

“GAYS HAVE MONEY”: THE GENDERED NATURE AND MEANINGS OF TRANSACTIONAL SEX AMONG BLACK MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN IN SOUTH AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

- A number of quantitative studies show that transactional sex is common among MSM in Africa.
- However, most of these studies have been quantitative in nature and have not examined the phenomenon in detail to understand what these relationships entail and mean for the MSM involved.
- We define “transactional sex” as “having exchanged money, gifts, shelter or drugs for sex with another man.” We distinguish it from commercial sex work, which we do not report on in this poster.

STUDY QUESTION:

- We investigate the nature and meanings of transactional sex among Black MSM (BMSM) in South Africa and seek to understand how gender structures these particular relationships.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURES:

- Purposive sampling and snowball techniques were used to recruit Black men who have sex with men (BMSM) from four townships in Tshwane, South Africa into the study.
- Only men who reported engaging in anal, oral or masturbatory sex with at least one male in the preceding year were eligible to participate in the study.
- The main data collection strategies used were in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations of BMSM friendship circles.

DATA ANALYSIS:

- Interviews were transcribed verbatim and each transcript was coded by two researchers in ATLAS.ti using *a priori* codes.
- This poster is based on data from the “transactional sex” code and our analysis focused specifically on BMSM who reported that they had personally participated in transactional sex.

RESULTS

TYPES OF TRANSACTIONAL SEX

- #### “Involuntary” transactional sex
- Occurred mostly with regular partners.
 - Typically, the expectation for material rewards was not always communicated directly to the “paying” partner.
 - Some men, however, argued that material exchanges were a normal aspect of relationships and they did not mind providing or being provided for by their partners.

“I had a relationship with this guy and he was always in need of cash. When he is at my place he will take my things. I gave him money, clothes, anything...” (*feminine MSM, Mamelodi*)

“If I’ m dating somebody, yes, I will get those things, like this phone, I got it from my partner.” (*feminine MSM, Mamelodi*)

- #### “Voluntary” transactional sex
- Occurred mostly with casual partners and took place in alcohol establishments.
 - Accepting a drink from a male stranger was said to indicate consent to a sexual relationship.
 - Purchasing drinks for desired sexual partners provided men with an indirect and relatively safe way of identifying other MSM.

“In the township if someone buys you a drink it means that you are going to sleep with him.” (*masculine & feminine MSM, Soshanguve*)

“If he’ s the closet case, he will wink or buy drinks for you [and] you know there must be something.” (*masculine & feminine MSM, Atteridgeville*)

FACTORS DRIVING TRANSACTIONAL SEX

- There was a widespread perception in the townships that gay men were economically better off than others.
- “Gay” men were said to offer money and spend lavishly on current and potential sexual partners.
- There seems to be a scarcity of insertive sex partners among the feminine gay men.
- Poverty and economic hardships in the townships.

“There are expectations of gay guys. Every straight guy wants to be with you because they think that you have got money.” (*feminine MSM, Mamelodi*)

“There are gay people out there who would really like, they’ d meet you today [and] take you shopping, like from underwear to shoes, you got a whole outfit for Saturday night.” (*both feminine and masculine MSM, Atteridgeville*)

KEY MESSAGES

1. Transactional sex among MSM was gendered, with “feminine” gay identifying MSM more likely to have given money or material goods in exchange for sex with “masculine” non-gay identifying MSM.

Surprisingly, however, paying for sex did not always translate into sexual decision-making power for “feminine” MSM.

2. A substantial amount of transactional sex occurred in the context of alcohol consumption and was often a precursor to casual sex and sexual violence.

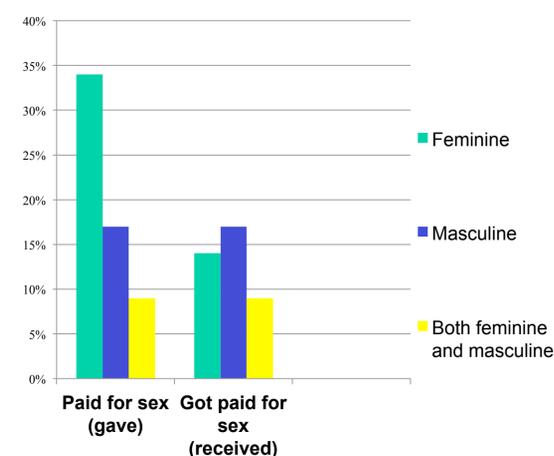
This makes the practice a potentially high HIV-risk activity.

3. We therefore recommend that HIV interventions take into account the dual role that gender and alcohol play in structuring the HIV-risk of MSM who engage in transactional sex in South Africa.

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS (N=81)

| | |
|---|-------------|
| Age | 20-39 years |
| Gender presentation of MSM in sample: | |
| feminine identifying | 35 (43%) |
| masculine identifying | 23 (28%) |
| identify as both masculine and feminine | 23 (28%) |
| MSM who engaged in transactional sex | 29 (35.8%) |
| Men who paid other men for sex | 18 (62%) |
| Men who were paid for sex | 11 (38%) |

Gender identities of MSM who engaged in transactional sex (n = 29)



MEANINGS OF TRANSACTIONAL SEX

- Transactional sex seemed to be a key part of the broader dating and “hooking up” culture among MSM in the townships. It facilitated the establishment and maintenance of sexual and romantic relationships.
- Transactional sex also met subsistence and consumption needs as illustrated by the nature of goods exchanged. These included shelter, airtime, assistance with payment of bills, mobile phones and money to purchase clothes, perfume and other desired consumption items.

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