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‘I don’t want to have Sex as a Woman’: A qualitative Study exploring Sexuality and Sexual Practices of Drag Queens in Germany

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Drag queens are typically gay men who perform as caricature-like women. They thereby publicly challenge ‘naturally’ binary gender role categories, though it remains unclear how that interplays with their private (e.g., sexual) lives. This study seeks to answer this question by exploring the sexuality and sexual practices of drag queens. Employing a critical realist approach, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted in Germany, with questions focusing on the drag queens’ views on sexuality and sexual positioning. By adopting a thematic analysis, three main themes were identified: natural versus artificial identity; advocacy for sexuality; and rejection of heteronormativity. Results suggest that the primary intention of drag queens is to challenge heteronorms, while they regularly adhered to these privately. This illustrates the distinction made by the participants between their ‘public’ persona, an artificial character that lacks sexuality, and their ‘private’ life (e.g., sexual practices), shaped by an ‘inborn’ sexuality.

Keywords: sexuality; drag queen; sexual positioning; sexual health; qualitative; LGBT health; sexual identity

Introduction

Western societies typically stigmatize any transgression of the gender binary, such as the impersonation of a female character by a male performer (Underwood & Schacht, 2004). Drag queens are often marginalized for being too feminine, flamboyant, and promiscuous, and therefore experience abuse and exclusion not only from outside, but also inside the gay community (Berkowitz & Belgrave, 2010; Berkowitz, Belgrave, & Halberstein, 2007). At the same time, drag queens are often admired as advocates for LGBTQI+-rights, regarded as important for social change, and possess a celebrity status, characterizing them as a distinctive subgroup within the gay community (Berkowitz & Belgrave, 2010; Buetti, Martinello, Moreau, Lapointe-Harris, & Ladouceur, 2016). Despite the unique experiences drag queens face, they still receive

little attention in research, making them a continuously understudied population (Knutson, Koch, Sneed, & Lee, 2018).

To this day, there is no consistency regarding the definition of drag queens. Taylor and Rupp (2004) define them as “gay men who dress and perform as but do not want to be women or have women’s bodies” (p. 115). This definition is problematic, as it recreates binary categories of gender and sexual orientation. Although most drag queens identify as gay cisgender men and do not want to be women, there is a variety of other gender identities and sexual orientations within the drag community (Berkowitz et al., 2007). For this reason, Knutson et al. (2018) proposed a different definition, arguing that “self-identification as a drag queen is the best characteristic to distinguish drag performers from others who cross-dress or who parody gender in public arenas” (p. 33). Though it is vague, it does not rely on pre-existing categorizations, making it a suitable definition for this study.

Drag queens combine their often caricature-like feminine appearance with a male identity and can thereby fall outside society’s gender norms by challenging the binary understanding of gender. The creation of a different character can be regarded as a creative expression of the performer, and might allow an exploration of personality traits that would be suppressed without the ‘mask’ (Strübel-Scheiner, 2011). Therefore, some performers consider the drag queen to be a part of their personality, suggesting a complex interaction between different parts of the same identity (Egner & Maloney, 2016). On the other hand, drag can be portrayed as a mere profession, excluding the female character from the performer’s identity (Berkowitz et al., 2007). This suggests that drag performances, and thereby the performers themselves, could consist of a multitude of experiences.

Only few studies have looked at personal experiences and views of drag queens. Knutson, Koch, Sneed, Lee, and Chung (2019), for instance, examined the role of gender in the drag queens' lives by focusing on the internal experiences of the performers themselves. They outlined a separation between gender identity (the internal identification as cisgender men) and gender performance (the external expression as drag queens) – essentially demonstrating a differentiation between the drag queens' private persona and the public figure. Gender identity and performance exist in a complex interaction with societal expectations, as these expectations impact on the way performers design their representations as different genders. Although the authors acknowledged the potential impact of social norms on sexuality, their main focus was on gender. To this day, research examining drag queens' sexuality and their sexual health in-depth is lacking.

When investigating sexuality – anything socially defined as erotic, such as desires, relationships, practices or identities – it is important to take theories about gender into account (Jackson & Scott, 2010). Gender is a social division that splits individuals predominantly into two discrete and hierarchical categories associated with certain roles. Gender roles are constructed by social and cultural contexts, which assign masculinity and femininity contrary traits and behaviors. Aggressiveness, for instance, is typically viewed as masculine, while gentleness is viewed as feminine (Gough & Robertson, 2010).

Gender categories further have an impact on our understanding of sexuality. The homo/hetero binary, for instance, is based on the differentiation between two genders, distinguishing male and female homosexuality from heterosexuality (Jackson & Scott, 2010). Furthermore, gender roles shape sexual practices, as they are not defined by

biological traits, but by the concept of sex embedded in our historical and cultural context (Tiefer, 2004).

Sexual positioning during men's anal sex seems to be particularly influenced by notions of masculinity and 'straightness' (for insertive partners), and femininity and 'gayness' (for receptive partners) (Johns, Pingel, Eisenberg, Santana, & Bauermeister, 2012). Hence gay men use the labels 'top', 'bottom' or 'versatile' to state their preferred positioning (Dangerfeld, Smith, Williams, Unger, & Bluthenthal, 2017), which is argued to also be an important aspect within sexual health. Sexual positioning is described as recreating gendered hierarchies and power differences, complicating the possibility of initiating condom use for receptive partners (Hoppe, 2011). This may adversely affect people's health, since receptive anal sex entails the highest risk of HIV-contraction (Vittinghoff et al., 1999).

While the typical association of tops as dominant and bottoms as submissive seems to follow heteronormative ideas about sex, there are certain attempts to break with this notion. According to Johns et al. (2012) some men who have sex with men (MSM) call themselves "bower bottoms", taking control during anal intercourse despite being the receptive partner. Furthermore, the study describes versatile as the ideal within the community, since it breaks with the notion of being "too masculine" or "too feminine". Although these labels are widely used, they are argued to be rather fluid, representing a complex interaction of social and cultural norms instead of a mere preference (Dangerfeld et al., 2017; Moskowitz & Roloff, 2017).

In Germany, research on the sexuality of LGBTQI+ individuals is scarce. While the country has a history of prosecuting sexual minorities during Nazi-Germany, it made significant advancements towards equality, particularly since the decriminalization of male homosexuality in 1994 (Schwartz, 2021), for instance by

legalizing gay marriage in 2017 (Könne, 2018). Still, research within the German context, particularly regarding sexual practices is lacking. Only one study estimated sexual positioning of MSM in Germany by analyzing dating app profiles, suggesting that around one third of men identify as versatile, while both ‘active’ and ‘passive’ anal sex were listed as preferences by approximately 20% in each group (Scholz et al., 2019). However, the meaning of such labels for these men and their experience of sexual positioning was not explored, further highlighting the need to address this gap.

Drag queens, as transgressors of typical gender norms, may have unique views on topics regarding gender and sexuality. Since drag is generally described as having positive effects on the performers’ health by normalizing their ‘divergent’ sexual orientation and offering an outlet for negative emotions (Knutson et al., 2018), their views might give new insights into the sexual health of gay community subgroups. This study aims to examine how doing drag interplays with the performers’ private lives, more specifically their sexuality, and is guided by the following research questions: How do drag queens frame their sexuality? What are their views on sexual positioning?

Methods

This study is situated within a critical realist approach. From such a perspective, knowledge is not considered as a direct reflection of ‘reality’, but as socially produced and situated within a particular context (Willig, 2013). It is thus not concerned with the identification of universal ‘truths’, but rather looks at the consequences of such ‘truths’ (Sullivan & Forrester, 2019). This study follows Gough and Robertson’s (2010) approach to critical realism for men’s health, which acknowledges gender as a social construct, and questions hegemonic masculinities and power differences. This framework does not aim towards creating ‘facts’, but wants to contribute to a better

understanding of masculinities by questioning current masculine ideals. It also allows an in-depth and critical examination of sexuality and sexual practices.

Narratives are deemed as particularly important within a critical realist framework, since they can reflect an interplay between structural conditions, culture, and the individual. Language expresses thoughts and actions, which can be regarded as cultural reactions to structural pressures (Porpora, 2015). A qualitative design is therefore the preferred methodology (Willig, 2013), examining personal accounts that focus on the participants' experiences with and views of their sexuality.

For data collection, self-identified drag queens from in and around Munich, Germany, were interviewed by the first author, guided by an open-ended interview schedule developed for this study. The semi-structured interviews started with general questions about doing drag, continued with questions about the participants' sexuality as well as their views on gender roles before asking more specifically about sexual positioning and sexual interaction as drag queens (see appendix 1). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, including speech repetitions and hesitations. The extracts used in this paper remain 'uncleaned', to convey adequate context and to affirm the findings of the analysis (Eldh, Årestedt, & Berterö, 2020). The interviews lasted for an average of 50 minutes, ranging from 30 minutes to 1 hour and 17 minutes. To ensure that ethical requirements were met, all data were anonymized (i.e., using pseudonyms for both their male persona and their drag queen, as well as altering any possibly identifying information, such as places or names), and the participant information sheet, as well as the consent form were explained and signed prior to the interview. All consent forms were securely kept in a lockable cabinet at the Technical University of Munich, and all data was kept separately on a password protected computer.

The participants were recruited via social media and snowball sampling in the second half of 2019. Recruitment continued until no new codes were identified in their data sheets, leading to ten participants in total. Participants were 20 – 45 years old (mean: 30.8 years), seven described themselves as Caucasian/European, two as South American, and one as Asian. All interviewees identified as gay cisgender men and had been doing drag for one to nineteen years (mean: 3.4 years). The participants' characteristics are summarized in table 1 [*table 1 near here*].

For data analysis, a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was applied, using the six step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Here, after initial reading of the data, inductive coding was performed. The codes were organized into themes, which were reviewed and refined until they provided a distinct and coherent picture of the codes. Thematic analysis is a flexible tool that is not bound to a particular epistemological position, and thus needs to be embedded in a certain framework (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Therefore, this study's position within critical realism, as well as the research question inform the analysis process (Willig, 2013). A critical analysis particularly emphasizes possible assumptions and meanings behind what was said by the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The analysis was conducted by the first author in consultation with the second author.

Since the authors identify as a heterosexual man and a heterosexual woman, both took an 'outsider' perspective during the research, as they were neither gay, nor experienced in doing drag. Although this can impede the understanding of unique views and experiences (Taylor & Rupp, 2005), it can also be seen as an advantage due to the naïve perspective researchers employ during data collection and analysis (Berkowitz et al., 2007).

Since the study was conducted in German, all extracts used in this paper were translated by the first author as close to the original as possible (including grammatical errors and hesitations) and were reviewed by the second author (a native speaker in both languages). Due to the participants' differentiation in the description of sexual positioning in German between 'top'/'bottom' and "active"/ "passive" (herein not necessarily synonymous with insertive and receptive), the literal translations were adopted to convey the nuances in meaning. Furthermore, since participants defined themselves as cisgender men, their male pseudonyms as well as pronouns are used.

Results

In the interviews, the participants described being a drag queen as a role that influenced their private lives, and thereby their sexuality, in various ways. Simultaneously, they separated their sexuality from their public performance, recreating social norms within their sexual practices that may contradict the values they represented as drag queens. In the analysis, three main themes were identified that reflect this complex interaction: natural versus artificial identity, advocacy for sexuality, and rejection of heteronormativity.

Natural versus artificial Identity

Participants described their sexuality as naturally given by characterizing same sex attraction and sexual preferences as 'innate'. They often portrayed the drag queen as a part of their identity, yet concurrently never as integrated into their sexuality. Some interviewees ascribed a sexuality to their drag queen's character that was positioned as contradicting their male sexuality:

Bernd: And there are also sometimes then eh... requests via Facebook or Instagram where I then... like 'can I get to know you, beautiful woman', [Anna: Mmm.] I think it's nice but no, cause won't work.

Anna: Mmm.

Bernd: It's a fictional character... and the err there Bernd is more important than; well Bernd's sexuality is more important to me than Miss B.'s.

[Bernd/Rosi B.]

The drag queen is portrayed here as a character that is separated from the male personality. By distinguishing the two sexualities, Bernd highlights the differentiation between his 'private' sexuality and the 'public' female character. He favors the sexuality of his male persona, suggesting that both personas could not be integrated into one sexuality.

Participants adopted different narratives when talking about both their sexuality and the drag queen. While the latter was characterized as artificial, participants typically framed their sexuality as natural.

Natural Sexuality

Homosexuality was portrayed as an important part of the participants' identity. Those interviewed talked about a shared "aura" and visible characteristics that differentiate gay and straight individuals from one another. They described their sexual orientation as an unchangeable and 'inborn' characteristic:

David: I can't know that, well I'm not straight [Anna: Sure.] I've never been straight (laughs) and then... but it's like this, I've outed myself at about eighteen, nineteen... well with seventeen I err recognized it with, then it took till nineteen err... that I err accepted it and err... finally recognized myself (laughs) as gay... and then... till then I really behaved (laughs) err like a hetero.

[David/Miss Verhalten]

David portrays his sexual orientation as 'inborn', having an impact on the way he behaves. Until he accepted his homosexuality, he describes himself as having acted in a heterosexual fashion. He thereby explains adhering to a hegemonic male characterization due to his socialization as a heterosexual man. By accepting his homosexuality, he was able to 'free' himself from this predetermined role and live out his 'true' sexuality. Hence, he highlights a fixed bond between behavior and sexual orientation.

In a similar fashion, participants described their sexual preferences, for instance their sexual positioning, as 'innate'. Two interviewees identified as being exclusively "active" or "passive", portraying this preference as biologically determined. Even when participants defined themselves as versatile, they often talked about a 'wired-in' preference:

Julian: Well I think I'm naturally rather passive.

Anna: Mmm.

Julian: And that means, when I'm active, I have to rather... I have to rather adapt, that is not my natural role in that sense... and that means for me erm a little... allowing a little aggressiveness... well not... erm not err violent in any kind or anything like that but... I have to understand for myself that the partner pretty much wants [Anna: Mmm.] me to show dominance.

Anna: Yes.

Julian: Well that it is desired and that this also... satisfies my partner like this.

[Julian/Jessy]

Julian links sexual positioning to certain traits, for instance penetrating as the dominant part, following stereotypical notions about sexual roles (Johns et al., 2012). He portrays his positioning as changeable, adhering to his partner's wishes and ideas. Although he defined himself as versatile earlier in the interview, his 'inner preference' is suggested to remain stable. He therefore seems to regularly 'play' an 'artificial' role during sex.

Being versatile is thus illustrated as a socially adopted trait that anyone can take on, regardless of their ‘natural’ preferences.

The participants’ portrayal of an ‘innate’ sexual orientation and sexual preferences seemed to be related to the way they acted. When changing positions, for instance, they seemed to recreate the typical association of certain gendered traits or attributes to sexual positions (Dangerfeld et al., 2017), following societal expectations and normative sexual scripts. Any deviation from their personal preferences seemed to relate to ideals embedded in their community, allowing participants to maintain viewing their sexuality and sexual preferences as naturally stable despite variances in their behavior.

Artificial Drag Queen

In opposition to sexual practices, participants portrayed the drag queen as too artificial to include in sexual behavior. They outlined a general bewilderment at being attracted to drag queens, and portrayed drag as neither fitting to homosexual nor heterosexual practices. While they acknowledged their sexual orientation as a “door-opener” for doing drag, and thereby drew a connection between drag and sexuality, they distanced themselves from sexual practices while being in drag. Participants emphasized that having sex in drag would be impractical due to their costumes, but many further distanced themselves from such ideas due to their gender and sexual identity:

Anna: Alright and did you ever have sex as a drag queen, like wearing a costume?

John: Mmm... no well that is err not an option for me.

Anna: Mmm.

John: Because as a erm, when I when I am drag queen, I feel erm ... more like a woman concerning my aura.

Anna: Mmm.

John: Erm and I don't want to have sex as a woman... also not somehow being passive or ac-active, these a-are simply two worlds for me, Banana doesn't have sex.

[John/Banana]

John portrays his female appearance as a drag queen in contrast to his private sexuality by outlining sex in drag as 'out of question'. He describes being a drag queen as feeling like a woman, therefore as a female identity and not merely a female performance. By creating a distinction between his preferred sexual practices as a gay man and sexual engagement as a woman, he highlights the importance of his sexuality and gender identity, while portraying the drag queen as an artificial creation.

Only one of the participants reported an experience of sexual interaction while being in drag. He portrayed sex in drag similar to heterosexual sex as a woman, describing the impractical costume as limiting his choices:

Samuel: Well it was okay, but it was kind of... it was of course primarily for the guy's satisfaction.

Anna: Mmm.

Samuel: Yeah. Although that obviously again falls in this... yeah stupid traditional distribution of roles somehow and erm; but as I said it would've been too complicated for me [to be the insertive partner]...

[Samuel/Dila]

Here, Samuel criticizes sex in drag, as it is primarily for the satisfaction of the penetrative partner. His costume limited his freedom during sex, wherefore he was only able to have receptive anal sex. Although Samuel previously described enjoying receptive sex, he criticizes sex in drag, because it seems to have forced him into the traditional female role due to practical reasons. Drag may therefore only be able to break with gendered assumptions in public performances, possibly creating contrasting

experiences during (private) sexual interactions. Simultaneously, his account illustrates the ease of falling into heteronormative gender role scripts (Jackson & Scott, 2010), even within gay sex.

Although participants acknowledged drag as a possibility to transgress binary categorizations such as gender, the categorization of sexual orientation and sexual practices seemed to remain stable. Those interviewed outlined the possibility of changing their sexual behavior, but this seemed to occur in accordance with social norms and expectations inside the gay community. When taking a different sexual position than their 'inborn' preference, for instance, public expectations seemed to permeate into the 'private' sphere of sexual positioning. Drag, on the other hand, was positioned as a mere artistry, and as contradicting their 'inborn' sexual orientation and gender identity. Furthermore, sex in drag was characterized as reinforcing gendered assumptions, suggesting that the transgression of gendered scripts could not be implemented into the private sphere of sexual practices. Therefore, participants showed a strict division between the fictional character and their personal sexuality.

Although participants excluded the drag queen from their sexual practices, they acknowledged drag as important for shaping their general views on sexuality, as outlined in the next theme.

Advocacy for Sexuality

When talking about their sexual orientation, interviewees described homosexuality as stigmatized in a heteronormative world. Overcoming negative views on homosexuality was portrayed as essential to fully accept oneself and live freely, but also as emotionally stressful. Participants outlined how drag helped them to overcome difficulties during this process:

Martin: And then I saw like how drag slowly erm... helped like to understand my sexuality a little and to explain well to... yes re-really to better understand myself, as a human being, so to speak, cause... a long time ago I have always recognized a feminine side in me [Anna: Mmm.] and never really well always laid aside. Like that that... that doesn't belong to you erm, it is here but no one needs to know or you maybe mustn't be proud of something like that, then leave it. And here wa-was okay, now it's a different world, another perspective, and we research it a little or experiment a little about it and that's actually how it started...

[Martin/Alexa]

Martin portrays drag as a therapy, helping him to understand his sexuality and identity. Drag saved him from the social pressure to disguise his “feminine side”. This suggests that being a drag queen allowed him to find value and social recognition of often socially undesirable traits (Oliveira, Guimarães, Caiero, & Júnior, 2018), indicating a high potential of overcoming hegemonic ideas of masculinities (Connell, 1995). At the same time, Martin links homosexuality to femininity, reproducing the linkage of sexual orientations with gender traits (Connell, 1992).

In the interviews, participants often emphasized the importance of sharing this ‘new freedom’ with others. Drag was thereby portrayed as changing the entire community and its views on sexuality:

David: And I think if you also erm... do drag that would be basically extreme fr the extreme of feminine, that is basically pushing the boundaries and and erm not... pushing is not the word that basically expanding [Anna: Mmm.] there that the boundaries get expanded and that the gays that erm... are already in this area basically, are already in that area of being feminine, they have more space [Anna: Mmm.] and they have more acceptance. And I think that's the best, for me this is really the best that erm... due to my drag and due to drags that these boundaries basically get expanded, and then all gays that don't fit into a norm have more space to... be themselves well and... just be there and get accepted just the way they are... basically.

[David/Miss Verhalten]

Drag is described as pushing the limits of what is accepted in society, offering others the opportunity to “be themselves”. David constructs drag queens as extremely feminine, allowing more femininity into gay identities. He seems to be particularly proud of his role model status, which is argued to save others from prejudice or exclusion, seemingly drawing on an altruistic narrative when discussing his drag performance. Thus, drag is portrayed as a vital figure not only for David’s private life, but for the community at large.

Social norms about masculinity and sexuality were portrayed as omnipresent, and participants tried to overcome these, for instance by doing drag. Drag queens were described as advocates for openness that helped those interviewed, as well as others to accept their feminine side and their sexual orientation, illustrating the potential of drag to overcome homonegativity (Knutson et al., 2018). Changing society’s views on sexuality seemed to give meaning to the participants’ performances, and drag was proposed to influence the interviewees’ identity, personal views and acceptance of their sexuality.

Although participants often recreated traditional narratives about homosexuality (Buetti et al., 2016), for instance by connecting femininity to their sexual orientation, they frequently attempted to challenge societal expectations about homosexuality. Furthermore, the ideals of drag queens, disrupting gendered expectations, may not only have an impact on the participants’ views on their sexual orientation, but also on their views on sexual practices, as outlined in the following theme.

Rejection of Heteronormativity

When talking about sexual practices, participants tried to distance themselves from

heteronormative notions. They criticized heterosexual assumptions about masculinities or relationships. Those interviewed described drag queens as open-minded figures that publicly embrace any deviation from societal expectations. In their private lives, participants also portrayed following heteronormative assumptions in a negative fashion:

Daniel: Mmm yes... I've always thought so... but I have a very disturbed behavior, I have a very heterosexual way of thinking as a gay man.

Anna: In what way?

Daniel: In in in terms of male role and female role, which is totally not okay, oh god no, but that's just how I was raised [Anna: Mmm.] erm... and I have always seen myself in the female role that's why yes... yes.

Anna: And that's why you are mostly passive?

Daniel: Exactly.

[Daniel/Karin]

Thinking in heteronormative patterns is portrayed here as unacceptable for gay men. Homonormativity, the integration of heteronormative ideas into a gay identity (Lovelock, 2019), is thereby criticized. At the same time, Daniel follows stereotypical assumptions regarding homosexuality by linking femininity to his sexual preference. Hence, despite acknowledging gender roles as a social construct and thereby portraying himself as being reflective, he still adheres to such roles.

The omnipresent criticism of heteronormativity during the interviews could reflect an aspiration inside the drag-community, whereby rejecting heteronormativity is favored. Concurrently, participants often seemed to adhere to predominant social norms about gender and sexuality. This was especially visible when they talked about their preferred sex partners.

Undesirable (Hyper)Masculinity

When participants talked about their sexual preferences, they also described their desired partners. While research suggests that traditional masculine traits are idealized inside the gay community (Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2011), participants attempted to reject such idealizations. They stated that gay men should not be attracted to hypermasculine men and should not follow such ideals themselves, drawing a connection between sexual orientation and gender roles:

Manuel: I'm not searching for a super feminine type.

Anna: Okay.

Manuel: Cause I don't feel like that either... and but of course I could fall in love well... that could happen but... I don't find it attractive... yeah well I prefer a normal person, also no extreme macho cause I hate it... cause I think it's also excessive, cause there is no human that is like this, [Anna: Mmm.] that's just playing your role, cause 'I am a macho' and erm 'I am a gay macho that I am heteronormative now'... you are not... well you just do your role.

[Manuel/Cruela]

Here, while following the notion of feminine men as unappealing (Buetti et al., 2016), Manuel constructs hypermasculine men as less desirable. He characterizes the ideal partner as neither extremely feminine, nor masculine, in an attempt to disrupt traditional gender roles pertaining heteronormative relationships. At the same time, he frames gay men acting according to heterosexual masculine ideals as inappropriate within the gay community, reproducing the connection of sexual orientation with certain behaviors.

Although the macho type was mostly criticized, many participants expressed sexual attraction towards it:

Samuel: Well if I really just look at what I'm into or or [Anna: Mmm.] what speaks to me sexually, then erm... I have to say for me it's also obviously something that goes rather into the extreme. Well now for instance more of a classic, I call it

machotype or something, [Anna: Mmm.] well that could definitely speak to me... erm but would for example never be anything, that's also interesting for a relationship.

Anna: Why not?

Samuel: Because this... I think it's interesting from time to time for the sexual appeal or what it triggers in me... but I wouldn't want to live it long-term...

Anna: Mmm.

Samuel: Well for that I think I am too... emancipated?

Anna: Okay.

Samuel: Independent, don't know how you could call it erm, and that wouldn't work for me pe-permanently and especially I think it would be... looking at it long-term too big of an imbalance, [Anna: Mmm.] I think it's nicer when someone is actually a little more balanced...

[Samuel/Dila]

Hypermasculine men are portrayed as both extremely attractive and unfit for relationships, positioning them as sex objects. Samuel links masculine appearance automatically to a certain type of personality that embodies heterosexual stereotypes. He criticizes the heterosexual distribution of gender roles inside gay relationships, yet concurrently, Samuel identifies himself with the female role. Hence, despite attempting to reject heteronormativity, he appears to view himself and relationships through a heteronormative lens.

Although participants tried to distance themselves from masculine stereotypes, they often portrayed traditional (hyper)masculine traits as especially attractive. Neither extremely masculine, nor feminine men were described as ideal, further limiting possible masculinities. The interviewees linked masculinity to casual sex and femininity to relationships, thus reproducing traditional assumptions about gender roles within sexuality (Hollway, 1984). The categorization of men as feminine *or* masculine further suggests that the binary understanding of gender and sexuality is still persistent, even within the drag-community.

Disrupting heterosexual Roles during Sex

Similar to the criticism of heterosexual role distribution inside same sex relationships, the participants rejected the assumption that gay sex should mirror heterosexual roles during sex. Two participants described men identifying as exclusively top or bottom as either too feminine or masculine, essentially connecting gender roles with sexual positions. Four criticized traditional heterosexual roles by attempting to reject the equation of penetration with dominance:

Anna: And does it feel somehow... except the physical any different... depending on what position you are taking?

Martin: Yes erm... at least for me, I try to when I'm in the active role actually lower the dominance a little like, and then care more for the partner, [Anna: Mmm.] because I know exactly that also how how it is to be on the other side. And err things that I don't like, err no ah that for example active has to do with dominance. And then you have some partner, that well to have sex with, and in the beginning he just pushes his whole dick inside without th-thinking about; Dude, that's also my ass that is involved here, be careful. Or there are people that like that, okay, it's not my taste I don't want you to use your standard sex-script when coming to me and doing just everything how you think it's right, want a special treatment, want to be really depicted as human 'oh he likes that then I continue' and such things... that on the other hand I try to include and try also and try also that err to get it from others, and if not, then eh bye.

[Martin/Alexa]

Rejecting "standard sex-scripts" and breaking with traditional notions of dominance is described as important for good sex. Martin distances himself from the 'others' that follow these heteronormative scripts, positioning himself as a good sex partner. He further criticizes the assumption that sex should mainly be for penetrative pleasure. A similar narrative is often adopted by heterosexual men, whereby significance is given to both men and women reaching orgasm. However, this could be due to the expectation

that a 'real' man is supposed to be able to satisfy women, rather than for increasing women's pleasure (Braun, Gavey, & McPhillips, 2003; Farvid & Braun, 2018). In this case, Martin expects the penetrative partner to also give pleasure to the receptive partner.

While most interviewees categorized themselves as either "active", "passive", or versatile despite their critique of labels, one participant completely rejected the idea of labelling sexual positioning. When he was asked to describe "active" and "passive", he questioned the existence of these categories:

Bernd: Well I can't say that... erm... there is an active part or a passive part.

Anna: Mmm.

Bernd: I mean I can't say that in a hetero relationship either... I can't say... the woman is more passive than the m-man no I can't answer that.

Anna: Mmm.

Bernd: Because there is no such thing.

[Bernd/Rosi B.]

Bernd describes the sexual roles as non-existent, neither in gay relationships, nor within heterosexuality. He thereby not only distances himself from heteronormativity, but further questions gendered assumptions within varying sexual relationships. Although he automatically seems to connect femininity with passiveness, he deliberately negates this assumption, suggesting that he chooses not to use such categorizations.

Participants idealized any dismissal of heteronormative ideas about sexual practices. Being receptive *and* dominant, for instance, was portrayed in a positive fashion, and one participant further questioned the existence of different sexual positioning categories. This illustrates the fluidity of these categorizations, which may be altered or overruled by challenging existing conventions (Pachankis, Bernstein, Bittenwieser, & Bayles, 2013). On the other hand, many interviewees followed

gendered assumptions by connecting gender traits with receptive or penetrative positions.

Following the ideals presented by the participants, the desired partner was depicted as neither extremely feminine or masculine, nor exclusively top/dominant or bottom/submissive. This could add pressure on the participants to identify themselves as versatile. It also stresses the interviewees' attempt to reject heteronormative notions of relationships whilst upholding traditional binary categorizations, such as gender or sexual orientation.

Discussion

The analysis demonstrates a complex interaction between the drag queens' ideals and social norms regarding their 'private' sexuality. Participants tried to reject heteronormativity both within their performances and their personal lives. While research indicates that hegemonic masculinity and 'straight acting' are remaining ideals inside the gay community (Buetti et al., 2016; Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2011), participants distanced themselves from such assumptions, which may be connected to values embedded in the drag-community. Concurrently, the interviewees often reported following heteronormative notions within their sexual practices. Hypermasculine men, for instance, were portrayed as undesirable, despite outlining an attraction to them, illustrating an attraction imperative also seen in heterosexual casual sex (Farvid & Braun, 2013).

Participants repeatedly emphasized the distinction of the public drag queen and their private sexuality, with the latter being described as 'inborn'. Norms about sexual preferences were thus portrayed as invariable. This separation of the artificial character and their sexuality complements the division of gender identity and gender performance outlined by Knutson et al. (2019). Drag queens could therefore not only separate gender

role behavior in relation to societal expectations, but also sexual behavior, for instance by distinguishing between ‘normal’ gay behavior and having sex in drag. The participants’ gender identity as gay cisgender men seemed to be connected to their sexuality, whereas the drag queen character and its gender performance were separated from it. This separation may be reinforced by social norms, where cross-dressing as a fetish is generally stigmatized (Berkowitz et al., 2007). Furthermore, the artificiality of the drag queen may allow participants to embody transgression without having to question the assumed ‘naturalness’ of their sexuality. Though the participants often criticized the influence of heterosexual ideals on gay practices, such critique seemed to be connected to the values they represented as drag queens, and not to a general questioning of such assumptions.

Sex in drag was further criticized, since it was described as mirroring heterosex. Although participants did not provide convincing imitations of women, their costume seemed to force them to adopt what is considered typical feminine characteristics, such as passiveness during sex. This highlights the significance of appearance and clothing on gender role behavior (Crawley, Foley, & Shehan, 2008) and further indicates the pervasiveness of gender roles and gendered hierarchies in all kinds of interactions (i.e. between men having sex).

When talking about preferred sexual positions, participants mostly used similar narratives as previously found in other gay men. They portrayed sexual positioning as ‘wired-in’, yet flexible in its execution (Johns et al., 2012; Pachankis et al., 2013). This suggests that changes in positions might be connected to preconceptions embedded in the community (Pachankis et al., 2013), rather than a general questioning of traditional assumptions about sexual practices. However, they deliberately distanced themselves from stereotypical gendered assumptions, such as traditional role distribution. This is in

line with their ideal of transgressing gendered notions when being in drag. A similar critique of linking gender roles to sexual positioning was described in other research, predominantly within gay men that disapprove hegemonic masculinity (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2018). The participants' rejection of (hyper)masculinity might thus also be related to the criticism of traditional gender roles in gay sex. The idealization of being neither 'too masculine' nor 'too feminine' by identifying as versatile could further be reflected in the general gay-community in Germany, where only about 10% in each group are estimated to identify as either exclusively "active" or "passive" (Scholz et al., 2019). The interviewees' view of an 'inborn' sexuality, however, could hinder the implementation of their 'artificial' persona's values in their sexual practices, and might need to be scrutinized in order to redefine sexual practices without gendered assumptions.

Participants further portrayed drag as having a positive impact on their personal views. They reported that doing drag helped them to accept their 'feminine side' and sexual orientation within a heteronormative world. Drag was framed as a self-therapy, further supporting the possible positive impact of drag on the performers' mental health suggested by previous research (i. e. Knutson et al., 2018).

The participants' recreation of the gendered dichotomy of sexual positions (top as masculine and bottom as feminine) could further be relevant for STI-prevention strategies. Previous research proposes that social and personal understandings of sexual positioning should be included into STI prevention messages, since the recreation of normative ideas about gender and sexuality could also reinforce power differences and thereby barriers for receptive partners to initiate safer sex practices (Hoppe, 2011; Johns et al., 2012). Considering that participants seemed to be bound to such preconceptions about sexual positioning despite their transgressive nature suggests that these

understandings remain firmly embedded in their community and thus emphasizes the importance to include them in STI prevention. Nevertheless, the drag queens' role model status and therefore a possible multiplier function inside their community could also provide a chance to promote safer sex practices. Considering that their popularity increased worldwide since RuPaul's Drag Race (Strübel-Scheiner, 2011), which can also be seen in the German context with its own drag show "Queen of Drags" that aired in 2019, drag queen's outreach appears to be increasing as well. This may potentially provide an interesting opportunity for new sexual health interventions and should be examined in further research.

This study has several limitations. It does not claim to be representative, as it only examined the narratives of ten cisgender men from a small area in the south of Germany, of which most had only been doing drag for one year. Other participants, from different cities, with more experience, or at another time may generate different data. Whilst social desirability may always play a role in interviews regarding sensitive topics, the outlined accounts demonstrate the predominant discourses inherent in the current context, which was the main interest of this study (Chamberlain & Murray, 2017). The researchers' views and experiences always have an impact on every stage of research, shaping the results of this study. Their outsider perspective may further limit their interpretation of the data. Since all participants identified as gay cisgender men, complementary research with a more diverse sample of gender identities and sexual orientations may be a valuable addition to this topic. Nonetheless, by our knowledge it is the first study assessing drag queens' views and experiences in Germany, providing an initial exploration of sexual practices among this gay-community subgroup.

Conclusion

The findings of this analysis demonstrate both the great impact drag can have on the

participants' lives and the resilience of heteronorms embedded and permeating within the diverse groups in current German society. The ten drag queens in this study portrayed drag as disrupting norms about gender and sexuality, giving meaning to their performances. Nevertheless, participants emphasized their sexual orientation and sexual practices as 'inborn', highlighting a distinct separation between their drag queen character, which often lacked sexuality, and their personal experiences. Therefore, drag was portrayed as transgressive in public spaces, but hardly impacting the interviewees' sexual practices. Though drag queens seemed to play an important role inside the gay community and criticized hetero- and homonormativity, participants often continued to recreate traditional assumptions about sexuality and binary categorizations. This highlights the omnipresence of heteronormativity and societal expectations within a population that embodies the transgression of gender roles.

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Appendix 1: Interview schedule (translated)

Primary questions	Additional questions
Doing Drag:	
Tell me something about you. Where are you from? What is your profession? Since when have you performed as a drag queen? What inspired you to become a drag queen?	
What does being a drag queen mean to you?	Why are you doing it? How do you feel when being in drag?
What role does your sexual orientation play?	
What does femininity/masculinity mean to you?	How would you view yourself/your (ideal) partner?
What does your partner/date/family think about you being a drag queen?	
Sexual Positioning:	
During sex, you can have different positions, for instance being 'active' or 'passive'. What do these terms mean to you?	
Is there a certain position you prefer?	Why? How do you feel in that position?
Does this preference change?	Has it change over time? What are factors influencing your preference?
Have you ever had sex in drag?	Why not? Is something different?

Table 1: Sociodemographics of participants

Pseudonym	Age	Professionality	Drag queen for*
Alex/Jizzy Balls	30-35	Hobby	1 year
Bernd/Rosi B.	>35	Hobby	> 2 years
Daniel/Karin	<30	Part-time	1 year
David/Miss Verhalten	<30	Hobby	1 year
John/Banana	30-35	Part-time/Hobby	1 year
Julian/Jessy	30-35	Hobby	1 year
Manuel/Cruela	<30	Part-time	2 years
Martin/Alexa	<30	Part-time/Hobby	> 2 years
Max/Farah Tale	<30	Hobby	1 year
Samuel/Dila	>35	Hobby	> 2 years

* To ensure anonymity, participants with experience for more than two years have been grouped together