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## Men, Sides, and Homosexism: A Small-Scale Empirical Study of the Lived Experiences of Men Who Identify as Sides

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### ABSTRACT

The present study contributes to recent scholarship on homosexuality and side sexualities by providing empirical evidence that supports stigmatizing societal responses to non-penetrative sexual practices among men who have sex with men as well as to those engaging in such practices. The study provides a close reading of two scenes of the series *Cucumber* (2015) which depict marginalizing attitudes toward a man who prefers non-penetrative to penetrative anal sex with other men as well as findings from interviews with men who identify as sides on a permanent or occasional basis. The findings confirm that the lived experiences of men who identify as sides are not different to the Henry's in *Cucumber* (2015), and participants of this study challenge the absence of positive representations of men who identify as sides in popular culture.

### KEYWORDS

Masculinity studies; sexuality studies; homosexuality; sides; social stigma; media

Empirical research suggests that among all the possible ways in which men who have sex with men (MSM) engage, anal penetration is the least frequently cited activity (Blumstein & Schwarz, 1983; Hellman, 2019). However, not only do socio-cultural perceptions and expectations regard penetrative sex as the *de facto* sexual activity of preference and engagement between and among MSM, but there appears to be a disregard of all other non-penetrative activities as insignificant, lesser, or even problematic behaviors (Hellman, 2021). The phenomenon whereby sexual activities other than penetrative ones are stigmatized has been termed *homosexism* (Hellman, 2019). There have been numerous explanations for the phenomenon of *homosexism* with attention to how it promotes and safeguards heteronormative ideas about non-heterosexual sexual practices, including the continuation of arguments in favor of the criminalization of anal intercourse among MSM as sodomy which can only be achieved if non-heterosexual sexual activities are solely linked to anal penetration (Hellman, 2021). However, the present research project aims to provide an empirical investigation into the relationship between hegemonic masculinity/masculinities and the phenomenon of

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homosexism put forward by Bollas (2021) who argues that “[...] situating non-penetrative practices in a foreplay-but-not-real-sex narrative enables tops and bottoms to confirm and validate their masculinity by emphasizing sexual prowess as the primary, if not sole, indicator of one’s masculinity, and by framing it singularly around penetration” (p. 1768). In other words, homosexuality promotes exclusive engagement with penetrative sexual practices, irrespective of the role one assumes as a proxy to one’s assertion of a dominant/dominating form of masculinity, and abstention from such practices by volition or circumstance as a proxy of a lesser form of masculinity, one that is stigmatized, isolated, and discriminated against.

Within such a sociodicy, tops—men who penetrate anally other men—assert their masculinity by assuming the role equivalent to that of the man in heterosexual sexual practices; bottoms—men who are anally penetrated by other men—assert their masculinity by enduring pain and by resisting societal norms and expectations around what it means to be a man. The latter, commonly referred to as power bottoms to further associate power with masculinity, is discussed in detail by Dean (2009) who argues that “[h]yper-masculinity accrues to the man who assumes what used to be thought of as the female role in homosexual relations. The more men by whom one is penetrated, the more of a man he becomes” (p. 50). It follows that the stigmatization of sides, that is those who are neither tops nor bottoms by not engaging in penetrative sexual practices, contributes or even strengthens tops and bottoms’ share to a heteronormative, or homonormative for that matter, understanding of masculinity. That is, if one cannot or does not want to participate in penetrative sexual practices, he is not enough of a man. Contrary to this assertion, Bollas (2021) argues for “[...] the potential of sides to facilitate and inhibit normative hegemonic structures” (p. 1761). However, prior to examining such a potential, it is important to establish and further understand how these sexual ecologies, where sides are excluded, are created and promoted. In April 2022, comedian Michael Henry posted a video on YouTube titled “I’m a Side.” Through comedy, Henry (2022) challenges existing stereotypes about men who engage in non-penetrative sex with other men and provides a vocabulary to people who do not know how to talk about their sexual preferences. Viewers’ comments suggest anecdotally the existence of many people who have experienced discrimination based on identifying as sides. The present study provides a more systematic analysis of the phenomenon by examining homosexuality in popular culture and its effects on the lived experiences of those identifying as sides.

For the purposes of this research project, Herek’s (2009) definition of stigma is activated so as to situate it away from the individual and closer to a societal level, both in terms of its mechanisms of manifestation and in relation to its effects. For Herek, stigma includes “[...] the negative regard, inferior status, and relative powerlessness that society collectively accords to

people who possess a particular characteristic or belong to a particular group or category” (p. 441). This transition from Goffman’s (1963) initial conceptualization of stigma is significant in that it allows for a more sociologically complete examination by focusing on social forces that contribute to stigmatization at an individual and collective levels; that is, one can examine stigma as a phenomenon by looking at specific societal mechanisms in isolation or by examining how such societal mechanisms work together as a network or system of (re)production of stigma. Further, stigma is viewed in relation to violence, following Pinker’s (1970) understanding of stigma as “[...] the commonest form of violence used within democratic societies” (p. 17), and Tyler’s (2020) reconceptualization of stigma as a contributing force of “[...] reproduction and distribution of social inequalities” (p. 17). Such a view of stigma further confirms Bollas’s (2021) understanding of homosexism as a means through which men can assert their position of power in society irrespective of their sexuality. This is significant in that it allows homosexism to be understood as a mechanism and not a phenomenon which, in turn, allows—if not calls for—an examination of its production and reproduction.

Indeed, the production and reproduction of social inequality has been discussed in the context of culture and cultural processes with a view of exploring “[...] the processes that contribute to the production (and reproduction) of inequality through the routine and taken-for-granted actions of both dominant and subordinate actors” (Lamont et al., 2014, p. 573). Stigmatisation is viewed as one of the contributing processes that generate inequality. As such, it is worth examining the role of cultural processes—and industries, I should add—in this production. Within cultural studies, the media have been studied in association to stigma and the process of stigmatization. Studies such as Wahl’s (1995) focus on the role of the media in the creation of stigmatizing attitudes against people who share certain characteristics/qualities. Heuer et al. (2011) engage in systematic studies of stereotypical portrayals that have the potential to encourage the perpetuation of stigmatization and its resultant attitudes against certain people/groups of people. There have also been studies examining the potential of media to decrease stigma through the promotion of positive portrayals of people/groups of people who have otherwise, or previously, been portrayed in a stigmatizing manner (Corrigan et al., 2013). It appears to be important, therefore, to engage in an analysis of how sides, MSM who do not assume the position of the top or the bottom when they engage in sexual activities, are portrayed in the media and to examine whether such portrayals might contribute to the stigmatization of men who have sex with men without engaging in penetrative sexual activities.

Popular culture and popular media more specifically are treated with attention to their pedagogical function in this article. Indeed, the relationship between media and matters related gender and sexuality has been well documented in the literature (Scarcelli et al., 2021). Studies have demonstrated the

role of media in defining and disseminating ideas about gender and sexuality in a way that not only normalizes but renders desirable certain forms and expressions of sexuality (Krijnen & van Bauwel, 2015; Ross, 2012). It follows that certain sexual practices among men who have sex with men can be presented as more desirable than others, leaving the latter in a precarious position, pray to negative societal attitudes toward those who show a preference for them. Alderson (2016), among others, situates this media-enabled normalization process within a neoliberal discourse whereby ideologies are shaped and reshaped by the needs of the market, but he also acknowledges the significance of television in particular in shaping norms around gay male sexuality and gay male sex more specifically. Indeed, critics' responses to the series *Cucumber*, especially those comparing it to the creator's previous work *Queer as Folk* (2019–2022, Channel 4), refer to the fact that viewers are less likely to be concerned about the explicitness of sex references and sex scenes in the series because, since *Queer as Folk*, they have been trained on watching men having sex with men (Lawson, 2015). This supports the view that popular media have a pedagogical role through which certain forms of sexual expression are normalized. In this instance, the critics refer to previous portrayals of sex between men in corporate mainstream media, particularly the explicit scenes in *Queer as Folk*. In these scenes, sex almost always involved penetration and, in the rare instances when it did not, non-penetrative sexual activities were justified in relation to lack of time/conditions that would allow the participants to engage in penetration instead of this being their choice.

Except from exploring whether popular media stigmatize certain sexual behaviors, it is equally important to examine whether such portrayals have an actual effect on men who assume the position of the side in sexual encounters with other men. That is, whether negative portrayals of sides are also stigmatizing is arguably dependent on whether those who identify as sides are negatively affected by them. Fiske (1988) supports the notion of meaning-giving being closely related to one's social context. In particular, Fiske argues that "[the] viewer makes meanings and pleasures from television that are relevant to his or her social allegiances at the moment of viewing" (p. 247). Here, Fiske supports the view that although there is no fixed meaning attached to a cultural product, individuals do not assign meanings to such works independently from one another. Rather, Fiske highlights the importance of one's sociocultural context and its impact on meaning making. Cohen (1991) further works on the issue of polysemic interpretation and analyses the significant of relevance, that is the relevance of one's identity or social position in determining interpretation/reading of text. Relevance, for Cohen, becomes "[...] the meeting place of the viewer's experiences with and knowledge of [...]" (p. 445) the focus of representation which, in turn, enables the formation of what Fish (1982) discusses as interpretive communities.

In turn, if the interpretive strategies are dependent on the interpretive community the viewers belong to, it is clear that what two people identify as stigmatizing might not be the same; their view will depend on their schemata which, in turn, are shaped by their socio-cultural context. Social viewer-response theory, much like social reader-response theory, is not yet another map to guide our understanding of narratives of any form or medium. By arguing that there is no one meaning to be discovered, the process of meaning-making is reversed. Rather than identifying the meaning that is attached to a given narrative, it allows us to examine the interpretive strategies a viewer might use when they attach meaning to a narrative. In turn, this gives us an insight into the interpretive communities that viewers belong to. In other words, by analyzing cultural products and the possible meanings that are attached to them, we get a better understanding of the audiences' communities. As such, the purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the effect of popular media in contributing to the stigmatization of non-penetrative sex for men who have sex with men. In particular, I aim to describe how non-penetrative sex among men is portrayed in popular culture, and to understand the effect, if any, of this portrayal on men who engage in such practices with other men.

The two questions that are to be answered in this study are:

1. How is non-penetrative sex among men who have sex with men represented in popular culture? and
2. What effect, if any, do such representations have on men who have sex with men who engage in non-penetrative sex?

## Methods

In order for the first question to be addressed, the study provides an analysis of two scenes from the series *Cucumber* (Davies et al., 2015), one where the partner of the main protagonist expresses his dissatisfaction with his protagonist's refusal to engage in penetrative sex, and another one where the protagonist talks about his preference to non-penetrative sexual practices. In doing so, I aim to provide an insight into how people who identify as sides as well as the responses they get from their peers are portrayed in popular cultural products. This was a particularly important first step as it provided an initial insight into commonly perceived understandings of and responses to side sexualities. Further to this, referring to popular cultural products was an important tool during the interview process that allowed participants to compare their own lived experience to the one portrayed in the series.

Interviews were used to address the second question and explore the extent in which media portrayals of side sexualities had an impact on the lived experiences of audiences. The interviews provided further insight into the way people who identify as sides view themselves in relation to how others

view them, the extent in which they experience social stigma, as well as the mechanisms they develop to avoid marginalization and social exclusion. Given the topic of this study, a purposive sampling technique (Flick, 2018) was employed whereby participants volunteered to participate by responding to an open call that was advertised on social media. Self-selection bias (Robson & McCartan, 2016) could not be eliminated as, arguably, those who responded to the call are likely to be people with strong feelings and experiences in relation to their preferred sexual practices. However, to address this, the interviews involved questions that prompted participants to reflect on the similarities of their own personal experiences with the experiences of other people they might know who share similar preferences.

There were a number of people who responded to the call, but this study is part of a larger project and reports on the data collected from the first three participants who were interviewed. Two of the interviews were conducted online, using a videoconferencing platform, while the third one was conducted over the phone as the participant was worried that their identity would be revealed if a camera was involved. Having watched the series *Cucumber* (2015) was not a requirement for participant selection; participants viewed selected scenes as part of the study. Prior to the interview, participants were briefed about the aims of the study, the researcher, and the topics that would be covered in the interview, and they were presented with an informed consent form which they had to sign and return to me. The interview was divided into three sections: background information, questions that relate to their experiences, and questions that relate to their exposure to depictions of non-penetrative sex in the media. Although this study forms part of a larger project that aims to provide a more thorough sociological understanding of men who identify as sides, it contributes to recent scholarship by exploring the role and effect of media representations of people who identify as sides.

## Findings and discussion

*Cucumber* (2015) is a Channel 4 TV series which follows the aftermath of Henry's, the main protagonist, fall out with his 9-year partner. The series can be viewed on its own or with reference to two other series created by Davies: *Banana* (2015, E4) and *Tofu* (2015, webseries). The titles of the series allude to different levels of erectile hardness. All three are set in Manchester, UK. *Banana* focuses primarily on issues LGBTQI+ youth face, while *Cucumber* is primarily concerned with matters that concern primarily gay middle-aged men. *Tofu* is a docuseries whereby people reflect or expand on topics that are addressed in the other two series, creating a link between what they watch in a fictional TV programme and their own experiences. *Cucumber's* exclusive focus on Henry's life and how a middle-aged, middle class gay man can navigate dating, sex, and kinship after the end of a long-term relationship

allows viewers to reflect on topics of ageism, body shaming, and intimacy within queer community. As the discussion that follows shows, the series addresses Henry's preference in non-penetrative sex in a stigmatizing manner. Firstly, the context within which non-penetrative sex is presented situates it as a symptom, instead of a preference or a choice, of being middle aged and not fit. That is, Henry is initially presented against his 9-year partner who, although has a similar age, appears to be taking care of his body image and overall fitness whereas Henry does not. Following their breakup, Henry is presented against his new friends who are all younger and very much focused on their body image. As such, Henry is consistently presented as undesirable which can lead viewers to understand his dislike for penetration as a projection of his low self-esteem.

Even though all episodes of the series *Cucumber* focus on Henry's sexual life to a bigger or lesser extent, it is the first and fourth episodes that present his decision not to engage in penetrative sex as problematic or a result of a possibly unearthed psychological trauma. In particular, the first episode is dedicated to explaining how Henry's longstanding relationship with Lance comes to an end. The triggering event appears to be Henry's refusal to Lance's marriage proposal, which happens not because Henry does not want to maintain his relationship with Lance, but because he is against the institution of marriage. However, as the episode unfolds, it becomes clear that Henry's refusal to engage in penetrative sex with Lance is perceived by the latter as rejection. In an attempt to provoke Henry, Lance arranges a threesome with a stranger they meet in a nightclub, something that Henry initially consents to but while they are on their way home, he starts to regret. When they are back home, and while Henry expresses his disagreement with the threesome, Lance responds

(talking to Henry) He is going fuck me. Francesco is going to fuck my ass. (talking to Francesco) Do you know why, Francesco? Do you know why I want it so fucking hard? Because it's going to be the first fuck I've had in 9 years. 'Coz he doesn't do it. Henry doesn't fuck. He never fucks. He doesn't fuck, he doesn't get fucked. He's a virgin. He's a fucking virgin. My boyfriend is a fucking virgin. 9 years I've waited. 9 years of tossing off. That's what we do: we wank each other off, we suck each other off, and that's it. [...]  
 (talking to Henry) All the porn you watch is fucking, so why don't you do it?

The scene continues with Lance having sex with the stranger while Henry walks out of the house. Not only does this exchange represent an exclusive engagement with non-penetrative activities as indicative of lack of attraction toward a partner, but it also presents a clear definition of what sex is considered to be. For Lance, the sexual activities Henry participates in are not regarded as sex, an observation that Hellman (2021) reports is common among gay men despite the fact that such activities are the most frequently cited ones.



In the fourth episode of the series, Henry has a discussion with a man he has just met about sex and his repulsion toward anal penetration. Henry's friend does not initially appear to share the sentiment and encourages Henry to reflect on the reasons that might have affected Henry's view on the matter. This alone, the need for Henry to justify his preference by reflecting on an incident or a cause confirms Bollas's (2021) suspicion about a normative view of and around sex that does not allow non-penetrative sex to exist as a legitimate form of sexual expression. In the discussion between the two men, Henry initially attributes part of his lack of interest in anal penetration to the aftermath of the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and the fear that was instilled in all gay men about the potential harm that could result from anal penetration. However, as the conversation continues, Henry explains how sex (in this case referring to penetrative sex) is not something that he genuinely enjoys; but rather something that is expected of him.

[man]: I think I kinda know what you mean a little bit with the sex, coz sometimes there is that pressure, the pressure to have sex; and you know why, don't you? Coz there is too much porn these days.

[Henry]: Tell me about it. [..]

[man]: It's all so technical these days; It's all top, bottom, vers, top, flick [..] A nice fuck is all well and good, but now it's like we're fracking each other. It's hydraulics involved.

[Henry]: And you know why? Because it's all about the ass. What about the front?

[man]: I like the front

[Henry]: Oh, I love the front. But, every one of these gay men just fuck, fuck, fuck. It's a form of prejudice. We must fuck, and be seen to fuck, or we are not gay enough. Sometimes. . . I just want to have fun. I just wanna be with someone and do ordinary things, not bloody athletics. I just wanna be (hesitates) happy.

Henry's last words in this scene illustrate what Hellman (2019, 2021) and Bollas (2021) define as homosexism, discussing penetration as a performative act that not only verifies one's sexuality but also verifies its actors as members of a community. In turn, lack of engagement with penetrative sex is a marginalizing and stigmatizing decision, especially if not caused by a trauma of sorts. Henry seems to suggest that penetration is viewed as an identity marker, rather than a sexual practice. This is not unlike what the three participants of this study confirmed. There were many similarities among their responses regarding how others perceived them with reference to their preference for non-penetrative sexual activities. For example, one of the participants explained that

[..] I find talking about this with my mates very awkward, which is why I avoid it. There is an underlining tone that there is something wrong with that. They have never told me explicitly, but you can sense it in those moments when they ask "why," trying to find what might be the cause of this problem. So, I would rather not say anything to anyone (participant 1).

When I asked another participant a follow up question to why they do not engage in conversations about this preference with their friends, they said “[...] it’s like coming out all over again. I had to come out as gay once, and now I feel like I have to come out as... what? If I do not like penetration, what does this make me? still gay? not for them” (participant 2). This particular comment is not very different to what Henry discussed with the stranger in episode 4 about the need “[...] to fuck and be seen to fuck, or we are not gay enough.” Participant 2 explained that they avoid having that discussion with their friends altogether because “[...] it’s easier that way; no questions, no explanations, no judgment,” and when I asked them whether this affects their wellbeing in any way, they answered “[...] I lost quite a few friends when I told them I am gay; I cannot afford to lose more now,” suggesting that talking openly about what they enjoy doing while having sex with their friends, a discussion that they said has a prominent role in their interactions with their friends, they prefer lying to telling the truth in fear of not only being mocked, but more importantly in fear of being marginalized.

The third participant of the study had a similar experience with the other two; however, they were persistent in referring to the past when they were prompted to discuss examples of incidents that made them feel excluded, marginalized, or stigmatized for that matter. I queried their use of past tenses in their answers, and they clarified that they no longer experience similar responses. They further explained that they are very open about what they like and what they do not like doing sexually, and that they discuss this not only with their friends but also with potential sexual or romantic partners of theirs. I tried to investigate whether there was a tipping point they could identify that changed the way they participated in discussions with friends and partners, what encouraged them to be more open and honest about them preferring to engage in non-penetrative sexual practices. They explained that “[...] I cannot see a tipping point universally or anything. But I am speaking for myself. I would say that my engagement with feminist and queer theory has changed, has shifted my opinions on a lot of things including sexual practices at least for the last decade” (participant 3). It became apparent that this participant had engaged in thinking about sex at various levels, not only its quotidian manifestation. This could, in part, explain why they were particularly forthcoming with their friends about their own preferences. However, it begged the question about the others; that is the people with whom the participant was friendly prior to their engagement with feminist and queer theory which is when their network of friends changed to the extent that they would not form meaningful relations with people who would have stigmatizing attitudes toward others.

When I asked participants to reflect on what they thought of or felt when they watched the two scenes from *Cucumber* (2015) I discussed above, one from episode 1 and the other from episode 4, they could immediately recall

incidents from their own life which were very similar—if not identical—to the ones portrayed in the series. One participant talked about a period where their friends were making “[...] kind of sassy and mean comments on (sic) my sexual practices and [...] the effect was momentarily I would feel some kind of shame” (participant 3), while another one was very emotional after watching the two extracts because

[...] these are so similar to so many experiences I have had in the past [...] and what is upsetting about this is that I don’t see any way out of this. We see Henry there talking about it. That’s good. People will get to see that there are some who prefer non-penetrative sex. But where is a resolution about the stigma? Where is a scene where Henry has non-penetrative sex unapologetically and where is a scene where Henry’s friends do not react in a different way when he talks about him spending a night wanking off with another man? I do not see anything positive about these two scenes (participant 2).

## Conclusion

Although the size of this study does not warrant generalizations to be made, the findings contribute to the discussion about homosexism and the place of men who identify as sides, occasionally or permanently, by reflecting on representations of side sexualities in popular culture, the extent in which these representations are similar to people’s lived experiences, and the effect they have on these people. Despite the small sample of subjects, the study provides early data from individuals, indicating tentative support for the validity of the concept of homosexism. Bollas (2021) briefly discusses stigmatizing representations of side sexualities in popular culture and this study, focusing on one series in particular, further confirms the lack of positive representation of men who have non-penetrative sex with other men. It is, therefore, important to note that the paper does not suggest a complete absence of cultural portrayals of people who engage in non-penetrative sexual practices. As Bollas (*ibid.*) notes, cultural portrayals of sides and their subjective erotic experiences have been documented in films, TV series, and magazines. However, such portrayals are not only infrequent, but they present those who identify as sides negatively, often as if having a deficiency, psychological or otherwise, that prohibits them to enjoy “real,” that is penetrative, sex. An important future research direction would be a systematic review of the effects of such a physical practice and the societal responses it generates on the mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of the individuals involved in it. The present study confirms that absence of positive attitudes toward non-penetrative practices is not solely to be located in popular cultural products; rather, participants of this study report on negative societal responses to non-penetrative sexual practices and those who engage in such practices, as well as the effects such societal responses have on them.

Not only did they use words such as shame and stigma to explain how they perceive such responses, but they further described isolation and self-exclusion as mechanisms they have developed to escape criticism and marginalization from their networks of friends and kins. One participant, in particular, referred to the series in focus, and they expressed their dissatisfaction with the absence of a resolution regarding the stigmatization of sides as not gay or men enough. Indeed, the interviews suggested that the participants were expecting the series to reach a point whereby non-penetrative sex would become normalized which, they hoped, could have a real-life effect in people to stop viewing non-penetrative sex as not sex. This is not to be mistaken as an argument of this paper supporting a romanticized association between cultural products and societal change; rather, it reflects the participants' dissatisfaction with the two excerpts from the series as well as their longing for more positive portrayals of non-penetrative sexual practices. Perhaps, an important next step would be an enquiry into the kinds of representation that people who identify as sides would like to see and the implementation of such representation. What remains an important finding, though, is people's persistence to define what is normal and what is not, irrespective of their own struggles with such practices.

### **Consent to participate**

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

### **Consent to publish**

Consent to publish has been received from all individual participants included in the study

### **Ethics approval**

Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of DERE—The American College of Greece (2022/21-November).

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