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Richard Vytنيorgu

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Coming to Voice as Total Top or Total Bottom: Autobiographical Acts and the Sexual Politics of Versatility on Reddit

Richard Vytنيورگu, PhD 

School of Health and Social Work, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, UK

ABSTRACT

For gay, bisexual, and men who have sex with men (GBMSM), sexual versatility encompasses both insertive (top) and receptive (bottom) sexual practices. By contrast, “total top” and “total bottom” roles are often marginalized by those who advocate versatile roles for GBMSM. This article explores how GBMSM “come to voice” as total tops and total bottoms on the social media platform, Reddit. Reading posts and comments as autobiographical acts, the article analyses how total tops and bottoms assert the validity of their claim to sexual knowledge as total top or total bottom while negotiating the sexual politics of versatility on Reddit and beyond.

KEYWORDS

Autobiographical act; coming to voice; gay sex roles; Reddit; GBMSM; sexual versatility; sexual identity

Introduction

In contemporary gay, bisexual, and men who have sex with men cultures (GBMSM), anal sex role positionality continues to be hotly debated. Sexual versatility denotes the way in which GBMSM men engage in both insertive and receptive anal and/or oral sexual practices with each other. By contrast, being a *total bottom* or a *total top* indicates an exclusive preference for either receptive or insertive anal and/or oral sexual practices with other men. Where sexually versatile GBMSM either mix up sexual roles in a single sexual encounter, or simply switch roles depending on the sexual partner or partners in question, total tops and total bottoms emphasize their commitment to either insertive or receptive sexual practices—not both—regardless of sexual partner.

Sexual versatility is often praised by GBMSM themselves as being more open, flexible, and even more aligned with what gay sex is meant to be—freed from “heteronormative” expectations or “internalised homophobia” that prevents GBMSM from enjoying both insertive and receptive sexual behaviors. *Total top* and *total bottom*, on the other hand, typically denote a wholehearted and exclusive commitment to being either a top or a bottom, and may

CONTACT Richard Vytنيورگu  r.vytنيورگu@herts.ac.uk  School of Health and Social Work, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield AL10 9AB, UK.

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sometimes be linked to broader expectations around “power dynamics” and the interplay of different physiques and gender expressions in a sexual encounter.

To date, gender and sexuality scholars have offered useful empirical studies on GBMSM sexual positionality in different cultures (Brooks et al., 2017; Moskowitz & Garcia, 2019; Rios et al., 2019), in addition to studies exploring the gendered connotations and physical expectations surrounding GBMSM sexual positionality (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017, 2018; Winder, 2023). This research suggests that tops and bottoms can be reasonably thought of as specific subpopulations within GBMSM communities (Moskowitz, 2022), with different perspectives (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2019), childhood experiences of gender nonconformity (Cardoso, 2005; Swift-Gallant et al., 2021), adult gender expressions (Sánchez & Vilain, 2012; Swift-Gallant et al., 2021), and experiences of feeling marginalized (Brooks et al., 2017; Taywaditep, 2002). It is also accepted that preferences for being a top or bottom can change over the adult lifespan, or even vary according to perceived masculinity of a given partner: topping when a partner is perceived as more effeminate and/or with a smaller penis, and bottoming if a partner is perceived as more masculine and/or with a bigger penis (Moskowitz & Garcia, 2019; Moskowitz & Hart, 2011). But what happens when a top refuses to bottom or a bottom refuses to top, full stop? How do total tops and total bottoms negotiate the sexual politics of versatility, assert their own voices, and claim a valid understanding of their sexual preferences in a GBMSM culture frequently perceived as hostile to these?

This article explores how self-identified cisgender and transgender total tops and total bottoms write about their life experiences, as total tops and total bottoms, on the social media website and application, Reddit. Two specific subreddits, r/TopsAndBottoms, and r/askgaybros, contain the most concentrated level of discussion on Reddit about GBMSM anal sex roles and act as an archive for users’ comments that can be read through the lens of autobiographical acts and “coming to voice”. The article argues that “coming to voice” for total tops and total bottoms on these two, somewhat interconnected online communities, crucially involves justifying the validity of their claim to knowledge concerning their sexual preferences.

At the same time, what I am calling the sexual politics of versatility, is framed in these online communities as a competing claim to knowledge that attempts to undermine the efforts of total tops and total bottoms to come to voice and validate their own lived experience. While versatile-oriented users invoke discourses of limitation, internalized homophobia, heteronormativity, and lack of sexual knowledge to question total top or total bottom identities, total top and total bottom users respond by crafting a shared language of what has “always” been personally known to them, or of what feels “natural” to them sexually and what they now feel they were “born” to do and be.

In addition to contributing to knowledge of GBMSM sexual role positionality and its discussion on online media, the article highlights how comments on online social media communities such as Reddit can constitute autobiographical acts that demand to be read in ways that honor the individualized and non-systematic texture of autobiographical GBMSM narratives. This paper deliberately attends to the affective power of reading and interpreting autobiographical acts that seek to aid the coming to voice of a misunderstood and marginalized minority within the wider GBMSM community.

The article begins with reflections on methodology, coming to voice through autobiographical acts, and ethical considerations when engaging with sensitive online media content on Reddit. The article then explores the sexual politics of versatility on *r/TopsAndBottoms* and *r/askgaybros*. This section concentrates on how online users invoke versatility to assert their own claim to sexual knowledge at the same time as questioning or undermining the sexual preferences of total tops and total bottoms. The article then explores how self-identified total tops and total bottoms respond, by closely attending to their autobiographical acts and “coming to voice” narratives which re-assert the validity of their own claims to sexual knowledge and their professed sexual position identity. The article concludes by highlighting the importance of autobiographical approaches to GBMSM sexual positioning, due to their ability to highlight how validity of sexual knowledge and identity is closely connected to voicing how this knowledge is arrived at, through life experience and reflection.

Reddit

Reddit is a social media platform composed of subreddits devoted to topical discussions. While subreddits are comprised of registered members with usernames who create threads and comment on other people’s threads, the threads themselves—or topic discussions—within them are visible to the public. Subreddits are devoted to a range of topics and can vary in membership from single figures to the tens of millions, and each has their own members’ rules and moderation practices (Proferes et al., 2021). *r/askgaybros* is a subreddit with a membership of 371,000, as of June 2023 at the time of writing, and was created in November 2012. It describes its purpose as a place ‘where anyone can ask the manly men for their opinions on various topics. Advice. AskReddit style questions. A[sk] M[e] A[nything]. E[xplain] L[ike] I[“m] 5 [years old]. Everything in between’. The subreddit *r/TopsAndBottoms*, by contrast, is somewhat smaller, with 110,000 members at the time of writing, and was created in March 2014, partly in response, as we shall see, to the dominance of sexually versatile attitudes in *r/askgaybros* and the skepticism directed to total top and total bottom identities and practices. The About blurb of *r/*

TopsAndBottoms reads: “Gay sex: what’s hot, what’s not, and how to do it better”. As such, the two subreddits are somewhat interconnected, with some members posting in both subreddits and some threads referencing the other subreddit.

While Reddit has mostly been studied in computational fields (Proferes et al., 2021), it can also be approached as a “cyberspace” or “virtual field in which to observe the production of identities and sexualities” (Bury & Easton, 2022, p. 332). To that end, Reddit has also been studied using digital discourse analysis (Recuber, 2016), “unstructured observation” (see Hine, 2015), virtual ethnography (Foeken & Roberts, 2019), and “poststructural textual analysis” (Robards, 2017), among other approaches. I approached this media content through the lenses of autobiographical acts and “coming to voice”, recognizing that autobiographical acts are a “condition of social media participation” (Morrison, 2019, p. 46).

Coming to voice through autobiographical acts

Grounded in feminist traditions, coming to voice was identified as a key feature of women’s autobiographies (Smith & Watson, 1998, 2010), but has since expanded to consider postcolonial and queer voices (Bisson, 2019; Macdonald, 2013). As a concept, “coming to voice” demands an empathic embrace of the “transient, fragmentary, and enigmatic” nature of digital lives and the rhetorical and creative ways in which online users communicate aspects of themselves (McNeill & Zuern, 2019, p. 138). In this article, I am using “coming to voice” to identify processes whereby online users who feel their sexual identities to be vilified or marginalized respond to criticisms, justify their own claims to sexual knowledge, and articulate their sexual identities through the telling of sexual stories (Plummer, 1995).

Meanwhile, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that *autobiographical act* is a way of encompassing the diversity of ways individuals and groups represent aspects of themselves (2010). Moving away from literary notions of *autobiography*, *autobiographical act* is intended to democratize the autobiographical process and allow scholars in other disciplines to explore how people represent themselves. Specifically, Smith and Watson note that an autobiographical act can involve several acts, which bear witness to personal experience: “coming to voice, claiming social space, and insisting on the authority of one’s previously unacknowledged experiential history” (p. 85). In this article, I am using *autobiographical act* and *coming to voice* to frame the processes by which total tops and total bottoms claim the social space of particular subreddits and insist on the authority of their own “unacknowledged experiential history” and through this, come to voice as total top or total bottom. As an autobiographical act, these moments do not need to consist of linear life narratives, but short instances where a user discloses a personal experience

or perspective with the specific purpose of validating their knowledge and identity.

Other scholars have used the term “generous reading” to encapsulate an approach to reading and interpreting the “amateur and often ephemeral auto/biographical acts that characterize so many of the digital texts we now seek to understand” (McNeill & Zuern, 2019, p. 132). Generous reading draws from the auto/biographical critical tradition in asking of digital “texts”: “What is ethically and politically at stake in representing a life?” (McNeill & Zuern, 2019, p. 135). Focusing on how autobiographical acts on social media enable and *mediate* coming to voice for marginalized groups should be a key methodological consideration for reading digital GBMSM autobiographical acts.

Method

I first encountered r/askgaybros and r/TopsAndBottoms two years ago, and for most of that time I engaged in what Aimée Morrison has called exploring and engaging, traversing texts “rhizomatically, across webs of connection, in order to discern emergent patterns” (Morrison, 2019, p. 44). In May 2023 I then purposely searched each subreddit using the terms “total top” and “total bottom” in each, creating four sets of results of threads since each subreddit’s inception (two sets of results for each subreddit). I then scanned these results for relevance, selecting only those that dealt with the identity and sexual politics of being a total top or total bottom ($n = 62$ total). 35 threads were from r/TopsAndBottoms and 27 threads were from r/askgaybros. I then categorized these archived threads according to whether voices within them were from self-identified total tops, total bottoms, versatiles, or unknown—and whether they were the original poster (OP), or a respondent (Table 1).

I then close read the whole corpus, interpreting according to how selves and narratives were constituted, and focusing on the “interplay between platform, technology, and production” (Morrison, 2019, p. 46). I then subdivided the corpus into the different voices—versatile, total top, total bottom, and unknown—and re-read them again to listen for common themes until saturation was reached. The fact that more users self-identify as total tops or total bottoms on r/TopsAndBottoms than on r/askgaybros is not surprising, given the subreddit’s specific aim to provide a space in which users with top and

Table 1. Number of users by sexual role identification.

	r/TopsAndBottoms	r/askgaybros	Combined
Total Tops	34	11	45
Total Bottoms	45	11	56
Versatiles	5	5	10
Unknown	18	37	55
Total	102	64	166

bottom identities can be open about these, as well as allowing users the option to include a “user flare” which indicates sexual position identity. Similarly, the larger number of unknown users on r/askgaybros than on r/TopsAndBottoms, and the low number of versatile-identified users on both subreddits is also unsurprising. r/askgaybros does not have a remit for focusing specifically on sexual identities in the way that r/TopsAndBottoms does, and given the nature of the versatile comments that follow, users who are suspicious of polarized sexual roles altogether are unlikely to identify with one openly. Thus, for those users who advocate versatility without self-identifying as such, it makes sense, at least in the context of this paper, to refer to them as “versatile-oriented” users.

In line with guidance from other media scholars, my discussion of the material has anonymized the original authors of posts and comments, and at times engaged in paraphrasing or altering some words in a quotation to protect the privacy of the poster or respondent (Fiesler & Proferes, 2018, p. 10; Proferes et al., 2021). This practice, which otherwise might be accused of threatening the integrity of autobiographical narratives, is nevertheless consistent with a focus on autobiographical acts, which allow for the ephemeral, momentary, and somewhat fragmented nature of how digital selves enact themselves online. I have also omitted URL links to the original threads for the same reason, to protect user privacy (Greenhalgh, 2021).

The sexual politics of versatility

One of the most straightforward ways in which versatile-identified users on r/askgaybros and r/TopsAndBottoms respond to the notion of total tops and total bottoms is to express incomprehension. One user’s comment is typical: “I don’t understand total tops and bottoms. I can’t relate to any guy who does not want to fuck my ass as much as I want to fuck his”. Equally, this user “can’t understand any guy who cuts himself off from either side” of what he calls “the anal joy logic”, where “anal joy” involves both fucking and being fucked. Such joy, according to this user, should be “basic knowledge” for all gay men. For this user, knowledge of sexual practice is linked to relatability as another gay man, which in turn is phrased in the language of understanding (or not) specific people as much as practices. Similarly, another user adopts the language of what seems “obvious” to express incomprehension at total top and total bottom identity and practice: “Since it’s two guys it seemed obvious to me that they would fuck each other. As in automatically obvious; it never even occurred to me to think of this as something to have to think about”. Equally dismissive of more exclusive gay anal sexual roles and identities, this user adds a value judgment, calling total top and total bottom practices “insane” and totally outside his own experience and understanding of what it means to be gay.

Indeed, beyond simply expressing incomprehension, versatile-oriented users on these subreddits utilize a range of rhetorical strategies to undermine the basis of total top and total bottom sexual knowledge and practice, including (1) accusations of heteronormativity, (2) limiting sexual enjoyment and partners, and (3) even re-writing gay cultural history to make exclusive roles seem a rare, novel, and “extreme” thing, (4) in part fueled by technology and digital online sexual fantasy.

Invoking heteronormativity as a negative quality through which to undermine total top and total bottom identity and practice has a cultural precedent and gathered momentum during gay liberation in Western Europe and North America in the 1970s (Levine, 1998; Loftin, 2007; Stines, 2017). On Reddit, versatile-oriented users have suggested that total top and total bottom identities are “limiting” and “put us into heteronormative boxes”. Such total tops and total bottoms who articulate exclusive sexual roles are guilty of “hetero-centric viewpoints”. Another user writes of the “kind of rules imitating heterosexual masculine/feminine roles”, in which the total top is supposed to assume a masculine, penetrative role and the bottom a feminine, “passive” or submissive role (Murray, 2000). These criticisms are linked to those perspectives that suggest such roles are inherently limiting: “they just limit us”, says one user. Adherence to such “heteronormative” roles might even be evidence of “internalised homophobia”, as one user opined: “Why are you fucking a dude if you aren’t interested in his dick? Not even sucking a dick does sound like there are some mental barriers (internalized homophobia)”.

Indeed, not only are these exclusive roles seen to be constitutive of limited knowledge about what gay sexuality should encompass, excluding oneself from crucial “first-hand information”, but for versatile-oriented users, they also “seriously shrink the pool of potential long-term partners compared to someone who is more open to being versatile”. One user even suggests that these limitations are to some extent also relatively new. In a lengthy autobiographical post, this user states that when he came out in 1993, he heard very little about top and bottom roles, and when he did, they were “things you did, not something you are. Totally new”. This user suggests that increasingly there were two comings out: first as gay, and then as top or bottom, whereas “I thought this was all covered by being gay”. For this user, being gay is seen as synonymous with being sexually versatile, which to some extent is in agreement with historical observations around gay liberation (Odets, 2020). But what these reflections overlook are the ways in which male-male sexual and relational dynamics were structured, sometimes quite peaceably, by gendered and sexual polarities, long before gay liberation (Chauncey, 1994; Murray, 1996, 2000), and that so-called “heteronormative top and bottom roles” had a longer cultural pedigree that has also been explored transculturally, beyond the European and North American context, among global majority populations (Cardoso, 2005;

Guitoo, 2021; Msibi & Rudwick, 2015; Stief, 2017). Moreover, such users who invoke heteronormativity as a criticism also overlook the possibility that those who identify as total top or total bottom may actually invert gendered expectations by having a fem top and masc bottom pairing, although this was not common among the total top and total bottom users featured in this paper (Zane, 2021). In other words, fluidity of expression is not limited to versatile users.

Other versatile-oriented users focus on the apparent rarity of total top and total bottom identities and practices, as being on the “extreme ends of average homosexual experiences”, or they offer the suggestion that these sexual dynamics are “essentially fantasy/fiction. In the real world, people who are that strict their entire adult lives are very rare”. Indeed, r/TopsAndBottoms in particular is accused by one versatile-identified user as being “rife with those who fetishize these roles”.

Together, these rhetorical strategies combine to undermine the basis for the sexual knowledge articulated by total tops and total bottoms on these sub-reddit forums. The attempt to pinpoint these sexual dynamics within online sexual fantasy is also especially problematic, given that these subreddit forums in part exist to provide a space in which GBMSM can explore their sexual concerns and preferences and to feel that they are not alone in their struggles. While such social media, including other platforms such as Twitter/X and Tumblr, may indeed be used to mediate GBMSM sexual fantasy (Vytنيorgu, 2023; Wignall, 2022), such an assertion may also invalidate these users’ engagement with this technology and undermine the subreddits’ explicit purpose to be a place for people to ask questions and elicit responses. But perhaps more generally, these comments constitute a sexual politics of versatility that is territorial about what it means to be truly gay and to have sufficient knowledge of gay sexuality to satisfy a partner and even attract one in the first place. And these voices are not unique to these subreddit forums.

These subreddit versatile voices have also been echoed in LGBTQ+ blog posts and media articles online. Max Micellaf, for example, has linked top and bottom roles to an oppressive heteronormative dynamic that “being queer” is intended to subvert and overcome (2021). Writing for Gawker, Rich Juzwiak has argued that versatility is “what sets gay sex apart from the rest of the world” and his article adopts similar rhetorical strategies to the subreddit posts explored above, by highlighting the supposed heteronormative dynamics of top and bottom roles and the way they apparently limit sexual knowledge and pool of possible partners (2015). However, others, such as Henry Philyaw, writing for thebody.com, echo some of the critical responses generated by those on these subreddits who identify as a total top or total bottom. Philyaw focuses on the need to respect other people’s sexual experiences, preferences, and knowledge, and not to pressure them to become something they do not want to be (2021). I will now explore how

total tops and total bottoms on r/askgaybros and r/TopsAndBottoms negotiate the sexual politics of versatility on these subreddits.

The voices of total tops and total bottoms

Users who self-identify as total tops or total bottoms, either explicitly in their post or comment, or else through their “user flare” (a subheading to their username), employ a range of strategies to come to voice on these subreddits. Some users respond specifically to the sexual politics of versatility. Others explain why they are total tops or total bottoms in the first place, either because of circumstances, or, more commonly, because of a psychological “instinct” that celebrates opposites between “masc[uline] tops” and “[eff]fem-[inate]bottoms”, or because of a strong sense that this is “natural” for them or that they were “born that way”. Together, these forms of coming to voice represent a reassertion of the validity of these users’ claim to sexual knowledge about themselves in the face of perceived or actual hostility to it.

Total tops and total bottoms on r/askgaybros and r/TopsAndBottoms sometimes verbalize their awareness of versatile sexual politics in gay culture. “Everywhere I look,” writes one user:

There’s this constant pressure to become versatile or be left sexless and lonely. I’ve both heard and read that total tops/bottoms are “boring” (I hear that word a lot) and that there’s something wrong with them [. . .] It makes me feel crap [. . .] and because this is so personal and uniquely a gay man’s problem, there’s no one to talk to about it.

Leaving aside the issue of whether this is really “uniquely a gay problem” (as opposed to something also affecting bisexual men and other men who have sex with men), in another thread, a top-identified user undertakes a further diagnostic of the problem, which seems to affect the wider “LGBT community”, wherein “labels don’t matter”, “don’t define yourself”, “be open-minded”, “you don’t know if you like it unless you try it, etc.”. For this user, this rhetoric of open-mindedness can be experienced by total tops and total bottoms as an attempt to “make everyone blend together”. Indeed, if everyone followed this advice, “it would be a huge regress in gay rights”, because such pressure overlooks the nuances of gay sexuality, which cannot all be subsumed within a paradigm of sexual versatility.

When responding to perceived pressures to be versatile, total tops and total bottoms assert their own claims to sexual knowledge: “Some of us know what we want, and stick to it. That’s ok. I will never understand the ‘everyone should be vers’ mob,” says one user. Another user links this personal knowledge to bodily experience:

This is my body; not yours. I know what I’ve liked and I’ve tried lots of stuff [. . .] Don’t tell me I need to be vers and do things I don’t enjoy to conform to your opinion of what a gay man should be.

For these users, asserting the validity of their claim to sexual knowledge as total top or total bottom is also connected to how they envisage gay rights. Whereas some versatile users invoke gay rights in order to “liberate” themselves from what they perceive to be heteronormative, these total top and total bottom users invoke the same language of gay rights but for a completely different reason and end-goal.

One user also suggests that the criticisms only tend to go one way: “I don’t see a lot of bottoms and tops responding in a bad light to vers posts [. . .] But when a bottom/top related post appears, vers guys (though not all) always feel the need to say something, usually unwelcoming.” Indeed, one user, who helped initiate r/TopsAndBottoms in 2014 as a safe space for tops and bottoms, explained in one comment that

a lot of us have been burned by vers guys [. . .] A lot of us have had the negative experience of investing a whole evening or a long chat or whatever only to have a super uncomfortable experience with a vers guy who wants us to do something we don’t want to do.

Similarly, one bottom expresses how welcome r/TopsAndBottoms is for him:

It’s made me realise so much about myself. Kind of like how you look back on childhood and see clues about being gay. It’s making me look back at my sex life till now and go, “Oh, wow, I’m a total bottom”.

Almost as a riposte to those vers users who claim that this subreddit fetishizes exclusive anal sex roles and contains these within an unrealistic online fantasy world, these top and bottom users write autobiographically about the way in which this subreddit has helped them to come to voice as a top or bottom. One user—a bottom—even counters the vers argument that total tops and bottoms are somehow limited in knowledge, sexual skill, and pool of partners: “It’s not ‘selfish’ or ‘boring’ to do what you love. We’re fucking specialists in this community [. . .] our skills are superior because we don’t spread ourselves thin by doing everything”. This user asserts his claim to valid sexual knowledge in part by identifying himself with “this community”. Such a community is composed of “fucking specialists” whose claims to sexual knowledge cannot be undermined by vers rhetoric.

Before I explore psychological dimensions of being a total top or total bottom, for some who identify as such, their reasons are more circumstantial and are often forgotten by vers users who criticize them for being limited, selfish, or narrow. For one user, who engaged in top or versatile roles in relationships for “many years”, it was only when depression and diabetes-related erectile dysfunction occurred that he became a total bottom. But even here, he has come to feel “at home” in this role and “the natural place I want to be”. Another user says that he only tops because of the preparation that can go into bottoming: “it just isn’t worth it for me”. In short, these users offer

a useful reminder that sexual role preferences can also be guided by factors outside someone's control, whether this is due to erectile dysfunction (Ussher et al., 2017), prostate cancer (Tatum et al., 2023), colorectal health problems (McDonagh et al., 2018), or even intolerance to pain associated with being a bottom which therefore impacts a man's ability to find bottoming pleasurable (Grant, 2020). Different life experiences can affect how GBMSM move between roles, often over time, and how these shifts in identity or role affiliation impact men's health and wellbeing (Pachankis et al., 2013).

But perhaps the most common reason for circumstantial identification as a total top or total bottom is due to perceived penis size. One bottom explains that because his penis "lacks girth," he thinks most gay men would reject it: "I just feel more confident and true to myself when I don't focus on my penis and I just let myself be what I am, a bottom." Another bottom user focuses especially on size: "My penis is on the small size so I don't feel qualified to be a top." But this quality is aligned with other physical qualities this user identifies that make him feel suited to being a bottom, including a thin build and light body hair, as well as the fact he does not like the feeling of inserting his penis into anything. For this bottom, these physical aspects, which seem defined by his perceived penis size, stimulate his identification with being a bottom. The suggestion for all these users is that if circumstances were different, would they identify strictly with being a bottom?

While it is important to highlight the existence of top and bottom voices that relate medical or physical reasons for identifying with that role, many self-identified total tops or total bottoms on these subreddits underscore the psychological dimensions that energize their sex role identities, including enjoying sexual and romantic opposites, and reflecting on the "naturalness" of their preferences and that they were born to be this way. Together, these modes of coming to voice concretize the validity of total top and total bottom claims to sexual knowledge in the face of perceived versatile criticism.

As one "pure top" user states, "it's not just the physical sensation [of anal sex], but the mental aspect of it" that is important to him. "Even before I had sex," he explains, "when I imagined sex with a guy, I was always the top. Always on top, using those hips as handles to fuck a gorgeous hole." For this top, the physical sensation is clearly important, but it is the psychological aspect that galvanizes his identity—something he felt he had before he even had sex. A bottom user explains in more detail that at least for some people,

being top or bottom is as intuitive and intrinsic as being straight or gay. It's not some arbitrary preference. When a guy has me pinned on my back as he is thrusting into me I just know it's all I ever wanted to do.

Another user even goes so far as to say that "vers guys will never know that special magnetism between a total top and a total bottom. Everything just fits together so well." The "intrinsic" and "intuitive" way of identifying with total

top and total bottom roles links to a special form of knowledge perhaps even denied to more versatile inclined men. There is a “magnetism” that arises from not having to negotiate sexual roles at the time: “no one has to argue about who is doing most of the topping or bottoming”.

Indeed, part of this “magnetism” seems linked to the way in which total top and total bottom users on these subreddits voice their preference for sexual opposites that even extend far beyond sexual preferences, to include broader themes around gender expression and body types. One top explains that although he respects other people’s right to be versatile: “I just don’t share it . . . as 100% top, I enjoy my polar opposite . . . a submissive for my dominance, a concave to my convex, a feminine to my masculine.” This user crafts a series of oppositional metaphors to encapsulate the way in which he thinks about what sex means for him. Indeed, one could even suggest that this user has re-written the “anal joy logic” proposed by a versatile user (see above), to opposite conclusions. For this user, “anal joy” seems to lie in precisely restricting oneself to what one can do best, and by partnering with a “polar opposite”. Another top admits, similarly, that

It turns me on to think that I’m fundamentally different from my bottom, that we have different needs [. . .] It’s so hot when my bottom is the opposite from me [. . .] The ideal bottom for me is one that is entirely focused on their ass and sees themselves as my beta wife.

To re-assure others in the thread, he claims that this preference does not “mean I’m not romantic.” However, “I’m a man, and I fucking love pussy.” This top unashamedly voices his preferences for a “polar opposite,” and states that a large part of the excitement in his sexual experiences comes from this opposition manifesting itself. While this top frames his oppositional preferences in gendered terms (“I’m a man;” “beta wife;” “pussy”), the earlier top couches them in terms of dominance and submission as well as masculinity/femininity.

Crucially, total tops and total bottoms tend to link this preference for opposite partners to a personal knowledge that this feels “natural” to them or that they were born this way. Especially for total bottoms, who may also see themselves as “effeminate”, the combination of their sexual role preferences, gender expression, and desire for their opposite, combines to represent a “package” that is felt to be in-born and confirmed when total tops validate them by expressing sexual interest in them in a culture that can routinely denigrate effeminate gay men (Brooks et al., 2017; Reilly et al., 2022). As one bottom says, “I honestly feel there are some vers guys who simply don’t get the fact that there are people who are exclusively naturally bottoms or tops”. For some users, this knowledge has always been with them: they have felt that their sexual preferences were natural from the start. One bottom writes that “from the moment I first thought I was gay, I thought I was a bottom, and this was in

my early teens”. Similarly, another bottom admits that he knew he was a bottom “pretty much from day one. I realized I was a total bottom when I found I wouldn’t get hard without something stuck up my ass or at least it being played with”.

For others, however, their sexual knowledge as a total top or total bottom is sparked after their first sexual experiences with other males. One bottom’s experience highlights the role that early experiences of shame can play in delaying realization of bottom preferences:

When I was younger I didn’t fully accept being a total bottom. I once met a man for a hookup with the aim of being a top with him. But once we met and got down to it he took out a condom and put it on himself. It all just naturally happened and I let it. Afterwards he said I gave off vibes that I wanted to be fucked. It was then I realized I was just naturally submissive and was just naturally a bottom. And I’ve not had any interest in topping since that day.

This bottom’s autobiographical narrative ties together several important aspects this paper is concerned with: early hesitation to identify as a total top or bottom; the role of embodied experience in stimulating intuitive sexual knowledge; and the importance of self-reflection leading to notions of what “has always been there” or what “feels natural”. The narrative also reads like a “coming out narrative”, looking for signs or “vibes” that others could sense but that one has not admitted to oneself, yet. As one bottom says, “some of us are just built differently”, or, as rhetoric scholar Timothy Oleksiak has suggested, for some, “bottoming is carried in the body” (2022, p. 358). And it can take a sexual experience to come to realization about embodied knowledge. One top also offers a similar narrative:

I tried bottoming when I first knew I was gay. Tried topping and loved it. I was built to fuck ass. It’s what I live for. I have no interest in bottoming and no plans to do it ever again. But I love to top.

This top uses the same language of being “built” in a way that preconditions him to specific sexual preferences, which is something that also extends to other gay identities. For example, a trans gay bottom also invokes the same rhetoric, but for different reasons: “the ‘total bottom’ role is really affirming for me because I love being a guy’s pussyboy twink bottom. It makes me feel so desired for the body I actually have.” Both *pussyboy* and *twink* are gay slang terms that can denote effeminacy and bottom sexual preferences, but for this user, the same discourse of what feels “natural” is equally useful, but to validate a claim to sexual knowledge that is different to that advocated by cis gay bottoms. Despite this difference, the rhetoric of what feels “natural” or “in-born” remains important in helping total tops and total bottoms come to voice and defend their claim to experience their gay sexuality in this way. And the subreddit itself—*r/TopsAndBottoms*—provides the safe space in which to offer mutual encouragement. As one top says to a bottom, “don’t change

yourself to suit others, just find a real top and take that fucking dick like you were born to do”.

Limitations and future directions

While this article contributes to understanding of GBMSM sexual role identities, especially online, there are also limitations of the article. Although Reddit is a key digital platform where GBMSM can discuss sexual roles and identities, it is far from the only one: Quora, Twitter/X, and to some extent Tumblr, among others, are also important in shaping online discussions around sexual roles and identities. Moreover, while it is important to acknowledge the role and dynamics of online sexual discourses, it is hard to make generalizations about the offline world. Put another way, it might be asked whether what I've observed on Reddit is a reflection of larger GBMSM culture, or just a reflection of this particular subculture of online discourse.

Platforms like Reddit afford users specific ways to engage with the platform, which include anonymity and, depending on the subreddit, limited moderation and censorship. Platforms such as Reddit can also be used to circulate sexual fantasies, which blur boundaries between the sexual and non-sexual. Further studies on GBMSM sexual role identities might combine attention to online media with offline focus groups or interviews, to determine if and how perspectives and attitudes change offline. Thematically, future studies might also explore the ways in which identities such as the *side* – which reject anal sex completely, interact with and respond to identities formed around anal sex practices (Bollas, 2023). They might also dedicate more space to trans top and bottom identities.

Conclusion

The autobiographical acts explored on these corners of Reddit emphasize the transient, fragmentary, and enigmatic nature of digital lives and the rhetorical and creative ways in which online users communicate aspects of themselves (McNeill & Zuern, 2019, p. 138). But while the autobiographical remains a pivotal way of understanding how gender and sexual minorities “come to voice,” it is especially significant for the ways in which self-identified total tops and total bottoms on Reddit assert the validity of their claim to sexual knowledge in the face of perceived versatile criticism. Where versatile-oriented users invoke rhetoric around limitations, selfishness, heteronormativity, and internalized homophobia in relation to exclusive top and bottom sexual roles, total tops and bottoms draw on their experiences and feelings to assert their own sexual identities and preferences. r/TopsAndBottoms in particular offers tops and bottoms a safe space in which to explore challenges and share personal experiences not only of gay sex, but of navigating the wider sexual politics of

versatility they experience elsewhere on Reddit and online, as well as in “real life” through encounters with sexual partners.

This article has argued that Reddit is an especially useful media platform to engage affective practices of reading and interpreting that highlight the epistemological work that autobiographical acts can do, especially for shaping GBMSM sexual identities and rhetoric. Subreddits are not only spaces in which users can seek answers to questions; they mobilize sexual epistemologies which respond to perceived hegemonic forms of sexual knowledge. For many of the total tops and total bottoms whose autobiographical acts I have foregrounded, their sexual knowledge feels “intrinsic” and “intuitive,” embodied and deeply constitutive of their sense of self as GBMSM. Indeed, for some of the total tops and total bottoms, responding to the sexual politics of versatility is intricately connected to taking ownership and defining what it means to be gay more broadly, whether one is cis or trans. Coming to voice for such users not only involves navigating specific online counter-voices, but negotiating the cultural weight of histories of gay liberation, in which sexual versatility and masculinity have been foregrounded. But, as one user says, if someone made sexual roles “political with me [. . .] I’d throw at them that gay rights aren’t about everyone being versatile, but about each gay having the right to choose what they’re comfortable with”.

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ORCID

Richard Vytņiorgu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9322-3155>

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