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# Butch Tops and Femme Bottoms? Sexual Positioning, Sexual Decision Making, and Gender Roles Among Young Gay Men

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## Abstract

Gender and power are theoretical constructs linked to discussions of sexual transmission of HIV/AIDS among heterosexual couples. Despite the fact that HIV rates are rising among young men who have sex with men in the United States, work examining the role of gender in sexual decision making of young men who have sex with men remains in its infancy. Through qualitative interviews with 34 young gay men (YGM), the authors seek to contribute to the literature in this area by focusing on the ways that YGM understand and enact sexual positions during anal sex. The authors' results highlight the diversity of YGM's sexual preferences, as well as the high degree of sexual fluidity. Ideas of gender appear to inform part of this process; however, YGM critiqued conventional gender norms and emphasized the centrality of relationships (i.e., casual vs. romantic) in their sexual decision making. The authors discuss the importance of considering gender and interpersonal factors when designing HIV/AIDS prevention messages for YGM.

## Keywords

gay men, sexual decision making, gender roles, sexuality, HIV/AIDS, relationships

HIV prevention researchers have long acknowledged the heightened risk of HIV transmission for sexually receptive partners (Kingsley et al., 1987). Subsequently, a large body of health and science literature explores the social forces that may exacerbate a receptive sexual partner's biological level of risk for HIV (MacPhail, Williams, & Campbell, 2002; Rosenthal & Levy, 2010; Wingood & DiClemente, 2002). In heterosexual transmission, power imbalances in sexual negotiation derived from restrictive male and female gender roles are frequently implicated in women's heightened vulnerability to HIV/AIDS (MacPhail, Williams, & Campbell, 2002; Rosenthal & Levy, 2010; Wingood & DiClemente, 2002). Yet explorations of how performances of gender may (or may not) shape the sexual decision making of young men who have sex with men (YMSM) remain in their infancy, despite the fact that YMSM are at the forefront of the HIV epidemic in the United States—male-to-male sexual contact accounts for a majority of new HIV cases (e.g., 56% of new infections in 2009), and the most dramatic increases in new infections occurring among MSM between the ages of 13 and 24 years (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] 2011). To bolster HIV prevention efforts in the face of the growing

HIV epidemic among YMSM, we examine how gendered ideologies regarding sexual positioning influence sexual decision making among YMSM and reflect on the usefulness of a gender framework in working with YMSM.

## Gender Roles and Sexual Positioning Among MSM

Early research indicates that knowledge of gender roles is present within MSM's conceptions around anal sex dynamics. Examinations of the decision making around sexual positioning among adult MSM have yielded some important insights into the explicit and understood ways in which gender roles inform negotiations during anal sex. Normative language around sexual positioning commonly

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refers to the insertive partner during anal sex as the “top” and the receptive partner as the “bottom.” Although these terms describe anal sex *behaviors*, there is evidence to suggest that MSM may also associate these terms with gender roles. In a formative study with male couples, Kippax and Smith (2001) asked participants to characterize men who performed as tops and men who performed as bottoms. The couples gave descriptions heavily steeped in assumptions about the overlap between sexual positioning and gender roles. Some participants spoke of the receptive partner as possessing effeminate characteristics, linking the preference for anal receptivity to the hegemonic feminine personality traits assigned to heterosexual women by traditional gender roles (i.e., the vaginally receptive partner). Yet when these participants outlined the power distribution associated with sexual roles during anal sex, it did not always mirror those assumed by heterosexual gender roles (Kippax & Smith, 2001). Some anal receptive partners reported coercing tops into sex, and a few emotionally passive men reported a preference for the insertive role (Kippax & Smith, 2001). These findings suggest that, although attributions of masculinity and femininity are present in MSM sexual encounters, they inadequately capture the dynamics of sexual power between MSM.

Recently, researchers have investigated *how* gender roles may inform negotiations of sexual positioning during anal sex. These efforts reveal sexual positioning not to be static but rather to be a dynamic and shifting process with sexual decision making occurring in relation to traits expressed by sexual partners. Mixed methods inquiries into the sexual decision making of Latino MSM in the United States found masculinity to be central in determining anal sex positions (Carballo-Diequez et al., 2004). Men believing their partners possessed more masculine physical characteristics (e.g., taller, older, larger penis, etc.) than themselves were more likely to bottom and vice versa, a finding that underscores the relativity of anal sex behaviors contingent on a chosen partner's characteristics. Moskowitz and Hart (2011) revealed discrepancies between adult MSM's professed gender roles and sexual behaviors. In that study, men who performed sexually as *only* a top or *only* a bottom tended to adhere to those behaviors regardless of the observable gender characteristics of their partners. On the other hand, for men who lacked a strong preference for a particular sexual position, both their and their partners' markers of masculinity (e.g., hairiness, penis size) became highly predictive of sexual positioning (Moskowitz & Hart, 2011). Moskowitz and Hart's results emphasize the heterogeneity of sexual behavior among MSM—some may rely heavily on normative understandings of gender roles to guide their sexual practices, whereas others may choose to top or bottom purely because they find that position to be more pleasurable physically. Some academics have encouraged use of

theoretical frameworks outside of gender to understand these sexual dynamics—Hoppe (2011) used concepts of power and pleasure to unpack the sexual decision making of a group of bottom-identified men, a discussion useful in considering how sexually receptive men may be thinking about their sexuality relative to their partners. Taken together, these studies suggest that gender roles contribute to MSM's conceptualizations of relationships and their sexual decision making. Given the ways in which gender roles may inequitably distribute power within heterosexual contexts, we believe it essential to investigate whether the prescriptive use of gender roles similarly create unequal power structures among MSM. With the burden of HIV weighing heavy on *young* MSM, and little to no research on how gendered dynamics manifest in these younger years, we identified examinations of how gender dynamics operate in the sexual and romantic lives of YMSM as a priority research area.

### *The Question of Youth*

The late teens and early 20s mark a time of transition in the lives of YMSM as they disclose their nonheterosexual identities for what may be the first time to peers and family members. YMSM are distinct from older cohorts of MSM in many important ways, and their unique identities likely shape the ways they conceive of their sexuality. The distinct sociopolitical environment of YMSM in the United States today likely influences their navigation of sexual identities and sexual interactions with partners. Coming out as a sexual minority today is associated with a wide spectrum of potential social consequences. Some youth face backlash in the form of bullying and harassment (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008), whereas others find that an increasingly favorable social climate toward sexual minorities allows friends and family to readily accept them (Savin-Williams, 2006). This range of reactions demonstrates how contemporary sexual minority youth are growing up in a vastly different culture than older MSM, who may have come out during the height of the HIV epidemic or endured a greater degree of social silence around sexuality in their youth (D'Emilio, 2002).

Recent evidence suggests that the coming out age may be occurring earlier and earlier within contemporary generations of lesbian, gay, or bisexual identified youth—many YMSM introduce their status as sexual minorities to their social networks during their mid to late teens, a younger age than observed in older cohorts of MSM or in populations of sexual minority women (Groves, Bimbi, Nani, & Parsons, 2006; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Public health researchers have also made the distinction between coming out to friends groups as opposed to family members as events with different implications (Groves et al., 2006). Recent evidence suggests that the timing of these

coming out experiences may vary across racial/ethnic groups, with White youth coming out to family at earlier ages than youth of color (Groves et al., 2006). Across the board, the emerging adulthood years appear to be a time of identity development as YMSM come out and contend with the various social reactions to their sexuality.

Investigations of identity among YMSM have showcased ideas of gender as being one area in which these young men construct a self-concept distinct from the normative heterosexual narrative. Traditional understandings of acceptable male behavior often emphasize same-sex attraction as antithetical to normative masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Pascoe, 2005). YMSM express an awareness of this friction between their sexual desires and conventional heterosexual gender roles (Mustanski, Lyons, & Garcia, 2010; Wilson et al., 2010), but appear adaptable in how they negotiate these contradictions. For example, YMSM may actively reflect on traditional gender norms modeled to them by male figures during their childhood and look to imbue their own identity with these characteristics, while also adopting feminine-associated traits made permissible by their non-heterosexual identity (Mustanski et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2010). As a result of this resilience, the assumed gender roles of YMSM today may look very different from culturally mainstream images of manhood.

Despite this knowledge base, at present, the public health and sexuality literature remains unclear as to how these shifting ideas of gender among YMSM influence their sexual decisions (e.g., sexual positioning). To advance HIV/AIDS prevention efforts in this population, we need to better understand the manner in which gender roles inform (or do not) YGM's sexual decision making. As a contribution to the literature, using qualitative data, we examined conversations about sexual roles among a sample of YMSM and investigated how, if at all, gender informed their experiences of sexual negotiations. In this study, we sought to answer three research questions:

*Research Question 1:* How do YMSM define the terms *top* and *bottom*?

*Research Question 2:* How do YMSM make decisions around sexual positioning in a given sexual encounter?

*Research Question 3:* In what ways are these sexual definitions and decisions informed by gender roles?

## Method

### Sample

Thirty-four young gay men participated in semistructured qualitative interviews investigating their sexual

behavior and their use of the Internet as a dating tool. To be eligible for participation, recruits had to be between the ages of 18 and 24 years (i.e., born between 1985 and 1991), self-identify as nonheterosexual (i.e., gay, bisexual, questioning, etc.), and report having used a dating website in the past 3 months. Participants were primarily recruited through advertisements on two social networking sites (i.e., Facebook and Connexion) and flyers posted at various local venues frequented by YMSM in the greater Detroit Metro area. Promotional materials displayed a synopsis of eligibility criteria, a mention of the \$30 iTunes gift card incentive, and the principal investigator's phone number to call if interested. Social network advertisements were viewable only to men who listed themselves as interested in other men and who fit our age range. All 34 recruited YMSM self-identified as gay. Accordingly, our subject pool is referred to as young gay men, or YGM, throughout our results in order to be specific about the participants' identities. Twenty-two identified their race as White/European American, 4 as Black/African American, 3 as Latino/Hispanic, 3 as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2 as Mixed Race/Other. A third of our sample reported being in a relationship at the time of interview, and more than two thirds (i.e., 24 cases) reported having had sex with someone met on a dating website in the past 3 months. Three participants reported being HIV positive. See Table 1 for detailed descriptive statistics of the sample.

### Procedure

Three research assistants trained in qualitative interviewing techniques conducted the interviews over the phone. The interviewers began by reading a detailed consent that explained the purpose of the study (i.e., speaking with YGM about how they use the Internet for dating) and their rights as participants. YGM were asked to consent both to the interview process and to the use of an audio recorder. Using a semistructured interview guide, researchers then conducted an in-depth interview covering topic areas such as relationship expectations, experiences using the Internet for dating, sexual behavior with partners met online, sexual roles with partners met online, and HIV prevention. Interviews typically lasted 60 to 90 minutes, and participants were compensated with a \$30 iTunes gift card for their time. Study data were protected by a Certificate of Confidentiality. All study procedures were approved by the institutional review board of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

*In-depth interviews.* Interviews began with a description of the study's purpose. Participants were provided with the opportunity to ask questions or obtain clarification. We first asked participants to define the terms *date* and *hook-up*, and subsequently, how a person might

**Table 1.** Participant Descriptive Statistics on Sociodemographic Variables

| Variable                               | Number       |
|--|--------------|
| Total sample                           | 34 (100%)    |
| Age                                    |              |
| Mean (SD)                              | 21.47 (1.81) |
| Minimum                                | 18           |
| Maximum                                | 24           |
| Race/ethnicity                         |              |
| White                                  | 22 (64.71%)  |
| Black                                  | 4 (11.76%)   |
| Latino                                 | 3 (8.82%)    |
| Asian                                  | 3 (8.82%)    |
| Other                                  | 2 (5.88%)    |
| HIV status <sup>a</sup>                |              |
| Negative/not tested                    | 31 (91.78%)  |
| Positive                               | 3 (8.82%)    |
| Relationship status                    |              |
| In LTR                                 | 11 (32.35%)  |
| Not in LTR                             | 23 (67.65%)  |
| Preferred sexual position <sup>b</sup> |              |
| Bottom                                 | 11 (32.35%)  |
| Top                                    | 11 (32.35%)  |
| Equal                                  | 9 (26.47)    |
| Unspecified                            | 3 (8.82%)    |

Note. LTR = long-term relationship.

a. HIV status deduced from participant response to the interview question, "Have you ever tested positive for HIV?"

b. These terms refer to professed *likelihood* of an anal sex behavior (e.g., insertive or receptive position) and do not necessarily reflect participants' sexual role *identities*.

distinguish one from the other. Participants were then asked to describe their ideal partners and to discuss the characteristics of their last relationship. Next, we questioned participants about their use of the Internet for dating. These prompts investigated the reasons for initially beginning to use the Internet as a dating tool, which websites participants preferred, how participants selected a potential partner online, and the advantages and disadvantages to Internet dating versus meeting men in public venues (i.e., bars and clubs). Participants then walked the interviewer through a play by play of their last sexual experience with someone they had met online and outlined their beliefs about sexual roles among MSM. The interview ended with a discussion about beliefs and attitudes surrounding condoms, as well as questions about participants' HIV status and perceived threat of HIV infection. In asking about participants' HIV statuses, we inquired "Have you ever tested positive for HIV?" For participants who said "yes," we followed up with questions about the length of time they were HIV positive and their feelings about the current

availability of HIV treatment. For participants who said "no," we probed about the date of their last HIV test and their degree of concern about HIV infection.

**Data analysis.** Our study approach and data analytic strategy were imbedded in the theoretical tradition of contextualism or postpositivism, wherein we recognize participant narratives as meaningful reflections of the ways in which they understand their social realities and view researchers as agents who work to accumulate knowledge about these social realities through the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). We read the transcribed interviews seeking to understand the ways in which the YGM made meaning of their sexual decisions, as well as how these decision-making descriptions related to societal understandings of gender and sexual identities.

To begin the analytic process, we created a draft codebook based on the principles of thematic analysis (Luborsky, 1994). In this stage, the codes developed were designed to identify themes at the semantic level (i.e., codes were developed to capture those themes elicited by our semistructured interview guide; Braun & Clarke, 2006). To create this draft codebook, we used our interview questions as a rubric to generate potential codes (i.e., deductive theme development). As a research team, we used this draft codebook to review the same pilot transcript independently. Then, we came together to discuss the merits and deficits of these codes in identifying semantic themes. This triangulation process allowed for the opportunity to address concerns with the codebook and to make appropriate amendments. Once finalized, this codebook guided our first round coding of the data corpus (i.e., all 34 transcripts from our participants).

Subsequently, two members of the team coded each transcript independently and then came together to resolve any discrepancies between their codes. After resolving coding discrepancies, transcripts and codes were entered into NVivo to allow for systematic extraction and reviewing of codes of interest. Throughout this process, we treated the codebook as a living document—we continually updated the codebook to incorporate semantic themes identified as missing from the original codebook. We incorporated these additional themes and topics to the appropriate code under "inclusion criteria" or "exclusion criteria." This iterative process ensured the reliability of the codebook as an instrument to be consistently used in our coding endeavors. The end result codebook included themes, definitions, and inclusion and exclusion criteria.

During the coding of the data corpus, we identified YGM's discussions of sexual roles as particularly rich portions of the narrative. Participants had complex thoughts about the terms *top*, *bottom*, and *versatile* in relation to their sexual experiences. As such, we chose to extract these semantic codes from the data corpus and create a data set for analyzing the patterns and topics within YGM's

**Table 2.** Interview Questions

| Order | Question  |
|-------|---|
| 1     | Let's talk about sexual roles: What does the term <i>bottom</i> mean to you? What about the term <i>top</i> ? |
| a     | What different views are there about people who are penetrated versus those who penetrate?                    |
| b     | What are your feelings about people who are only a top or only a bottom?                                      |
| 2     | Are you more likely to penetrate or to be penetrated? What determines that?                                   |
| 3     | How does your anal sex behavior change according to the partner you are with?                                 |
| a     | What makes you become "top" or "bottom" in different circumstances?   |
| b     | What characteristics in your partner may lead you to take a top or bottom role?                               |
| c     | How do you think other men decide whether to top or bottom?   |

discussions of these words (Luborsky, 1994). This tailored data set included responses to interview questions probing about YGM's ideas and perceptions of sexual roles taken during anal sex (see Table 2), as well as portions of the narrative captured by semantic codes relating to ideas and attitudes toward sexual roles (see Table 3). To be as inclusive as possible within this data set, we also performed a key word search on the terms *top*, *bottom*, and *versatile* to uncover other areas of the narratives where discussions of sexual roles during anal sex might have been mentioned in relation to other topics covered in the interview, and we included these portions of the transcripts in our analysis.

At the time we operationalized our data set, we also formulated the research questions that guide this article. Our research questions were developed in response to the broader literature around the role of gender and power in sexual negotiation and HIV risk (MacPhail et al., 2002; Rosenthal & Levy, 2010; Wingood & DiClemente, 2002), the literature on the diversity of gay men's expressions of gender (Carballo-Diequez et al., 2004; Kippax & Smith, 2001; Moskowitz & Hart, 2011), and our preliminary perceptions that these theoretical issues were reflected in the narratives in our data set.

After codifying the final data set and specifying our research questions, we sought to identify the latent themes related to sexual decision making and gender roles, our particular analytic area of interest. This stage of our process can best be characterized as a theoretical thematic analysis, in that we explored those themes relevant to our theoretically guided research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We acknowledge that there may be other salient issues and themes around sexual decision making

(e.g., comfort with gay identity, race/ethnicity) that are relevant to YGM, but they fall outside the purview of this article and our analytic efforts.

## Results

Discussions with YGM about sexual positions (i.e., top and bottom) elicited themes along three particular dimensions. First, YGM described the terms associated with sexual positions as social identities, each with a constellation of gender- and sexuality-based attributes. Second, YGM considered the social value ascribed to men who performed sexually as tops, bottoms, and versatiles. Finally, YGM narrated the multifaceted ways in which knowledge of gender roles was used in the negotiation of sexual positioning during anal sex. We expand on these domains below.

### *Top and Bottom as Social Identities*

*Masculinity and gay identity.* When asked about the meaning of top and bottom, most participants were able to quickly offer two lists of dichotomous identity characteristics that they believed or had heard to be associated with each sexual position. For some participants, the terms *top* and *bottom* referred to highly gendered identities reflecting an essentialist, heterosexual construction of inserting and receiving during a given sexual encounter. As Jaime<sup>1</sup> (Age 22, Equally likely) states,

Well honestly, what I've heard is that the bottom is the more feminine actor of the relationship, and the top is the more masculine actor of the relationship. . . . The perception of masculine or feminine comes from the fact that in a straight relationship the male penetrates and the woman is the one being penetrated.

However, gender was not the only assumed binary to be at play in the narratives. Participants also spoke about the terms *top* and *bottom* as representing different degrees of gayness—an individual's preferred sexual position signified YGM as more *straight* or *gay*, respectively. As Robert (Age 20, Equally likely) notes,

Tops [are] the ones that say that they're straight, but then they go and . . . penetrate men. Or they're the ones that wish that they're straight. So, therefore they say, "Oh, I'm a top. I just fuck people. I don't ever receive anything. And . . . then they say, "Oh yeah, I'm not really gay." . . . The bottom . . . the stereotypes are that they're the bitches and the pushovers and they're the cute, twinkie ones and cute ones that . . . are more flamboyant are the ones that bottom.

**Table 3.** Thematic Codes

| Code                                   | Definition  | Inclusion Criteria <sup>a</sup>  |
|--|---|--|
| Definition of bottom                   | Participant provides a definition for the term <i>bottom</i>  | Include any allusions to the term beyond sexual role (e.g., gender roles)  |
| Definition of top                      | Participant provides a definition of the term <i>top</i>  | Include any allusions to the term beyond sexual role (e.g., gender roles)  |
| Perceived norms regarding sexual roles | Participant describes the existing norms about individuals' sexual roles                                | Include narrative about how other men choose to top or bottom  |
| Attitudes toward tops or bottoms       | Participant expresses a set of beliefs or judgments regarding individuals who exclusively top or bottom | Include any reference to versatile men   |
| Likelihood of sexual role              | Participant describes how he decides whether to be a top or a bottom                                    | Include any discussion regarding the traits of the sexual partner, or the relationship type (actual or expected) |

a. The category of inclusion criteria was continuously updated throughout our analysis in an effort to account for themes that we identified during the coding process.

The clarity of whether top and bottom connoted an individual's gender (e.g., male/female, masculine/feminine) or his sexuality (e.g., gay/straight) was often conflated by participants within the narratives. When describing men who liked to top in relation to men who bottomed, the social designations of gender and sexual orientation were frequently used interchangeably. This imprecision of language reflected how the YGM understood tops' alignment with normative, heterosexual masculinity, whereas bottoms presumably transgressed these lines through their desire to be penetrated. Freddy (Age 22, Top) interweaves these two intersecting concepts of gender and orientation in his observation,

The bottoms are the softer ones, the feminine ones. They're the real fags. . . . It's one thing to be gay, but to be a fag—you don't want to do that. I can't say that you don't want to be that, but they're the more liberal ones when it comes to the idea of gender identity. . . . It's not that it's foreign but it's abhorred. . . . So if I want to dress up as a woman on Friday night at a club and then come out as this big leather strap-wearing guy at a pride party the next time, I can do that. Those are usually the bottoms. The tops, I find are more conservative in their ideals of what the role of the man should be.

Freddy's quote illuminates the extreme end of conflation of gender and sexual identity. As a man who prefers to top, he distances himself from bottoms not through their sexual behaviors, but from a critical description of the open, counterculture ways that he believes men who bottom perform gender. Through this quote, Freddy constructs men who bottom as the "other," a group that he signifies as distasteful through his use of the term *fags*.

Although not all participants equated sexual behavior with identity in a pejorative manner, milder forms of these assumptions of femininity among bottoms could be found in several of the transcripts.

*Power and social identity.* Along with the socialized gender attributes linked to sexual positioning, YGM discussed how sexual positions influenced power relations within a given sexual experience. Many YGM regarded the primary distribution of power as one where tops were the dominant players, structuring the rules of a sexual encounter, and bottoms were passive players, relinquishing control of their sexual experiences. As Marc (Age 22, Bottom) states,

I actually do not voluntarily top. . . . And the reason is I feel like, just psychological. . . . There's a certain self-esteem thing there, and you know, like, topping someone is such an assertive, self-assertive act, penetrating that person. And I did not feel like I'm that psychological makeup where I can, like, exert my sexual will on, over someone.

Marc expresses how the presumed dominance of tops plays out in terms of sexual negotiation. In his mind, the top's wills and wants guide the parameters of a specific sexual encounter. In many of the conversations, the "top as dominant" assumption was discussed as expected and normative. In a few cases, the result of this power differential was the bottom forgoing sexual safety along with the sexual control. Matthew (Age 22, Bottom) states,

He definitely took control for the situation. Like, he had, like, a pretty active sex drive. He always wanted to, and it was always very nice. And he wasn't versatile at all. . . . I could just bottom, it

was fine. So, it was very comfortable and it went—it felt like the way it ought to go, I guess. I mean, without using condoms, I guess, I would rather—in retrospect, I should have but I guess it just all, like, felt so good.

In his interview, Matthew expresses conflicted emotions toward forgoing condoms—on one hand, he enjoyed his sexual experience without condoms, but on the other hand, he notes that use of a condom might have been beneficial, if not socially expected. Matthew's struggle reflects a piece of what may result from a power exchange with a top as the dominant partner: the bottoms have less room for active decision making during sex.

Other narratives recognized that bottoms did have the ability to take control of a given sexual encounter, disrupting the hegemonic masculine idea that the act of penetration always mandates how sexual power is distributed. In a few cases, control was described in terms of traditionally masculine personality traits being enacted at the same time as the participant assumed a receptive role during anal intercourse. For example, Peter (Age 24, Equally likely) states,

I tend to be a power bottom . . . so when I bottom I tend to be more along the lines of, like, I tend to be the aggressor in it anyway. When I say aggressor, you know what I mean, like the more dominant person.

The language used by Peter makes clear that his preference for bottoming during anal sex is not an affront to his masculinity: He is not merely a bottom, he is a "power bottom"; he is not the submissive partner, he is the aggressor. In this snapshot, Peter portrays himself as the director of his sexual encounters, not in spite of, but in accordance with his position as a strong bottom. Other YGM described bottoms as having power only in the ability to decide how much control to let go, with tops still directing the course of the sexual scenario. Winston (Age 21, Top) states,

I've seen it where . . . the person who's penetrated is the complete opposite in their personal and daily life, . . . always the dominant, dominant, dominant, dominant personality. And when they're in bed, they enter into relationships, all they want is for someone to really take control of them. . . . They're usually more, like, aggressive bottoms. You know, like, "Dominate me. Take control. Spank me. Tell them to call me names." That type of stuff.

In Winston's description of the power dynamics, the receptive partner enacts his sexual control by asking the

top to dominate him. Winston characterizes this scenario of aggressive bottoming as a means that some hypermasculine men use to escape from the rigid gender performance that governs other realms of their lives. His quote highlights that for many of the YGM, masculinity and submission were not always mutually exclusive during anal sex. These portrayals of bottoms as maintaining their sexual agency stood in contrast to the predominant illustration of bottoms as uniformly feminine and passive. Through conversations around aggressive and power bottoms, YGM suggested that sexual positioning is complicated in ways not captured by the normative views of tops and bottoms.

**Stereotypes.** Although YGM acknowledged the ways in which they saw gender roles at work in their conceptions of tops and bottoms, they were also simultaneously critical of the idea that masculine or feminine characteristics could be attributed to a person simply by knowing their preferred sexual position. This tension resulting from mapping gender roles onto sexual positions appeared throughout the transcripts, underscoring the hesitancy many of the participants felt toward being stereotyped into particular gender roles. Several of the participants shared that in their own lived experiences, friends and partners did not fit neatly into rigid categories. Ryan (Age 23, Bottom) notes,

It's a whole spectrum, really. I've seen everything from sort of the typical butch top and femme bottom to vice versa. You know, flip the, flip the scenario. I—so, I tend not to associate any sort of mannerism or, or personalities with sexual interest. One of our . . . best friends . . . is an incredibly masculine farm boy. You know. Car mechanic. And he's the most submissive bottom, kinky boy we know.

This anecdote juxtaposing the imagery of the "masculine farm boy" with the "submissive bottom" challenges the normative notions of sexual desire and masculinity demanded by the use of terms such as *top* and *bottom*. Other participants offered up tales of their own frustration of being placed into an ill-fitting category simply based on their physical characteristics. Caleb (Age 22, Top) states,

I find that I am shorter. I'm not very tall. I'm skinny. And I find that everybody expects me to be a bottom, which is fine. You can have your, you know, assumptions about me. But it's like I should not be expected [to be a bottom]. And I am expected in the gay community to be a bottom. So, if I, who happen to be a top, want to date to someone . . . they always expect me to be a bottom. So,



I've actually talked to men who were like, "Oh, we could never date because you don't bottom." And I'm like, "What does that have to do with anything? Why does it have to come down to this?" So, I find that being a smaller person, or a skinny boy, any person who's like skinny or sort of on the girlier side, they expect to be the bottom.

These nonnormative pairings of visible gender characteristics and sexual behavior appear over and over again in the participant interviews, often with YGM questioning their validity. At times, the concern was not about being placed in the *wrong* identity category but rather about the narrowness of the categories themselves. As Tim (Age 22, Top) reflects,

Well, obviously, there's the connotation of the guy that's getting fucked as being the more feminine, the more girly, that kind of thing. And then the other guy is supposed to be more the butch, the man. And that's not necessarily true, because I don't consider myself to be like, you know, super butch, watching football, smashing beer cans on my head, but I'm not like a fairy fag either.

The exaggerated description of top and bottom expressed by Tim points to his discomfort with the identities assigned to tops and bottoms as not reflecting his sense of self, which is neither explicitly masculine nor feminine. Not feeling himself specifically gendered, he resides outside of the top/bottom dichotomy. Tim's nonpolarized gender role performance critiques these categories' usefulness. In such quotes, participants simultaneously revealed a shared understanding of the gendered expectations assigned to anal sex positions and an uncertainty about the adequacy of these labels to represent them, their friends, or their partners meaningfully.

### **Versatility and Balancing Gender Roles**

Discussions of the social identities associated with sexual positions continually framed men who were versatile, in that they enjoyed both performing sexually as a top and a bottom, as the ideal partner type. The YGM's reasons for this preference appeared to be born out of personality characteristics they assigned to versatility rather than the sexual behaviors associated with this term. Versatility appeared to provide an opportunity for YGM to deviate from the gendered and sexual stereotypes attributed to tops and bottoms.

YGM spoke about versatility as an identity with characteristics more appealing than those associated with tops or bottoms by virtue of a lack of polarity. As Jonathan (Age 24, Equally likely) explains about men who are versatile,

"I think they're usually a little bit more stable. They can, like, they can be dominated, but they can also step it up and not have to, you know, have someone take care of them." In Jonathan's quote, a versatile partner is deemed to possess the ability to fluidly share power, a connection that also associates versatility with stability. These attributes are situated between those discussed in relation to being a top or a bottom and, as outlined above, fully masculine or fully feminine. Leonard (Age 19, Equally likely) echoes this assumption of versatility as more evolved when he describes versatile men in terms of romantic partnerships:

We've talked about, part of the reason that I think he says he's vers and like probably one of the reasons why once we have or if we do, whether I'll be vers or whatever, I think part of it is the idea of being egalitarian. I think that's something that's important to both of us. It goes back to, the reason that I've done 69. [And] the reason, we did the frotting thing. The point is those things are very symmetrical, and like, nobody's dominating or not dominating. You know, people always ask, "Who's the girl one? Who's the guy one?" Well, that doesn't apply to us. If it did, I'd be dating a girl. I know that's how he sees it too. I mean, what we do should be equal for us.

In this quote, the versatile man exists outside of traditional gender scripts and is thus assumed to be better equipped for handling his partner's sexual needs. Additionally, Leonard broadens the discussion of gay sexuality to include sexual acts beyond anal sex. He references oral and manual stimulation as being enjoyable in part because they are reciprocal sexual experiences with his partner.

Attributions regarding versatility contrasted sharply with polarized portraits of tops and bottoms. Ethan (Age 24, Bottom) explains his concerns about bottoms:

There's something that . . . is missing from their life. Because you get a lot of guys who are like, "Oh, I'm looking for a hot stud top to come and, you know." I think they want someone to fix their life and make them feel more complete, is the common opinion with me and my friends, because someone who's just a bottom is just—I don't know, it's almost like we get the feeling that they're not in control of their lives. That they're not really trying to accomplish anything, but they want someone to give them something to make them feel whole. Like, they're looking for someone to complete them.

The traits that are linked with being a bottom in this quote (e.g., being needy, submissive, feminine) erase the

agency of men who bottom and echo of the ways in which these men were assumed to be without power within anal sex encounters. Ethan assumes bottoms to be not just submissive sexually but also to require guidance and direction from a (presumably top-identified) man.

Tops were similarly dismissed by the YGM in several of these interviews as being unfit romantic partners. As Sean (Age 22, Top) reflects,

Some people feel like because they are so, like, macho or whatever that they can have the right to, like, always be a top. Some people would just be like, "Oh, like, I'm a top." They won't say, like, "Oh, I'm usually a top." And I just feel like that's too, like, too much self-worship or self-confidence or something.

Sean's description of tops is a counterpoint to Ethan's description of bottoms. The men portrayed in Sean's description are confident to the point of smugness—a quality he represents as repugnant and undesirable. This conception of tops connects back to the ideas of masculine performance and domination participants commonly attributed to a preference for topping during anal sex.

On the contrary, versatility was rarely marked as deviant. In most cases, it was highlighted as a prized quality. Several of the YGM revealed that for them to be versatile was to be free of the limited emotional capacity characteristic of tops and bottoms. Brandon (Age 23, Bottom) spells this out succinctly when he says, "I mean, going back to the ideal guy. I think a more ideal guy for me is somebody who's more versatile, and who's more about giving and sharing pleasure than fulfilling [the] sexual, if that makes sense." Switching back and forth from penetrative to receptive partner is perceived as a quality possessed by an ideal partner. Thus, out of these discussions of the meaning of top and bottom with respect to both identity and behavior, the perfect man appears as the egalitarian, emotionally in touch versatile.

### *Sexual Decision Making and the Role of Gender*

YGM discussed the ways in which both assumptions and critiques around gender roles and sexual behaviors of partners influenced their sexual decision making. Within these conversations, we identified relationship type as a key signifier for the degree to which YGM's sexual positioning and gender roles would intersect. YGM expressed that within the context of a *hookup*, or casual sexual encounter, gender roles aided in decision making; however, within a romantic, long-term relationship, gender roles were not inherent to the negotiation of anal sex behaviors.

Gender roles shined through as gauges for behavior within initial sexual encounters and/or hookups. In these scenarios, many participants spoke of sexual partners' physical stature and size as key indicators for who was to take on the top or bottom position during sex. As James (Age 22, Top) states,

Individually with guys, if I can tell someone is more muscular or more masculine than I am, I'll just assume and then I'll usually be bottom. Or if someone's more feminine, then I'll usually just assume and I'll top.

In this quote, James demonstrates the association between physical size, observable gender presentation, dominance, and sexual positioning. The cue of his partner's physical strength and overt masculinity as greater than his own allows James to assess the likelihood of that partner assuming a top or bottom position, and thus bypass a conversation about sexual preferences prior to a sexual encounter. This equation of stature and dominance was echoed by Derek (Age 21, Bottom), who confesses,

Basically if they are . . . like older, physically dominant . . . then I am the bottom. If I were to see someone who was, I don't know, smaller, really into being a bottom, stuff like that, then I might feel compelled to top them.

Similarly, age was identified as a useful tool in determining sexual positions during an anal sex encounter. Jacob (Age 24, Top) notes,

The people I date, if I've gone out on a date or something with someone, they seem to be, like 21 or 20. You know, they're a little bit younger than me. So, they're just like, "Oh, I'm a bottom." OK. So, it just kind of happens that way. They identify as a bottom. So, it's like, "OK, so I guess I know what I'm doing."

Here, older partners automatically top, possibly due to an assumption of more sexual experience and, therefore, more reason to be in the physically dominant role. These findings implicate age as a marker of sexual power.

Notably, some participants expressed their unhappiness with these rubrics for sexual behavior, as they resulted in the young men suppressing their own desires. As Matthew (Age 22, Bottom) explains,

Yeah . . . I don't enjoy [topping]. And whenever I do it, I feel like I'm making this huge concession, and I don't like it . . . the times I have topped, it's been for guys who were younger than me and

smaller than me. And it just, like, at the moment felt like, this is kind of the only way this can go.

Although the rote performance of sexual positions based on understandings of gender were often in the foreground of participant narratives discussing initial sexual encounters, such rules faded to the background when YGM discussed *long-term, romantic partners*. In these instances, YGM described sexual positioning as much more reliant on their boyfriends' preferences. For example, many YGM spoke of taking on an insertive or receptive position as a reciprocal decision to accommodate the desires of their partner. When asked what he preferred, Aiden (Age 23, Equally likely) shares,

I guess it varies on what they're into. I've had previous partners who were only tops. I've also had partners who didn't really like sex at all, but I mean, that changes. I guess I more conform to what they enjoy. Whether they like to be a top, I'll be the bottom. Or if they like to be the bottom, I'll be the top.

In these stories, men expressed the notion that they defaulted to the position that facilitated their sexual partner's happiness and satisfaction. The sexual partners' desires, rather than the identities of the participants, became the central driving force in shaping decisions around sexual positions during anal sex.

Even those men who expressed a particular preference for either topping or bottoming during anal sex confirmed that the needs of a partner could often sway them away from their preferred position. Taking on a new position that might be outside of their comfort zone could be an act of affection and an indicator of the degree of a romantic relationship's importance. Matthew, who noted above that he does not enjoy topping casual partners, confides, "I mean, like, my current boyfriend, sometimes, if he asks me, I'll top him because I care about him." Since top and bottom did not operate as restrictive sexual role categories, YGM fluctuated between sexual positions as both routines and spontaneous romantic gestures. These shifts marked the fluidity of topping or bottoming within a relationship context. We expand on the relevance of our study findings below.

## Discussion

By focusing our attention on discussions of sexual positioning, we sought to understand how power and agency are enacted in these scenarios and whether gender roles were influential in these negotiations. Our findings suggest the presence of fluidity in the identities and sexuality of YGM and that their relationship status (casual vs. long-term/romantic) influences the degree to which this

fluidity plays out in their sexual decision making. We believe these discoveries to be useful for building developmentally appropriate HIV interventions that align with the current national HIV prevention strategies outlined by Grossman et al. (2011). We discuss the implications of our findings for HIV prevention.

### Research Question 1: How Do YMSM Define the Terms Top and Bottom?

Most YGM in our study had distinct ideas about whom and what constituted a top or bottom. When denoting identities, these terms described a constellation of social and emotional attributes linked to heteronormative gender roles (discussed in further detail under Research Question 3). Similar to past research (Kippax & Smith, 2001), tops were ascribed characteristics often viewed as hegemonically masculine (i.e., dominant, muscular, and tall) and bottoms with traits regarded to be feminine (i.e., submissive, slender, and small). These terms also were also used to describe sexual behavior without any gendered characteristics: top as the insertive partner and bottom as the receptive partner. Importantly, without prompting from the interviewers (in the majority of cases), the YGM in our sample also considered a third term, *versatility*, as relevant to the sexual positioning conversation. The use of this third term served to undermine conceptions of top/bottom existing as mutually exclusive signifiers of identity or behavior. The saliency of versatility in the lives of many YGM in our sample suggested that they bucked restrictive, gender-based ideas of how gay men operate sexually. These YGM painted gay sexuality as encompassing fluid behaviors and identities, not confined to the performance of rigid roles.

YGM sampled in our study spanned the emerging adulthood years (Arnett, 2000), and several portrayed this period as a time to challenge societal expectations around the sexuality of gay men. Instances where our YGM critiqued conventional perceptions of gay sexuality through discussions of versatility or commentary on stereotypes align with other research on sexual minority youth, suggesting that some eschew normative conceptions of gay identity to craft their own narratives around sexual orientation (Savin-Williams, 2006). Some YGM in our study engaged in this process of redefinition by deconstructing the stereotypes of top (insertive) and bottom (receptive) partners. In some instances, this discussion of stereotypes included YGMs othering, or socially distancing themselves from, gendered caricatures of gay men.

The depiction of gay sexuality as fluid by YGM has real-world meaning for HIV prevention efforts. By acknowledging receptive intercourse as the more risky sexual position, public health practitioners may be tempted to design interventions specifically targeting men who

bottom and provide them with harm reduction techniques such as strategic positioning (i.e., deciding whether to top or bottom depending on a partner's HIV status to negotiate risk; Marks et al., 2010). Based on these findings, we argue that a more appropriate harm reduction strategy for youth would be to discuss HIV risk with regard to a variety of sexual positions and acknowledge saliency of partners within this equation. Additionally, we note that campaigns linking gendered and sexual behavior may risk alienating those YGM who are actively distancing themselves from gay stereotypes. Current National Institutes of Health and CDC recommendations for HIV prevention underscore the need to recognize the unique experiences of identity formation among *young* MSM and to create interventions that correspond to the unique developmental period in which YMSM inhabit (Grossman et al., 2011). We note that efforts that heavily emphasize gender roles or a particular sexual position may misrepresent the sexual dynamics of YGM within and across relationships and overlook the needs of some men during this developmental period.

### ***Research Question 2: How Do YMSM Make Decisions Around Sexual Positioning in a Given Sexual Encounter?***

When YGM shared how they determined whether to top or bottom during anal sex, they described casual encounters and long-term relationships differently. Within casual encounters, some YGM discussed the gender-based attributes associated with tops and bottoms as useful. Similar to trends noted in previous work with adult MSM (Carballo-Diequez et al., 2004; Moskowitz & Hart, 2011), a portion of our participants engaging in casual encounters assessed a potential partner's physical characteristics in comparison with their own to ascertain who was more masculine. This relational game determined whether the new partner was more or less likely to take on the top or bottom role in that moment. Stereotypical understandings of gender proved a useful tool in establishing the rules of engagement for the short term, possibly helping these YGM avoid intensive negotiations with sexual partners that were intended for one-time sexual gratification.

Conversely, using gender traits to negotiate the parameters of a sexual encounter with a romantic, long-term partner was not spoken of as consistently. In romantic or long-term relationships, many participants referenced partners' preferences as the primary indicator of whether the YGM would take on a top or bottom position. For those YGM inside of a romantic, long-term relationship, restrictive sexual roles appeared to run contrary to establishing sexual and emotional intimacy. Our findings echo Hoppe's (2011) work with bottoms in that we found that top,

bottom, and versatile men were not bound by gender scripts with regard to their sexual role decision making. Rather, they valued pleasure, both their own and their long-term partner's, as a key contribution to this process. The centrality of relationship type is particularly meaningful in terms of building HIV prevention campaigns, as recent data suggest that more than half of new infections among MSM occur through a primary partner (Sullivan, Salazar, Buchbinder, & Sanchez, 2009). National HIV prevention strategies have underscored the importance of focusing on couples as a prevention unit (Grossman et al., 2011). In the context of our results, we believe these dyads would be well served by the incorporation of communication skills around negotiating pleasure in relation to safety with long-term, romantic partners.

Our results also support recent literature suggesting that young men conceptualize casual and romantic, long-term relationships as having distinct sexual expectations (Bauermeister, Leslie-Santana, Johns, Pingel, & Eisenberg, 2011). The different contexts of relationship types have implications for the ways in which sexual behaviors get negotiated. In spaces where casual encounters are the norm (e.g., bars, clubs, websites designed for connecting men for casual sex), sex may happen along prescriptively gendered lines with physical attributes taking center stage in the negotiation process. In these arenas, an HIV intervention might benefit from incorporating gendered characteristics of tops and bottoms into their messaging, so as to better appeal to their target audience. Yet in relationship-focused spaces (e.g., websites designed specifically for dating, LGBT dating events), HIV prevention messages might be strengthened by focusing on communication styles and sexual negotiation and avoiding identity-based messages that could inadvertently be limited in reach. Future research examining how YGM negotiate their sexual roles, while acknowledging how relationship dynamics may make sexual roles fluid, is warranted.

### ***Research Question 3: In What Ways Are These Sexual Definitions and Decisions Informed by Gender Roles?***

When YGM in our sample spoke of tops and bottoms as social identities, some of the images they provided were informed by normative ideas of gender. YGM's knowledge of gendered ideologies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Rhodes et al., 2011) was demonstrated through the ease by which YGM created the personas of "typical" tops (e.g., masculine, straight acting) and "typical" bottoms (e.g., feminine, visibly gay). These YGM presumably attributed these specific characteristics to men who preferred these positions because of conceptions of the power dynamics of anal sex between two men as analogous

to those of heterosexual, vaginal sex: insertive partner as masculine, receptive partner as feminine. However, as evidenced in their narratives, several YGM did not fully embrace these gendered understandings of gay sexuality. Although they acknowledged gender role assumptions as present, many YGM also critiqued them and sought to dismantle the notion that one could reliably discern another's preferred sexual behavior by their performance of gender roles. They frequently referenced the existence of a top identity and a bottom identity as beliefs grounded in stereotypes. Yet their behavior, particularly within the context of hookups, did not always reflect this social critique. Although on the surface this discrepancy may appear to be a contradiction, some YGM may use stereotypes as a cognitive heuristic or cue when making decisions in a casual sexual encounter. For example, our participants who referenced defaulting to a bottom position when encountering a sexual partner who was older or physically larger, no matter their usual sexual position. In this respect, YGM could be simultaneously skeptical of, but still influenced by, the presence of assumptions around gender roles and anal sex behaviors.

Still some YGM did appear to be engaging in a process of defining gender roles' evolving place in their lives, and the elevated status of versatility was probably the best example of this evolution. By challenging a top identity as an ideal (i.e., an identity constructed as hypermasculine), many YGM in our sample invalidated normative masculinity as the preferred construction of manhood. A preference for versatility shirked notions that *real* men must be dominant and control the power within a relationship. Our findings echo work by Wilson et al. (2010), who noted that YMSM sought a balance between traditionally defined masculine and feminine characteristics within their gender identities. Similarly, our participants noted a desire for a sexually flexible partner, reporting that they wanted someone who was comfortable with a constellation of appealing masculine *and* feminine traits. Based on YGM's preference for fluidity in their gender and sexuality, existing theories that apply concepts of gender and power to HIV prevention (Wingood & DiClemente, 2002) may need to be rethought or adapted for this population. Rather than positioning masculine and feminine roles as inherently at odds with each other, the development of approaches that conceptualize them as interrelated may enhance these theories' applicability in HIV prevention programs for YGM.

These YGM in our sample appeared to be recalibrating the meaning of gender roles in relation to gay sexuality. Rejecting the terms *top* and *bottom* as rigid, prescriptive sexual identities, YGM frequently navigated their sexual behaviors based on their interpersonal relationships (e.g., casual or romantic, long-term) with other men. These trends suggest that not only are YGM different from their

heterosexual peers but they are also distinct from their gay elders as well—a group in which ideas of top and bottom appear more universally accepted and where accompanying sexual roles remain static (Kippax & Smith, 2001). Research examining how ideas of gender are influencing the sexual lives of YMSM, particularly how performances of gender might shift across sexual identity categories (e.g., gay, bisexual, queer, same gender loving), race, geography, and socioeconomic status, is needed. Through such undertakings, public health professionals can better develop HIV interventions that resonate with a younger generation of MSM.

### Limitations

This study has a few notable limitations. First, our sample all identified as gay. We suspect that our use of Facebook as a recruitment device may have hindered our ability to sample bisexual or questioning men, as young men had to report being interested in men on their profiles in order to see our study advertisement. Given this constraint, we were unable to explore the ways in which YMSM who identify their sexual orientations in other ways (e.g., bisexual, queer, same-gender loving) might differently understand ideas of gender within their sexual negotiations; however, having a sample of all gay identified youth allowed us to evaluate sexual decision making among YGM without any confounding by differing experiences of sexual identity. Second, YGM in this sample were not asked specifically about the role of gender in their sexual decision making—this fact may leave room for interpreter bias in the beliefs and attitudes of these YGM around gender and sexuality; however, the theme of gender originated organically from the discussions of sexual positioning during anal sex. The regularity of this theme across transcripts validated the link between sexual positioning and ideas of gender roles among this sample. Third, this study had limited discussion about how race or ethnicity may interact with ideas about gender during sexual negotiation among YGM. Although other literature has discussed how race and gender may intersect within the sexual decision making of gay and bisexual men (Carballo-Diequez et al., 2004), we did not identify that theme consistently in our transcripts, and thus we believe it was outside the scope of this article. Finally, our eligibility criteria required men to have actively used a dating website in the past 3 months. This qualification may have skewed our sample toward YGM who are currently seeking romantic, long-term partnerships, a group that may have different beliefs than men who are not interested in these types of relationships. Future research expanding on how gender roles present in the sexual decision making of YGM who pursue only casual encounters may be warranted.

## Implications for HIV Prevention

YGM in this sample expressed fluidity in their identities and sexual behaviors. Consistent with national HIV prevention recommendations that call for developmentally appropriate interventions (Grossman et al., 2011), YGM in our sample distinguished themselves from older cohorts of MSM in their conceptions of identity and sexuality. Future intervention work would benefit from acknowledging that fixed sexual roles may not be the norm among younger generations of YGM and that the sexual decision making of YGM may be less bound by normative understandings of gender than older cohorts. In line with guidelines to involve couples in HIV campaigns (Grossman et al., 2011), YGM in this sample expressed that their sexual decision making was frequently contingent on relationship type or the preferences of their romantic, long-term partners. Incorporation of safety messages alongside messages around pleasure for long-term, romantic partners would serve to make HIV prevention materials more relatable and accessible to YGM. YGM's discussions of sexual positioning revealed much information about their social and psychological realities, which could be used to better tailor HIV prevention messages. Moving forward, we must continue to ask these questions about processes of sexual decision making, pushing for inclusion of other YMSM in this conversation in order to increase the scope of such messages and move toward successfully diminishing the increasing burden of HIV in these youth.

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## Note

1. All participants are discussed using pseudonyms followed by their age and whether they described themselves as more likely to top or bottom during anal intercourse.

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