place inside the receptive playmate's body. Training therefore enables a fist-bottom to develop a more finely honed sense of the intense fullness, stretching, and snaking pressures they feel. From this understanding, training is constructed as a practice of embodied learning through which a fist-bottom's visceral knowledge and skill is formed and developed. This visceral knowledge is understood to aid fist-bottoms in navigating the sensory and sensual reference points of the play taking place inside them and, in turn, what these sensations mean for their safety and pleasure during play.

Conclusion and limitations

This study explored how eight gay men who play as fist-bottoms understand their bottom training and how the meanings they ascribe to this training inform their sense of pleasure, risk, and safety. The findings revealed that bottom training was understood as multifaceted process entailing corporeal, psychological, sensual, and subcultural dimensions that collectively prioritise a bottom's wellbeing and, in turn, shape their personal readiness and subcultural identity as a fist-bottom. Together, the findings suggest that bottom training forms (part of) a developmental pathway that equips new and experienced fist-bottoms with the skills to understand and navigate their desires and establish limits for safe play. Bottom training is therefore akin to the experiential learning that Sprott, Meeker, and O'Brien (2019) have found are crucial to the education and development of kinksters in their kink. Such findings are important because they highlight how communities of kink that practise forms of edge-play, such as fist-fuckers, foster unique and perhaps queerer practices of learning and acculturation that serve a protective function which work to mitigate both role and kink specific risks.

The findings of this study need to be considered in light of the delimited focus on the practice of bottom training. By focusing on bottom training, this study did not explore the other values, meanings, or practices that holistically shape one into a fist-bottom. Studies with gay men who prefer to bottom in anal sex have highlighted that there is a complex range of personal meaning-making that informs the desire to bottom including considerations around power, pleasure, and masculinity (Hoppe 2011; Ravenhill and de Visser 2018). The same can be said for studies with kinksters who bottom or play as a submissive (Moser and Kleinplatz 2007; Newmahr 2010). Thus, while bottom training may be understood by fist-fuckers as a necessary condition for playing safely and enjoyably as a fist-bottom, it is not entirely sufficient in explaining both why and how someone becomes a fist-bottom.

Notes

1. Edge-play refers to forms of kink which involve a higher degree of risk. It includes activities where there is either extreme sensory deprivation and/or stimulation/sensation, or potential for physical or emotional harm. Examples include breath control, wax play, or bloodletting, amongst others.
2. Sexual self-labels like top, bottom, and versatile function as important identifiers and descriptors of gay men's (anal) sexual preferences (Ravenhill and de Visser 2018). In some sexual subcultures, these labels also serve as tools for expressing preferences, negotiating roles, and establishing role-specific forms of erotic practice and etiquette (Newmahr 2010). However, practices like anal fisting challenge the rigidity of these labels, emphasising versatility, mutual exchange, and dynamic power relations (Barcelos 2023). See Martin (2023b) for a fuller discussion on the subversion of these terms in fisting.
3. Depth play entails the insertion of the top's hand (and parts of their arm) beyond the bottom's sigmoid colon.
4. Punching involves rapid and successive insertions of the top's hand into the bottom's rectum while it is balled into a fist.
5. Taking doubles refers to the insertion of two hands through the bottom's anus, either by the same or different topping partners, simultaneously or non-simultaneously.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was made possible by funding from the University of Pretoria's Research Development Programme for early-career academics.

ORCID

Jarred H. Martin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7406-147X>

References

- Barcelos, C. A. 2023. "Adventures in Fisting." *Sex Education* 23 (3): 279–286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2022.206144>.
- Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.
- Brough, T. 2005. *First Hand: An Erotic Guide to Fisting*. Las Vegas, NV: Nazca Plains Corporation.
- Cappelletti, S., M. Aromatario, E. Bottoni, P. A. Fiore, V. Fineschi, N. M. di Luca, and C. Ciallella. 2016. "Variability in Findings of Anogenital Injury in Consensual and Non-consensual Fisting Intercourse: A Systematic Review." *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine* 44: 58–62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jflm.2016.08.013>.
- Cappelletti, S., P. A. Fiore, E. Bottoni, and M. Aromatario. 2017. "Fourth-degree Perineal Laceration in Nonconsensual Fisting: A Case Report, Brief Review of the Literature, and Medicolegal Issues." *The American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology* 38 (3): 258–261. <https://doi.org/10.1097/PAF.0000000000000324>.
- Cheves, A. 2018. "25 Tips for Your First Fist." *Advocate*, May 9, 2018. <https://www.advocate.com/sexy-beast/2018/5/09/25-tips-your-first-fist#media-gallery-media-2>
- Cohen, C. E., A. Giles, and M. Nelson. 2004. "Sexual Trauma Associated with Fisting and Recreational Drugs." *Sexually Transmitted Infections* 80 (6): 469–470. <https://doi.org/10.1136/sti.2004.011171>.
- de Bakker, J., and S. Bruin. 2012. "Successful Laparoscopic Repair of a Large Traumatic Sigmoid Perforation." *Journal of Surgical Case Reports* 2012 (2): 3–3. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jscr/2012.2.3>.
- Dowsett, G. W. 2000. "Bodyplay: Corporeality in a Discursive Silence." In *Framing the Sexual Subject: The Politics of Gender, Sexuality and Power*, edited by R. Parker, R. M. Barbosa, and P. Aggleton, 29–45. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Florêncio, J. 2020. *Bareback Porn, Porous Masculinities, Queer Futures: The Ethics of Becoming-Pig*. London: Routledge.
- Forgan-Smith, G., and E. Leather. 2023. "Ask a Doctor: Fisting and Depth Play Safety". Filmed in Australia. Eagle Leather Community Television Network video:20. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHA9GJR5BVE>
- Foucault, M. [1979] 2002. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1. London: Allen Lane.
- Foucault, M. [1984] 1997. "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity: Interview with B. Gallagher and A. Wilson." In *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, edited by P. Rabinow, 163–176. Vol. 1. New York: The New Press.
- Halperin, D. 1995. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Hébert, A., and A. Weaver. 2015. "Perks, Problems, and the People Who Play: A Qualitative Exploration of Dominant and Submissive BDSM Roles." *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 24 (1): 49–62. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.2467>.

- Herrman, B. 1991. *Trust – The Hand Book: A Guide to the Sensual and Spiritual Art of Handballing*. San Francisco, CA: Alamo Square Press.
- Holmes, D., S. J. Murray, N. Knack, M. Mercier, and J. P. Fedoroff. 2018. "Degenitalizing the Sexual." In *Radical Sex Between Men: Assembling Desiring-Machines*, edited by D. Holmes, S. J. Murray, and T. Foth, 117–141. New York: Routledge.
- Hoppe, T. 2011. "Circuits of Power, Circuits of Pleasure: Sexual Scripting in Gay Men's Bottom Narratives." *Sexualities* 14 (2): 193–217. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460711399033>.
- Knox, J., A. Boyd, A. Matser, T. Heijman, T. Sandfort, and U. Davidovich. 2020. "Types of Group Sex and Their Association with Different Sexual Risk Behaviors Among HIV-Negative Men Who Have Sex with Men." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 49 (6): 1995–2003. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-020-01744-5>.
- Leder, D. 2005. "Visceral Perception." In *The Book of Touch*, edited by C. Classen and D. Howes, 335–342. Oxford: Berg.
- Martin, J. H. 2020. "Exploring Gender Subversion and Recuperation in Anal Fisting Among Gay Men." *South African Journal of Psychology* 50 (3): 336–346. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0081246319888975>.
- Martin, J. H. 2022. "A Queer(er) Temporality: A Posthumanist Analysis of the Performative Agencies of Time with/in Gay Men's Anal Fisting." *Sexualities* 25 (4): 406–423. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460720967648>.
- Martin, J. H. 2023a. "Fisting Intimacy: The Sexual Scripting of Intimacy in Gay Men's Anal Fisting." *Psychology & Sexuality* 14 (2): 416–431. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2022.2148119>.
- Martin, J. H. 2023b. "No Cock Needed: Exploring the Hapto-Erotic Assemblage of Fist-Play in Gay Men's Anal Fisting." *Journal of Homosexuality*: 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2023.2275299>.
- Martin, J. H. 2024. "Fisting Subjectivity: Narratives of Sexual Subjectivity Among Gay Fist-Fuckers." *Journal of Sex Research*: 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2024.2339521>.
- Maxwell, S., M. Shahmanesh, and M. Gafos. 2019. "Chemsex Behaviours Among Men Who Have Sex with Men: A Systematic Review of the Literature." *The International Journal on Drug Policy* 63: 74–89. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2018.11.014>.
- Merrell, F. 2003. *Sensing Corporeally: Toward a Posthuman Understanding*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Moser, C., and P. J. Kleinplatz. 2007. "Themes of SM Expression." In *Safe, Sane, and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*, edited by D. Langdridge and M. Barker, 55–62. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Moskowitz, D. A., J. Turrubiates, H. Lozano, and C. Hajek. 2013. "Physical, Behavioral, and Psychological Traits of Gay Men Identifying as Bears." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 42 (5): 775–784. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-013-0095-z>.
- Navin, H. 1981. "Medical and Surgical Risks in Handballing: Implications of an Inadequate Socialization Process." *Journal of Homosexuality* 6 (3): 67–76. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v06n03_06.
- Newmahr, S. 2010. "Rethinking Kink: Sadomasochism as Serious Leisure." *Qualitative Sociology* 33 (3): 313–331. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-010-9158-9>.
- Niederwieser, S. 2013. *Fist Me! The Complete Guide to Fisting: Sex Guide for Gay Men*. Berlin: Bruno Gmunder Verlag.
- Norton, R. 2006. "A history of Gay Sex", *Gay History and Literature*. November 24, 2006 <http://rictornorton.co.uk/gaysex.htm>
- Preciado, P. B. 2018. *Countersexual Manifesto*. Translated by K. G. Dunn. New York/Chichester: Columbia University Press.
- Ravenhill, J. P., and R. O. de Visser. 2018. "It Takes a Man to Put Me on the Bottom": Gay Men's Experiences of Masculinity and Anal Intercourse." *Journal of Sex Research* 55 (8): 1033–1047. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2017.1403547>.
- Rehberg, P. 2023. "Fisting." *differences* 34 (1): 119–125. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-10435646>.
- Rubin, G. 1991. "The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole." In *Leatherfolk – Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, edited by M. Thompson, 119–141. Boston, MA: Alyson Publications.

- Rubin, G. 1997. "Elegy for the Valley of Kings: AIDS and the Leather Community in San Francisco." In *Changing Times: Gay Men and Lesbians Encounter HIV/AIDS*, edited by M. P. Levine, P. M., Nardi, and J. H. Gagnon, 101–144. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Schilder, A. J., T. R. Orchard, C. S. Buchner, S. A. Strathdee, and R. S. Hogg. 2010. "Insert Discourse: Rectal Douching Among Young HIV-Positive and HIV-Negative Men Who have Sex with Men in Vancouver, Canada." *Sexuality & Culture* 14 (4): 327–343. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-010-9077-7>.
- Schwartz-Shea, P., and D. Yanow. 2013. *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes*. London: Routledge.
- Shockey, L. R. 2009. *The Sacred Art of Fisting*. San Francisco, CA: STOP AIDS Project.
- Shook, L. L., R. Whittle, and E. F. Rose. 1985. "Rectal Fist Insertion. An Unusual Form of Sexual Behavior." *The American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology* 6 (4): 319–324. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00000433-198512000-00009>.
- Silverstein, C., and F. Picano. 2004. *The Joy of Gay Sex*. 3rd ed. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Sohn, N., M. A. Weinstein, and J. Gonchar. 1977. "Social Injuries of the Rectum." *American Journal of Surgery* 134 (5): 611–612. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0002-9610\(77\)90446-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0002-9610(77)90446-9).
- Soss, J. 2006. "Talking Our Way to Meaningful Explanations: A Practice-Centered View of Interviewing for Interpretive Research." In *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, edited by D. Yanow and P. Schwartz-Shea, 127–149. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
- Sprott, R., C. Meeker, and M. O'Brien. 2019. "Kink Community Education: Experiential Learning and Communities of Practice." *Journal of Positive Sexuality* 5 (2): 48–58. <https://doi.org/10.51681/1.523>.
- Thorneycroft, R. 2020. "If Not a Fist, Then What About a Stump? Ableism and Heteronormativity within Australia's Porn Regulations." *Porn Studies* 7 (2): 152–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2020.1713872>.
- Valverde, M. 1980. "Feminism Meets Fist-Fucking: Getting Lost in Lesbian S&M." *The Body Politic*, February 1980.
- Vivid, J., E. M. Lev, and R. A. Sprott. 2020. "The Structure of Kink Identity: Four Key Themes within a World of Complexity." *Journal of Positive Sexuality* 6 (2): 75–85. <https://doi.org/10.51681/1.623>.
- Zhang, Y., and B. M. Wildemuth. 2009. "Unstructured Interviews." In *Applications of Social Research Methods to Questions in Information and Library Science*, edited by B. M. Wildemuth, 222–231. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited.