

# After-nine, 429, he-she, stabane, and gay, bisexual and other men sleeping with men: Diversity in Black South African MSM identities and implications for HIV prevention

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## KEY MESSAGES

- In South African townships, as in other societies where more extensive research has been done, the concept of MSM (men who have sex with men), which has been widely adopted in HIV prevention, conceals a rich diversity of same-sex expressions.
- Same-sex expressions among Black South African MSM differ on several intersecting dimensions: (1) self-labeling; (2) gender identification; (3) sexual interest in terms of preference for partner type and sexual role; (4) exclusiveness of same-sex attraction; and (5) sense of control and protection in sexual interactions.
- For HIV prevention to be effective, the diversity in MSM expressions and how these expressions structure sexual interactions and social networks need to be taken into account, and prevention strategies tailored to the realities of local sexual cultures and networks must be implemented.

## INTRODUCTION

- Men who engage in sex with men have been grouped together under the label MSM.
- The concept obscures the diversity in same-sex sexual expressions that needs to be understood to effectively target HIV prevention.
- We set out to explore the diversity of same-sex sexual expression among Black South African men who have sex with men, and the way in which this diversity constructs sexual interactions and social networks.

## RESULTS

### Sexual and Gender Identities

- Despite the diversity of sexual minority labels, most men identified as “gay.” Men who did so include predominantly men who saw themselves as relatively more feminine, felt like or saw themselves as a woman. “Gay” included “drag queens” and transgendered persons.
- A sense of femininity was based on one’s physical appearance, personal characteristics, activities, ways of dressing, moving, and expressing oneself. A few gay men attributed their relative sense of femininity to the environment, which perceived them as not being “real men.”
- Several men called themselves straight or bisexual. Gay men reported that some of these men treated them negatively during the day but showed sexual interest at night (resulting in the label “after nines” applied to them by gay men). All straight and bisexual men saw themselves as “masculine.”
- Few men did not want to label themselves or adopted idiosyncratic labels such as “a free spirit.” Not adopting a label was sometimes associated with ambivalent feelings about same-sex sexuality.
- While most gay men said to have known they were different since they were young (based on gender nonconforming interests), straight and bisexual men were more likely to have discovered their same-sex sexual interests during chance encounters.

### Sexual Partner and Role Preferences

- Like their sexual identities, the men’s sexual preferences and practices also seemed to be strongly gendered.
- Most men who identified as “gay” preferred masculine partners and to be the receptive partner in anal sex; for some of them being the receptive partner was the only way they wanted or could have sex.
- A subset of gay men, less outspokenly feminine, saw themselves as versatile. Although less outspoken, these men prefer sexual partners that are not obviously feminine.
- Straight and bisexual men exclusively said to play the “male part” i.e. the insertive role in anal sex; they usually prefer sex with feminine men. Some of these men engaged with gay men, initially assuming they were women.
- While love and intimacy was more common in the gay men’s narrative, for straight and bisexual men sex was predominantly about pleasure. Ongoing relationships between straight/bisexual men, usually simultaneously involved with a woman, and gay men did occur.

### Sexual Interactions and Social Networks

- Gendered sexual identities construct sexual interactions and social networks.
- Most “gay” men, specifically the ones preferring to be “the bottom,” didn’t have sex with each other, even though they socialized and formed strong bonds.
- Versatile gay men shunned having sex with the more feminine ones, but didn’t avoid them socially.
- Straight and bisexual men predominantly had casual sex with gay men; social associations with gay men were limited.

## METHODS

### Participants, Procedures, and Data Analysis

- 81 Black males from 4 townships in Tshwane, South Africa, were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling techniques.
- Men who reported engaging in anal, oral or masturbatory sex with at least one male in the preceding year were eligible to participate.
- Age range 20 to 39 years; M = 25.16 years
- Main data collection strategies: in-depth interviews with topics including sexual and gender identity, sexual attraction and behavior, preferences for partner types and sexual roles, sexual interactions and sense of control
- Using ATLAS.ti software, transcripts were first coded with a set of concept-driven codes related to the overall study’s research questions and then with data-driven codes related to identity and practices.
- This poster is based on data from the following a priori codes: sexual identities, gender presentations, experience of same-sex sexuality, openness about sexuality, sex with women, unsafe and safer sex practices, and understanding of the MSM concept.

### Sexual Labels

In the South African context, there is a multiplicity of labels to denote MSM: some are derogatory (especially if used by non-gay persons), some are only used by insiders, some are idiosyncratic and only understood by a few insiders, some labels are used for specific kind of MSM (e.g., those who prefer receptive or insertive anal sex, identify as a woman or as straight during the day but demonstrating interest in men at night).

Labels other than gay, bisexual, drag queen, transgender, include:

- *Stabane, stuzana, gemmi* (for gay men, demeaning)
- *Maho, magene* (men who are bottoms)
- *Trasi, skezonke* (men in the wrong body, persons having a penis and a vagina)
- *Pancake, double adaptor* (men who engage in both receptive and insertive anal intercourse)
- *Sjotsane* (from the English “excuse me,” because gay men are assumed to say that a lot)
- *Two-in-one* (bisexual)
- *After-nine, panstula* (straight men who, “after nine” show sexual interest in men)
- *Moffie, watermuis, tarashushu* (feminine gay men)
- *Njonga, mohosa* (men who are top, “real” men)
- *He-she* (transgendered persons)
- *Konkoni* (homosexual man)
- *429* (dial your phone to check this one)

### Control and HIV Risk

- Control in sexual interactions was gendered as well, with masculine men more often being in charge while feminine men were more likely to surrender control.
- There were, however, feminine men who clearly set boundaries and who took the lead, especially when straight or bisexual men were inexperienced.
- HIV risk was most frequent in casual sex affected by alcohol or in ongoing “trusted” relationships; not using condoms was often the preference of the masculine partner.
- Almost all participants who reported being HIV positive were feminine or transgendered persons, who preferred receptive anal sex.

In general, do you feel you have control when you sleep with other guys?  
“I am the one who is in control.”  
What makes you to be in control?  
“Because I take the other person as a woman, so he must not control me”

*Masculine, straight-identified man*

## CONCLUSIONS

- Sexual expression among Black South African MSM is strongly gendered, with “gay” in most cases implying being “feminine” and preferring receptive anal sex. Fewer gay men preferred insertive anal sex or saw themselves as versatile; non-gay identifying men tend to exclusively engage in insertive anal sex.
- The scarcity of insertive partners within this MSM population contributes to a power disadvantage for feminine gay men and promotes sexual risk, which is exacerbated by the adherence to traditional gender roles.
- Feminine gay men (“bottoms”; who rarely have sex with one another) and “versatiles” socialize and can therefore be reached with HIV prevention as a group; straight and bisexual men only connect with gay men through individual links and need to be addressed through special outreach.

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