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# Anal sex among young people and implications for health promotion: a qualitative study in the UK

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## ABSTRACT

### Objective

To explore expectations, experiences and circumstances of anal sex among young people.

### Design

Qualitative, longitudinal study using individual and group interviews.

### Participants

130 men and women aged 16-18 from diverse social backgrounds.

### Setting

Three contrasting sites in England (London, a northern industrial city, rural southwest).

### Results

Anal sex often appeared to be painful, risky and coercive. Five key themes emerged from our interviews that help explain why young people have anal sex despite this: men ‘copying pornography’, ‘it’s tighter’, competition between men, the claim that “people must like it if they do it” (made alongside the seemingly contradictory expectation that it will be painful for women) and, crucially, normalisation of coercion and ‘accidental’ penetration. It seemed men were often persuading or coercing reluctant partners. Safer, less painful techniques were not discussed.

### Conclusions

Interviewees frequently cite pornography as the ‘explanation’ for anal sex, yet their accounts reveal a complex context for anal sex with availability of pornography being only one element: crucially, young people circulated ideas that promoted coercive, painful and unsafe anal sex. This study suggests an urgent need to talk about anal sex with young people to discuss safer and less painful techniques, to emphasise consent, and to challenge views that promote coercion.

### Strengths and limitations of this study

- This study uses a large qualitative sample from three diverse sites in the UK and is the first to capture a wide range of circumstances around and reasons for engaging in anal sex among men and women between the ages of 16 and 18.
- Analysis explores experiences in depth, going beyond simplistic explanations linking motivations for anal sex with pornography
- The study shows that young people circulated ideas about gender and sexual practices that normalised coercive, painful and unsafe anal sex. These ideas could be addressed in health promotion work.
- This study was conducted in the UK and further work is needed to assess the extent to which the same discourses operate among young people in other countries.

## INTRODUCTION

Anal sex is increasingly prevalent among young people, yet anal intercourse between men and women – though commonly depicted in sexually explicit media – appears unmentionable in many social contexts and is usually absent from mainstream sexuality education.

Surveys suggest young men and women – and older adults – are engaging in anal intercourse more than ever before.<sup>1-4</sup> Sexually explicit media depictions are often mentioned as affecting how sex is viewed and practised by young people<sup>5-7</sup> with anal intercourse one of the ‘risky’ or ‘undesirable’ practices thought to be promoted by such media,<sup>8,9</sup> although evidence about the influence of pornography on anal practices is thin.<sup>5</sup> Studies of anal practices, which are generally of over-18s,<sup>10-12</sup> suggest anal sex might be desired by young men more than women, and may be used to avoid pregnancy,<sup>12,13</sup> or vaginal intercourse during menstruation,<sup>12</sup> while often being unprotected with condoms.<sup>12-14</sup> It may be painful for women,<sup>12,13,15</sup> and may be a pleasurable part of sex.<sup>16,17</sup>

Very little is known about the detailed circumstances around or reasons for engaging in anal sex among under 18 year olds anywhere, or what implications these might have for health. This study looks in detail at anal practices among under-18s and draws out global lessons for sexual health promotion.

## METHOD

### Design and data collection

We collected data on anal sex as part of a longitudinal, qualitative mixed methods study (the “sixteen18” project) which explored the range and meaning of different sexual activities among a diverse sample of 130 young people aged 16-18 in three contrasting locations in England: London; a medium-sized northern, industrial city; and a rural area in the southwest. From January 2010 we conducted nine group interviews and 71 depth interviews (wave one: 37 women, 34 men), re-interviewing 43 of the depth interviewees one year later (wave two), until June 2011. The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine ethics committee approved the study and all participants provided written consent.

For the depth interviews, we used purposive sampling to maximise variation in social background. Within each location we sampled from a range of settings including: schools/colleges (n=23 depth interviews), youth work services targeting young people not in education or training (n=9), youth organisations (n=8), a supported housing project for young

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3 people living independently from their families (n=4) and informal networks (n=3). We also  
4 used 'snowball' sampling (n=17) and, in the rural southwest, we approached people directly  
5 in a town centre (n=7).  
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8 We highlighted in our information leaflet and our conversations with potential interviewees  
9 that we were keen to speak to any young person, whatever their experiences. Although  
10 participants varied in terms of the range of activities they had experienced, and the number  
11 and nature of their sexual partnerships, the majority reported opposite-sex partners only.  
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14 In the depth interviews, we asked interviewees about what sexual practices they had engaged  
15 in, the circumstances of those practices, and how they felt about them. We deliberately left  
16 'sexual practices' undefined, to allow for young people's own definitions to emerge. In the  
17 group discussions, we asked general questions about what practices they had heard of, their  
18 attitudes to those practices, and whether they thought young people their age would generally  
19 engage in particular practices, and if so, under what circumstances. Many of our interviewees  
20 spontaneously talked about anal sexual practices (whether they had engaged in them or not)  
21 and so in wave two, we specifically asked all of our participants about their perception, and if  
22 relevant their experience, of anal practices. Our aim was to explore the key discourses  
23 surrounding anal sexual practices among this age group, and to elicit detailed accounts of  
24 specific experiences.  
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### 34 **Data analysis**

35 We recorded and transcribed all interviews. We used iterative thematic analysis<sup>18</sup> to develop  
36 our understanding of the data. This involved 'coding' transcripts<sup>18</sup> and extensive discussions  
37 between researchers to come to a shared interpretation of young people's accounts of anal  
38 sex, taking into consideration our own characteristics (e.g. white, middle-class, educated,  
39 women older than the interviewees) and how these may have affected the data collected. We  
40 made constant comparisons across cases and themes, and sought deviant cases to challenge  
41 our emerging interpretations. Throughout the analysis, we simultaneously engaged with  
42 theoretical literature to put the work in context.  
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50 We use unique identifier pseudonyms throughout. Quotations are from one-to-one interviews  
51 unless otherwise indicated, with omissions marked [...].  
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## RESULTS

Anal practices reported most commonly involved penetration or attempted penetration by the man with his penis or finger (15 and eight of the 71 in-depth interviewees respectively – 19 of 71 reported anal practices in total), and with one exception were between opposite-sex partners. Although a small minority of interviewees said anal sex (i.e. penetration with a penis) was exclusively ‘gay’ it was widely understood as also occurring between men and women.

Women reported painful anal sex:

As soon as the whole incident happened where he didn’t warn me it just hurt. It was just pain [*laugh*]. It was just like: no. No one could possibly enjoy that. It was just horrible [...] I guess he could have used lube, maybe that would have helped, but I don’t know. Apparently if you’re tense it hurts more, I guess, which makes sense really, but I don’t see how you couldn’t be tense [*laugh*] in that kind of situation. (Emma)

The men, while often keen on anal sex in principle, were sometimes unenthusiastic about the physical reality: “I thought it was going to be a lot better to be honest” (Ali); “sometimes it does feel better [than vaginal sex] but I wouldn’t say I preferred it” (Max).

### Risks

Anal sex was also often risky; condoms were only sometimes used, and then for basic hygiene, not STI prevention: “so you don’t get shit on your dick” (Carl). Some interviewees incorrectly stated that anal STI transmission was impossible, or less likely than for vaginal intercourse.

There were marked gender differences in how anal sex was described: its benefits (pleasure, indicator of sexual achievement) were expected for men but not women; its risks – interviewees rarely mentioned risks of STIs, focusing instead on risk of pain, or damaged reputation – were expected for women not men. It was not described as a way to preserve virginity or avoid pregnancy.

### Key themes

Five key themes emerged from our interviews that help explain why the practice continued despite women’s reluctance, expectations of pain for women, and apparent lack of pleasure for women and men: men ‘copying pornography’; ‘it’s tighter’; competition between men;

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3 the claim that “people must like it if they do it” (alongside the seemingly contradictory  
4 expectation that it will be painful for women); and – crucially – normalisation of coercion  
5 and ‘accidental’ penetration.  
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### 8 ***Men ‘copying pornography’ and “it’s tighter”***

9  
10 The two main reasons given for young people having anal sex were that men wanted to copy  
11 what they saw in pornography, and that “it’s tighter”. The implication was that “tighter” was  
12 better for men and was something men were said to want. Women were expected to find anal  
13 sex painful, particularly the first time. The ‘pornography’ explanation seems inadequate, not  
14 least because young people only seemed to see this as motivating men, not women. We found  
15 other important explanations and motivations in young people’s accounts, as we will see  
16 below.  
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### 22 ***Competition between men***

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24 Men said they encouraged one another to try the practice, and both men and women said men  
25 wanted to tell their friends they had had anal sex. Men in a group discussion said anal sex  
26 was “something we do for a competition”, and “every hole’s a goal”. Even the men saying  
27 they found the idea of anal sex repulsive did not always rule out trying it. By contrast, both  
28 men and women said women risked their reputation for the same act; a sexual double  
29 standard familiar from previous literature.<sup>19</sup>  
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### 35 ***“People must like it if they do it”***

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37 Despite asserting that anal sex is inevitably painful for women, interviewees often expressed  
38 the seemingly contradictory view that it was in fact enjoyable for women:  
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40

41 Obviously people do enjoy it if they do it. (Naomi)

42  
43 There’s quite a few, a lot of girls enjoy it. But I think most girls  
44 would like, I think they might do, on the quiet. (Shane)  
45  
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47 Commonly, women experiencing pain were depicted as naive or flawed. Both men and  
48 women said that women needed to “relax” more, to “get used to it”:  
49  
50

51 I think that the boy enjoys it. I think it’s definitely the boy that pushes  
52 for it from watching porn and stuff, they wanna try it. The girl is  
53 scared and thinks it’s weird, and then they try it because the boyfriend  
54 wants them to. *They normally don’t enjoy it because they’re scared*  
55 and I, I know that like with anal, *if you’re not willing, you don’t relax,*  
56 like if you have, you have control over two of the muscles that are  
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3 closest to the outside and then inside it's like involuntary and if  
4 you're scared or you haven't eased them off like they stay tight and  
5 then you can rip 'em if you try and force anal sex. (Mark [our  
6 emphasis])  
7

### 8 9 *Normalisation of coercion and 'accidental' penetration*

10  
11 The idea that women would generally not wish to engage in anal sex seemed to be taken for  
12 granted by many participants. Even in otherwise seemingly communicative and caring  
13 partnerships, some men seemed to push to have anal sex with their reluctant partner despite  
14 believing it likely to hurt her. In most men's and women's reports of anal sex events  
15 'persuasion' of the woman featured to a greater or lesser degree, with repeated, emphatic  
16 requests from men commonly mentioned.  
17

18  
19 Women seemed to take for granted that they would either acquiesce to or resist their partners'  
20 repeated requests, rather than being equal partners in sexual decision making. Being able to  
21 say 'no' was often cited by the women as a positive example of their control of the situation.  
22

23  
24 Some men also described taking a 'try it and see' approach, where they anally penetrated a  
25 woman with their fingers or penis and hoped that she would not stop them.  
26

27  
28 Shane said he used digital penetration to see if a woman was likely to agree to anal sex and –  
29 if she said no – “I can be very persuasive. Like sometimes you just keep going, just keep  
30 going till they just get fed up and let you do it anyway”.

31  
32 'Try it and see' generally either hurt the woman or was 'unsuccessful' (from the man's point  
33 of view) in the sense of not penetrating “it just didn't go in really”. (Jack) A verbal 'no' from  
34 the woman did not necessarily stop anal penetration attempts:  
35

36  
37 He tried putting it there.  
38

39  
40 [Interviewer] Right  
41

42  
43 And I just said 'no'.  
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45  
46 [Interviewer] Had he asked you first or did he just try it?  
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48  
49 Um, he kept asking me at first. I'm like 'no', but then he tried it and I  
50 said 'no way'.  
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53 [Interviewer] Right  
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56 'No chance'. (Molly)  
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3 In some cases, anal penetration of the woman – digital or penile – is described as happening  
4 accidentally (“it slipped”).  
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7 It is difficult to assess the extent to which events described as ‘slips’ were genuinely  
8 unintentional. One man however described a ‘slip’ at first interview, which he said to the  
9 interviewer – and said he had told his girlfriend – was an accident, a story which he amended  
10 at second interview. He did not seem troubled by talking about having apparently attempted  
11 to penetrate his girlfriend against her wishes:  
12

13 [Interviewer] I think you said [...] in the first interview that there had  
14 been a time where [...] you said it slipped.  
15

16 Well I, I tried, and I said it slipped.  
17

18 [Interviewer] So it hadn’t actually slipped? It wasn’t an accident?  
19

20 No, no, no it wasn’t an accident. (Jack)  
21

22 Describing events as ‘slips’, then, may enable both men and women to gloss over the  
23 possibility that penetration was deliberate and non-consensual.  
24

### 25 **Complexities: a case study**

26 It is important to state that anal sex was not a simple matter of men pressuring/women  
27 resisting. Alicia exemplifies some of the complexities. She described a fairly common  
28 pattern: her partner asked for anal sex, which she first refused but later agreed to. She found it  
29 painful, and also had a second experience where her consent was questionable (“it just kind  
30 of slipped in”). She was atypical, however, in that she related the story in a positive way and  
31 described how she had subsequently enjoyed anal sex which both she and her partner  
32 initiated.  
33

34 Alicia described her relationship in very positive terms, and said she was more sexually  
35 driven than her partner: “I’m not saying that I’m like wanting sex [all practices, not only anal  
36 sex] all the time, but I’d say I go for it more. I’d initiate it more”.  
37

38 Her partner had had anal sex before. The first time she had anal sex with him was “really  
39 painful”:  
40

41 I didn’t wanna try it [anal sex] initially, well I was unsure about it  
42 initially. But I kind of, he didn’t, he said ‘that’s fine’, but I still  
43 wanted to try it for him because I was interested. I think I was  
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3 interested to why he was interested. I was curious about it [...] So I  
4 think that's [...] I just sort of tried it for him.  
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6 She described the second occasion they had anal sex differently in the first and second  
7 interviews, suggesting some discomfort with how the event had progressed:  
8  
9

10 [First interview] We were having [vaginal] sex another time and it  
11 [his penis] just kind of slipped in [into her anus] that way.  
12

13 [Second interview] He just sort of slipped in [...] I think he thought it  
14 would make it less painful for me. And I think he thought he can  
15 make me like it like that.  
16  
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18 At first interview, Alicia was ambiguous about what happened, describing the event as  
19 though it were accidental “it slipped in”, perhaps reluctant to draw attention to not having  
20 been involved in the decision. At second interview, she was clearer that he had deliberately  
21 penetrated her (she may also have spoken to her partner about it between interviews). She  
22 presents it in a somewhat positive way (“he thought he can make me like it”) but her consent  
23 remains unclear.  
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28 At both interviews, she emphasised how much she enjoyed subsequent anal sex with the  
29 same man, and that either of them might initiate it.  
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32 Alicia was the only woman we interviewed who described experiencing physical pleasure,  
33 including orgasm, from anal sex.  
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35

36 Yeah. I quite like it because I think I quite like the feeling of him  
37 against my bum, like against the meat of your bum, like it's kind of  
38 cushiony. So yeah, I think that's what I like about it, I'm not sure.  
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## 42 DISCUSSION

43 Few men or women reported finding anal sex pleasurable and both expected anal sex to be  
44 painful for women. This study offers explanations for why anal sex may occur despite this.  
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47 Interviewees' accounts frequently cite pornography as the 'explanation' for anal sex, yet only  
48 seem to see this as a motivation for men. A fuller picture of why women and men engage in  
49 anal sex appears in their accounts. It seems that anal sex happens in a context characterised  
50 by at least five specific features:  
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53 First, some men appear unconcerned about consent for anal sex. Interviewees often spoke  
54 casually about penetration without consent (“you can rip 'em if you try and force anal sex”;  
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3 “you just keep going till they get fed up and let you do it anyway”) suggesting that not only  
4 do they expect coercion to be part of anal sex (in general, even if not for themselves  
5 personally), but that many of them accept or at least do not explicitly challenge it. Some  
6 events, particularly the ‘accidental’ penetration reported by some interviewees were  
7 ambiguous in terms of whether or not they would be classed as rape (however defined), but  
8 we know from Jack’s interview that ‘accidents’ may happen ‘on purpose’. The men who  
9 described apparently coercing their partners seemed oblivious to, or uncaring of, their role as  
10 possible rapists.  
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17 Second, badgering women in order to obtain reluctant consent to anal sex appears to be  
18 considered normal.  
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Third, the commonly circulating ideas that ‘everyone’ enjoys it, and that women who do not  
are either flawed or simply keeping their enjoyment secret, help support the erroneous idea  
that a man pushing for anal sex is simply ‘persuading’ his partner to do something that ‘most  
girls would like’. Even Alicia’s narrative contains some of the coercive features of anal sex  
that other women report in negative terms, despite Alicia reporting enjoying anal sex.

Fourth, anal sex today appears to be a marker of (hetero)sexual achievement or experience,  
particularly for men.<sup>20</sup> The society our interviewees inhabit seems to reward men for sexual  
experience per se (“every hole’s a goal”), and to some extent reward women for compliance  
in sexually ‘adventurous’ acts (enjoyment signifying not being naive, unrelaxed etc.),  
although women must balance this with the risk to their reputation.

Fifth, many men do not express concern about the pain for women, viewing it as inevitable.  
Less painful techniques (such as slower penetration) were rarely discussed.

Currently this apparently oppressive context, and indeed the practice of anal sex itself,  
appears to be largely ignored in policy and in sex education. Attitudes such as the  
inevitability of pain for women, or men’s failure to recognise or reflect on their own  
potentially coercive behaviour, seem to be unchallenged.

Sexuality education, and specifically what it should contain, is the subject of global debate.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Prevention of STIs, HIV, and violence are priorities for health promotion worldwide. Yet  
sex education, where it exists, rarely addresses specific sexual practices, such as anal sex  
between men and women – despite its potential for disease transmission and, as these  
accounts reveal, coercion.

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3 This study was conducted in the UK and further work is needed to assess the extent to which  
4 similar coercive discourses operate among young people in other countries. This is a  
5 qualitative study, with an in-depth analysis of a smaller sample than would be usual for  
6 epidemiological studies, but which spans three locations and diverse social groups. Whether  
7 or not the concept of ‘generalisability’ should be applied in qualitative research is a matter of  
8 debate, but we would argue that this study provides useful, credible working hypotheses or  
9 theories about anal sexual practice among young men and women that are likely to apply  
10 outside our group of interviewees.  
11

12  
13 Previous work has suggested gendered power may operate differently for different sexual  
14 activities, and that sexual ‘scripts’ (i.e. expectations about how practices will be done) for  
15 anal intercourse may not be as well established as for vaginal intercourse.<sup>13</sup> Our findings  
16 suggest that coercion may be emerging as a dominant script for anal intercourse.  
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## 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 **CONCLUSION**

26  
27 Anal sex among young people in this study appeared to be taking place in a context  
28 encouraging pain, risk, and coercion. Harm reduction efforts targeting anal sex may help  
29 encourage debate about consent, reduce risky and painful techniques and challenge views that  
30 promote coercion.  
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## CONTRIBUTORSHIP STATEMENT

Both authors (CM, RL) meet all four criteria for authorship as detailed in the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals. No individual(s) meet the criteria for authorship who are not named on the manuscript. Only the listed authors (CM, RL) meet the criteria for contributorship: both CM and RL contributed to the planning, conduct, and reporting of the work described in the manuscript. The lead author (CM) agrees to act as guarantor for this manuscript and accepts full responsibility for the work and/or the conduct of the study.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Both authors (CM, RL) meet all four criteria for authorship as detailed in the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals. No individual(s) meet the criteria for authorship who are not named on the manuscript. Only the listed authors (CM, RL) meet the criteria for contributorship: both CM and RL contributed to the planning, conduct, and reporting of the work described in the manuscript. The lead author (CM) agrees to act as guarantor for this manuscript and accepts full responsibility for the work and/or the conduct of the study.

## DATA SHARING STATEMENT

Further data are available from the lead author (CM). Participants gave informed consent for anonymised data sharing in the final reports from this study.

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## Anal heterosex among young people and implications for health promotion: a qualitative study in the UK

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# Anal heterosex among young people and implications for health promotion: a qualitative study in the UK

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Keywords: anal sex, sexual behaviour, sexual health, young adult, qualitative research

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## ABSTRACT

### Objective

To explore expectations, experiences and circumstances of anal sex among young people.

### Design

Qualitative, longitudinal study using individual and group interviews.

### Participants

130 men and women aged 16-18 from diverse social backgrounds.

### Setting

Three contrasting sites in England (London, a northern industrial city, rural southwest).

### Results

Anal heterosex often appeared to be painful, risky and coercive, particularly for women. Interviewees frequently cited pornography as the 'explanation' for anal sex, yet their accounts revealed a complex context with availability of pornography being only one element. Other key elements included competition between men; the claim that "people must like it if they do it" (made alongside the seemingly contradictory expectation that it will be painful for women); and, crucially, normalisation of coercion and 'accidental' penetration. It seemed men were often persuading or coercing reluctant partners. Safer, less painful techniques were not discussed.

### Conclusions

Young people's narratives normalised coercive, painful and unsafe anal sex. This study suggests an urgent need for harm reduction efforts targeting anal sex to help encourage discussion about mutuality and consent, reduce risky and painful techniques and challenge views that normalise coercion.

### Strengths and limitations of this study

- This study uses a large qualitative sample from three diverse sites in the UK and is the first to capture a wide range of circumstances around and reasons for engaging in anal sex among men and women between the ages of 16 and 18.
- Analysis explores experiences in depth, going beyond simplistic explanations linking motivations for anal sex with pornography
- The study shows that young people's narratives about anal sex contained ideas normalising coercive, painful and unsafe anal sex. These ideas could be addressed in health promotion work.
- This study was conducted in the UK and further work is needed to assess the extent to which similar discourses operate among young people in other countries.

## INTRODUCTION

Anal sex is increasingly prevalent among young people, yet anal intercourse between men and women – though commonly depicted in sexually explicit media – is usually absent from mainstream sexuality education and seems unmentionable in many social contexts.

Surveys suggest young men and women – and older adults – are engaging in anal intercourse more than ever before.<sup>1-4</sup> Sexually explicit media depictions are often mentioned as affecting how sex is viewed and practised by young people<sup>5-7</sup> with anal intercourse one of the ‘risky’ or ‘undesirable’ practices thought to be promoted by such media,<sup>8,9</sup> although evidence about the influence of pornography on anal practices is thin.<sup>5</sup> Studies of anal practices, which are generally of over-18s,<sup>10-12</sup> suggest anal sex might be desired by young men more than women, and may be used to avoid pregnancy,<sup>12,13</sup> or vaginal intercourse during menstruation,<sup>12</sup> while often being unprotected with condoms.<sup>12-14</sup> It may be painful for women,<sup>12,13,15</sup> and may be a pleasurable part of sex for men and women.<sup>16,17</sup> Almost one in five 16-24 year olds (19% of men, 17% of women) reported having had anal intercourse in the past year in a recent UK survey.<sup>4</sup>

Very little is known about the detailed circumstances around or reasons for engaging in anal sex among under-18-year-olds anywhere, or what implications these might have for health. This study looks in detail at anal practices among young people aged 18 and under, develops hypotheses for further study, and makes suggestions for sexual health promotion.

## METHOD

### Design and data collection

The narratives about anal heterosex presented here emerged as part of a longitudinal, qualitative mixed methods study (the ‘sixteen18’ project) which explored the range and meaning of different sexual activities among a diverse sample of 130 young people aged 16-18 in three contrasting locations in England: London; a medium-sized northern, industrial city; and a rural area in the southwest. From January 2010 we conducted nine group interviews and 71 depth interviews (wave one: 37 women, 34 men), re-interviewing 43 of the depth interviewees one year later (wave two), until June 2011. The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine Research Ethics Committee approved the study and all participants provided written consent.

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3 For the depth interviews, we used purposive sampling to maximise variation in social  
4 background. Within each location we sampled from a range of settings including:  
5 schools/colleges; youth work services targeting young people not in education or training;  
6 youth organisations; a supported housing project for young people living independently from  
7 their families; and informal networks. We also used ‘snowball’ sampling and, in the rural  
8 southwest, we approached people directly in a town centre. The sample was diverse in terms  
9 of economic and social background, and less diverse in terms of ethnicity (most participants  
10 were white). See Lewis et al 2013 for further details.<sup>18</sup> We highlighted in our information  
11 leaflet and our conversations with potential interviewees that we were keen to speak to any  
12 young person, whatever their experiences. Although participants varied in terms of the range  
13 of activities they had experienced, and the number and nature of their sexual partnerships, the  
14 majority reported opposite-sex partners only.  
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17  
18 In the depth interviews, we asked interviewees about what sexual practices they had engaged  
19 in, the circumstances of those practices, and how they felt about them. We deliberately left  
20 ‘sexual practices’ undefined, to allow for young people’s own definitions to emerge. In the  
21 group discussions, we asked general questions about what practices they had heard of, their  
22 attitudes to those practices, and whether they thought young people their age would generally  
23 engage in particular practices, and if so, under what circumstances. Many of our interviewees  
24 talked about anal sexual practices unprompted (whether they had engaged in them or not) and  
25 so in wave two, we specifically asked all of our participants about their perception and, if  
26 relevant, their experience of anal practices (about a quarter of our in-depth interviewees  
27 reported anal sexual experiences). Our aim was to explore the key discourses surrounding  
28 anal sexual practices among this age group and to elicit detailed accounts of specific  
29 experiences.  
30  
31

### 32 **Data analysis**

33  
34 We recorded and transcribed all interviews. We used iterative thematic analysis<sup>19</sup> to develop  
35 our understanding of the data. This involved ‘coding’ transcripts<sup>19</sup> and extensive discussions  
36 between researchers to come to a shared interpretation of young people’s accounts of anal  
37 sex, taking into consideration our own characteristics (e.g. white, middle-class, educated,  
38 women older than the interviewees) and how these may have affected the data collected. We  
39 made constant comparisons across cases and themes, and sought ‘deviant cases’ to challenge  
40 our emerging interpretations. Throughout the analysis, we simultaneously engaged with  
41 theoretical literature to put the work in context.  
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We use unique identifier pseudonyms throughout. Quotations are from one-to-one interviews unless otherwise indicated, with omissions marked [...].

## RESULTS

Anal practices reported usually involved penetration or attempted penetration by the man with his penis or finger and, with one exception, were between opposite-sex partners. Anal practices generally occurred between young men and women in ‘boyfriend/girlfriend’ relationships. Although a small minority of interviewees said anal sex (i.e. penetration with a penis) was exclusively ‘gay’ it was widely understood as also occurring between men and women.

Initial anal sexual experiences were rarely narrated in terms of mutual exploration of sexual pleasure. Women reported painful anal sex:

As soon as the whole incident happened where he didn’t warn me it just hurt. It was just pain [*laugh*]. It was just like: no. No one could possibly enjoy that. It was just horrible [...] I guess he could have used lube, maybe that would have helped, but I don’t know. Apparently if you’re tense it hurts more, I guess, which makes sense really, but I don’t see how you couldn’t be tense [*laugh*] in that kind of situation. (Emma)

Young men in our study, while often keen on anal sex in principle, were sometimes unenthusiastic about the physical reality: “I thought it was going to be a lot better to be honest” (Ali); “sometimes it does feel better [than vaginal sex] but I wouldn’t say I preferred it” (Max).

From the young people’s accounts, it seems that condoms were not often used, and when they were it was usually for basic hygiene, not STI prevention: “so you don’t get shit on your dick” (Carl). Some interviewees incorrectly stated that anal STI transmission was impossible, or less likely than for vaginal intercourse.

There were marked gender differences in how anal sex was described: its benefits (pleasure, indicator of sexual achievement) were expected for men but not women; its risks – interviewees rarely mentioned risks of STIs, focusing instead on risk of pain, or damaged reputation – were expected for women not men. Our interviewees did not describe anal sex as a way to preserve virginity or avoid pregnancy.



### Reasons for anal sex

The main reasons given for young people having anal sex were that men wanted to copy what they saw in pornography, and that “it’s tighter”. The implication was that “tighter” was better for men and was something men were said to want, while women were expected to find anal sex painful, particularly the first time. The ‘pornography’ explanation seems partial at best, not least because young people only seemed to see this as motivating men, not women. We found other important explanations and motivations in young people’s accounts, as we will see below.

Key themes emerged from our interviews that help explain why the practice continued despite women’s reluctance, expectations of pain for women, and apparent lack of pleasure for women and men: competition between men; the claim that “people must like it if they do it” (alongside the seemingly contradictory expectation that it will be painful for women); and – crucially – normalisation of coercion and ‘accidental’ penetration.

#### *Competition between men*

While not all young men in the study wanted to have anal sex (e.g. saying it was ‘not for them’), many men said they encouraged one another to try the practice, and both men and women said men wanted to tell their friends they had had anal sex. Men in a group discussion said anal sex was “something we do for a competition”, and “every hole’s a goal”. By contrast, both men and women said women risked their reputation for the same act; a sexual double standard familiar from previous literature.<sup>20</sup>

#### *"People must like it if they do it"*

Despite asserting that anal sex is inevitably painful for women, and despite not usually linking pain to any sexual pleasure, both men and women often also expressed the seemingly contradictory view that anal sex was in fact enjoyable for women:

Obviously people do enjoy it if they do it. (Naomi)

There’s quite a few, a lot of girls enjoy it. But I think most girls would like, I think they might do, on the quiet. (Shane)

That it ‘must’ be enjoyable was typically suggested as an explanation by those who had not engaged in the practice.

Women experiencing pain were often depicted as naive or flawed. Both men and women said that women needed to “relax” more, to “get used to it”:

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3 I think that the boy enjoys it. I think it's definitely the boy that pushes  
4 for it from watching porn and stuff, they wanna try it. The girl is  
5 scared and thinks it's weird, and then they try it because the boyfriend  
6 wants them to. *They normally don't enjoy it because they're scared*  
7 and I, I know that like with anal, *if you're not willing, you don't relax,*  
8 like if you have, you have control over two of the muscles that are  
9 closest to the outside and then inside it's like involuntary and if  
10 you're scared or you haven't eased them off like they stay tight and  
11 then you can rip 'em if you try and force anal sex. (Mark [our  
12 emphasis])  
13  
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17 Note that Mark refers, almost casually, to the idea that a woman might be “scared” or “not  
18 willing” in a scenario in which anal sex is possibly taking place, seemingly assuming a shared  
19 understanding with the interviewer that this would often be the case. Elsewhere in the  
20 interview he talks about having hurt his partner during an anal sex ‘slip’ (see below), and so  
21 his talk about ‘easing off’ may reflect his own – perhaps more recent – understanding of how  
22 it ‘should’ be done.  
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### 27 ***Normalisation of coercion and 'accidental' penetration***

28 The idea that women would generally not wish to engage in anal sex, and so would need to  
29 be either persuaded or coerced, seemed to be taken for granted by many participants. Even in  
30 otherwise seemingly communicative and caring partnerships, some men seemed to push to  
31 have anal sex with their reluctant partner despite believing it likely to hurt her. Persuasion of  
32 women was a feature to a greater or lesser degree of most men's and women's narratives  
33 about anal sex events, with repeated, emphatic requests from men commonly mentioned.  
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40 Women seemed to take for granted that they would either acquiesce to or resist their partners'  
41 repeated requests, rather than being equal partners in sexual decision making. Being able to  
42 say ‘no’ was often cited by the women as a positive example of their control of the situation.  
43  
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45 Some men also described taking a ‘try it and see’ approach, where they anally penetrated a  
46 woman with their fingers or penis and hoped that she would not stop them.  
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49 Shane said he used digital penetration to see if a woman was likely to agree to anal sex and –  
50 if she said no – “I can be very persuasive. Like sometimes you just keep going, just keep  
51 going till they just get fed up and let you do it anyway”.  
52  
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54 ‘Try it and see’ generally either hurt the woman or was ‘unsuccessful’ (from the man's point  
55 of view) in the sense of not penetrating “it just didn't go in really”. (Jack) A verbal ‘no’ from  
56 the woman did not necessarily stop anal penetration attempts:  
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3 He tried putting it there.

4  
5 [Interviewer] Right

6  
7 And I just said ‘no’.

8  
9 [Interviewer] Had he asked you first or did he just try it?

10  
11 Um, he kept asking me at first. I’m like ‘no’, but then he tried it and I  
12 said ‘no way’.

13  
14 [Interviewer] Right

15  
16 ‘No chance’. (Molly)

17  
18 In some cases, anal penetration of the woman – digital or penile – was described by both men  
19 and women as having happened accidentally (“it slipped”). Mark, mentioned above, for  
20 instance told us about a time when he ‘slipped’ during vagina-penis intercourse and  
21 penetrated his girlfriend anally.

22  
23 Because of the nature of the data – we rely on reports at interview – it is difficult to assess the  
24 extent to which events described as ‘slips’ were genuinely unintentional. One man however  
25 described a ‘slip’ at first interview, which he said to the interviewer – and said he had told his  
26 girlfriend – was an accident, a story which he amended at second interview. He did not seem  
27 troubled by talking about having apparently attempted to penetrate his girlfriend against her  
28 wishes:

29  
30 [Interviewer] I think you said [...] in the first interview that there had  
31 been a time where [...] you said it [his penis] slipped.

32  
33 Well I, I tried, and I said it slipped.

34  
35 [Interviewer] So it hadn’t actually slipped? It wasn’t an accident?

36  
37 No, no, no it wasn’t an accident. (Jack)

38  
39 Describing events as ‘slips’, then, may enable both men and women to gloss over the  
40 possibility that penetration was deliberate and non-consensual.

41  
42 The narratives suggested little expectation that young women themselves would initiate anal  
43 sex. Many young men on the other hand clearly described wanting to penetrate a woman  
44 anally. This mismatch may help explain why ‘slips’ and ‘persuasion’ of the woman were  
45 common features of the narratives about anal sex.

## Anal sex and pleasure

Among those who had had anal sexual experiences, few of the men and only one woman among this young age group referred to physical pleasure in their accounts. Alicia, the only woman narrating pleasurable anal penetration, exemplifies some of the complexities involved in women's navigating (and narrating) anal sexual practices. She described a fairly common pattern: her partner asked for anal sex, which she first refused but later agreed to. She found it painful, and also had a second experience where her consent was questionable ("it just kind of slipped in"). She was atypical, however, in that she related the story in a positive way emphasising her own agency ("I was curious about it") and described how she had subsequently enjoyed anal sex, suggesting they had found a mutually satisfactory way to engage in the practice.

Her partner had had anal sex before. The first time she had anal sex with him was "really painful":

I didn't wanna try it [anal sex] initially, well I was unsure about it initially. But I kind of, he didn't, he said 'that's fine', but I still wanted to try it for him because I was interested. I think I was interested to why he was interested. I was curious about it [...] So I think that's [...] I just sort of tried it for him.

She described the second occasion they had anal sex differently in the first and second interviews:

[First interview] We were having [vaginal] sex another time and it [his penis] just kind of slipped in [into her anus] that way.

[Second interview] He just sort of slipped in [...] I think he thought it would make it less painful for me. And I think he thought he can make me like it like that.

At first interview, Alicia was ambiguous about what happened, narrating the event as though it were accidental ("it just kind of slipped in"), perhaps reluctant to draw attention to not having been involved in the decision. At second interview, she was clearer that he had deliberately penetrated her (she may also have spoken to her partner about it between interviews). She presents it in a somewhat positive way ("he thought he can make me like it") but her consent remains unclear.

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2  
3 At both interviews, she emphasised how much she enjoyed subsequent anal sex with the  
4 same man, and that either of them might initiate it. Alicia was the only woman we  
5 interviewed who described experiencing physical pleasure, including orgasm, from anal sex.  
6  
7

8  
9 Yeah. I quite like it because I think I quite like the feeling of him  
10 against my bum, like against the meat of your bum, like it's kind of  
11 cushiony. So yeah, I think that's what I like about it, I'm not sure.  
12

13 Alicia's case was also unusual in how she presented herself in relation to her partner as more  
14 sexually driven: "I'm not saying that I'm like wanting sex [all practices, not only anal sex] all  
15 the time, but I'd say I go for it more. I'd initiate it more".  
16  
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18 In previous work, we have shown how interpretations of apparently coercive events can  
19 change over time<sup>21</sup> and it is possible that better, later experiences in the context of a  
20 continuing relationship had allowed her to incorporate the initial, less enjoyable ones into a  
21 narrative of personal sexual growth within a stable relationship, particularly as she came to  
22 enjoy the practices that she had found painful at first.  
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27 Despite being generally positive, Alicia's account also contains indications of reluctance ("I  
28 didn't wanna try it [...] I was unsure"). It is possible that even as she talks about enjoying the  
29 practice, her narrative was shaped to some extent by social expectations about women  
30 resisting anal sex. Similarly, some men avoided talking about not enjoying anally penetrating  
31 a woman, only mentioning it after a series of questions, supporting other work describing an  
32 onus on men to articulate only a positive view of sex.<sup>22 23</sup>  
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## 41 DISCUSSION

42 Few young men or women reported finding anal sex pleasurable and both expected anal sex  
43 to be painful for women. This study offers explanations for why anal sex may occur despite  
44 this.  
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47 Interviewees frequently cite pornography as the 'explanation' for anal sex, yet only seem to  
48 see this as a motivation for men. A fuller picture of why women and men engage in anal sex  
49 emerges from their accounts. It seems that anal sex happens in a context characterised by at  
50 least five specific features linked with the key explanatory themes described above:  
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53 First, some men's narratives suggested consent for anal sex was not always a primary  
54 concern. Interviewees often spoke casually about penetration without consent ("you can rip  
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3 'em if you try and force anal sex"; "you just keep going till they get fed up and let you do it  
4 anyway") suggesting that not only do they expect coercion to be part of anal sex (in general,  
5 even if not for themselves personally), but that many of them accept or at least do not  
6 explicitly challenge it. Some events, particularly the 'accidental' penetration reported by  
7 some interviewees, were ambiguous in terms of whether or not they would be classed as rape  
8 (i.e. non-consensual penetration) but we know from Jack's interview that 'accidents' may  
9 happen 'on purpose'. The men who described apparently coercing their partners seemed  
10 oblivious to, or uncaring of, their role as possible rapists.

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17 Second, badgering women in order to obtain reluctant consent to anal sex appears to be  
18 considered normal.

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21 Third, the commonly circulating ideas that 'everyone' enjoys it, and that women who do not  
22 are either flawed or simply keeping their enjoyment secret, help support the erroneous idea  
23 that a man pushing for anal sex is simply 'persuading' his partner to do something that 'most  
24 girls would like'. Even Alicia's narrative contains some of the apparently coercive features of  
25 anal sex that other women report in negative terms, despite Alicia reporting enjoying anal  
26 sex. Women may also be under pressure to appear to enjoy or choose certain sexual practices:  
27 Gill describes a "postfeminist sensibility", where women are expected to present themselves  
28 as having chosen behaviours that conform to heterosexual male fantasy.<sup>24</sup> We hope to explore  
29 such expectations and their effects in future work.

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36 Fourth, anal sex today appears to be a marker of (hetero)sexual achievement or experience,  
37 particularly for men.<sup>18</sup> The society our interviewees inhabit seems to reward men for sexual  
38 experience per se ("every hole's a goal"), and to some extent reward women for compliance  
39 in sexually 'adventurous' acts (enjoyment signifying not being naive, unrelaxed etc.),  
40 although women must balance this with the risk to their reputation. The common portrayal of  
41 anal heterosex in terms of men breaking women's resistance can be compared with narratives  
42 about first vaginal intercourse<sup>25</sup> and perhaps have superseded them to some degree in the UK  
43 context where premarital vaginal intercourse is considered normal and so perhaps less of a  
44 'conquest'.  
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51 Fifth, many men do not express concern about possible pain for women, viewing it as  
52 inevitable. Less painful techniques (such as slower penetration) were rarely discussed.  
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3 Attitudes such as the inevitability of pain for women, or men's failure to recognise or reflect  
4 on their own potentially coercive behaviour, seem to be unchallenged. Alicia's case  
5 demonstrates how women might absorb potentially negative experiences into an overall  
6 narrative of control, desire and pleasure, all of which she emphasises in her account. We do  
7 not suggest that mutually pleasurable anal practices should not happen among this age group.  
8 Rather, we wish to emphasise how mutuality and pleasure are often absent in narratives of  
9 anal heterosexual and how their absence is not only left unremarked and unchallenged, but even  
10 seems expected by many young people.

11  
12 Previous work has suggested gendered power may operate differently for different sexual  
13 activities, and that sexual 'scripts' (i.e. expectations about how practices will be done) for  
14 anal intercourse may not be as well established as for vaginal intercourse.<sup>13</sup> Our findings  
15 suggest that coercion could emerge as a dominant script for anal intercourse at these young  
16 ages if left unchallenged.

17  
18 Further work is needed to assess the extent to which similar coercive discourses operate  
19 among young people in other countries. This is a qualitative study, with an in-depth analysis  
20 of a smaller sample than would be usual for epidemiological studies, but which spans three  
21 locations and diverse social groups. Whether or not the concept of 'generalisability' should  
22 be applied in qualitative research is a matter of debate<sup>26</sup>, but we would argue that this study  
23 provides useful, credible working hypotheses or theories about anal sexual practice among  
24 young men and women that are likely to apply outside our group of interviewees.

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26 Sexuality education, and specifically what it should contain, is the subject of global debate.<sup>27</sup>  
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<sup>28</sup> Prevention of STIs, HIV, and violence are priorities for health promotion worldwide. Yet  
sexuality education, where it exists, rarely addresses specific sexual practices, such as anal  
sex between men and women – despite its potential for disease transmission and, as these  
accounts reveal, coercion. In the UK, where this study was located, discussions of pleasure,  
pain, consent and coercion are included in good sexuality education but such education  
remains isolated, ad hoc, and non-compulsory.

## CONCLUSION

Anal sex among young people in this study appeared to be taking place in a context  
encouraging pain, risk, and coercion. Harm reduction efforts targeting anal sex may help  
encourage discussion about mutuality and consent, reduce risky and painful techniques and  
challenge views that normalise coercion.

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**DATA SHARING STATEMENT:** Further data are available from the lead author (CM). Participants gave informed consent for anonymised data sharing in the final reports from this study.

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16 The writing of this manuscript was undertaken by the listed authors (CM, RL) alone and  
17 without interference from the funder. The decision to submit this research for publication was  
18 entirely that of the authors (CM, RL).  
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29 and take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis  
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**Anal sexheterosex among young people and implications  
for health promotion: a qualitative study in the UK**

C. Marston<sup>1</sup>, R. Lewis<sup>1</sup>

**Word count: 3,162**

Keywords: anal sex, sexual behaviour, sexual health, young adult, qualitative research

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## ABSTRACT

### Objective

To explore expectations, experiences and circumstances of anal sex among young people.

### Design

Qualitative, longitudinal study using individual and group interviews.

### Participants

130 men and women aged 16-18 from diverse social backgrounds.

### Setting

Three contrasting sites in England (London, a northern industrial city, rural southwest).

### Results

Anal ~~sex~~heterosex often appeared to be painful, risky and coercive. ~~Five key themes emerged from our interviews that help explain why young people have, particularly for women. Interviewees frequently cited pornography as the ‘explanation’ for anal sex despite this: men ‘copying pornography’, ‘it’s tighter’, yet their accounts revealed a complex context with availability of pornography being only one element. Other key elements included~~ competition between men; the claim that “people must like it if they do it” (made alongside the seemingly contradictory expectation that it will be painful for women); and, crucially, normalisation of coercion and ‘accidental’ penetration. It seemed men were often persuading or coercing reluctant partners. Safer, less painful techniques were not discussed.

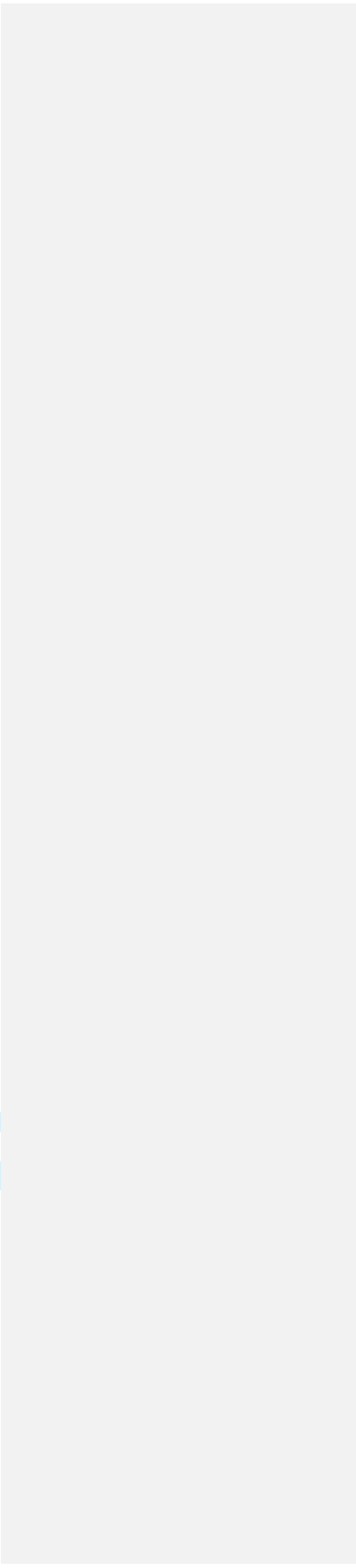
### Conclusions

~~Interviewees frequently cite pornography as the ‘explanation’ for anal sex, yet their accounts reveal a complex context for anal sex with availability of pornography being only one element: crucially, young people circulated ideas that promoted~~ Young people’s narratives normalised coercive, painful and unsafe anal sex. This study suggests an urgent need for harm reduction efforts targeting anal sex to talk help encourage discussion about anal sex with young people to discuss safer mutuality and less consent, reduce risky and painful techniques, to emphasise consent, and to challenge views that promote normalise coercion.



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### Strengths and limitations of this study

- This study uses a large qualitative sample from three diverse sites in the UK and is the first to capture a wide range of circumstances around and reasons for engaging in anal sex among men and women between the ages of 16 and 18.
- Analysis explores experiences in depth, going beyond simplistic explanations linking motivations for anal sex with pornography
- The study shows that young ~~people circulated ideas about gender and sexual practices that normalised~~ people's narratives about anal sex contained ideas normalising coercive, painful and unsafe anal sex. These ideas could be addressed in health promotion work.
- This study was conducted in the UK and further work is needed to assess the extent to which ~~the same~~ similar discourses operate among young people in other countries.

## INTRODUCTION

Anal sex is increasingly prevalent among young people, yet anal intercourse between men and women – though commonly depicted in sexually explicit media – ~~appears unmentionable in many social contexts and~~ is usually absent from mainstream sexuality education. ~~and seems unmentionable in many social contexts.~~

Surveys suggest young men and women – and older adults – are engaging in anal intercourse more than ever before.<sup>1-4</sup> Sexually explicit media depictions are often mentioned as affecting how sex is viewed and practised by young people<sup>5-7</sup> with anal intercourse one of the ‘risky’ or ‘undesirable’ practices thought to be promoted by such media,<sup>8,9</sup> although evidence about the influence of pornography on anal practices is thin.<sup>5,5</sup> Studies of anal practices, which are generally of over-18s,<sup>10-12</sup> suggest anal sex might be desired by young men more than women, and may be used to avoid pregnancy,<sup>12,13</sup> or vaginal intercourse during menstruation,<sup>12</sup> while often being unprotected with condoms.<sup>12-14</sup> It may be painful for women,<sup>12,13,15</sup> and may be a pleasurable part of sex for men and women.<sup>16,17</sup> Almost one in five 16-24 year olds (19% of men, 17% of women) reported having had anal intercourse in the past year in a recent UK survey.<sup>4</sup>

Very little is known about the detailed circumstances around or reasons for engaging in anal sex among under-18-year-olds anywhere, or what implications these might have for health.

This study looks in detail at anal practices among ~~under 18s and draws out global lessons~~ young people aged 18 and under, develops hypotheses for further study, and makes suggestions for sexual health promotion.

## METHOD

### Design and data collection

~~We collected data on~~ The narratives about anal ~~sex~~ heterosex presented here emerged as part of a longitudinal, qualitative mixed methods study (the ~~“sixteen18”~~ ‘sixteen18’ project) which explored the range and meaning of different sexual activities among a diverse sample of 130 young people aged 16-18 in three contrasting locations in England: London; a medium-sized northern, industrial city; and a rural area in the southwest. From January 2010 we conducted nine group interviews and 71 depth interviews (wave one: 37 women, 34 men), re-interviewing 43 of the depth interviewees one year later (wave two), until June 2011. The

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine ~~ethics committee~~ Research Ethics Committee approved the study and all participants provided written consent.

For the depth interviews, we used purposive sampling to maximise variation in social background. Within each location we sampled from a range of settings including: schools/colleges (~~n=23 depth interviews~~); youth work services targeting young people not in education or training (~~n=9~~); youth organisations (~~n=8~~); a supported housing project for young people living independently from their families (~~n=4~~); and informal networks (~~n=3~~). We also used 'snowball' sampling (~~n=17~~) and, in the rural southwest, we approached people directly in a town centre (~~n=7~~).

. The sample was diverse in terms of economic and social background, and less diverse in terms of ethnicity (most participants were white). See Lewis et al 2013 for further details.<sup>18</sup>

We highlighted in our information leaflet and our conversations with potential interviewees that we were keen to speak to any young person, whatever their experiences. Although participants varied in terms of the range of activities they had experienced, and the number and nature of their sexual partnerships, the majority reported opposite-sex partners only.

In the depth interviews, we asked interviewees about what sexual practices they had engaged in, the circumstances of those practices, and how they felt about them. We deliberately left 'sexual practices' undefined, to allow for young people's own definitions to emerge. In the group discussions, we asked general questions about what practices they had heard of, their attitudes to those practices, and whether they thought young people their age would generally engage in particular practices, and if so, under what circumstances. Many of our interviewees ~~spontaneously~~ talked about anal sexual practices unprompted (whether they had engaged in them or not) and so in wave two, we specifically asked all of our participants about their perception; and, if relevant, their experience; of anal practices; (about a quarter of our in-depth interviewees reported anal sexual experiences). Our aim was to explore the key discourses surrounding anal sexual practices among this age group; and to elicit detailed accounts of specific experiences.

### Data analysis

We recorded and transcribed all interviews. We used iterative thematic analysis<sup>18,19</sup> to develop our understanding of the data. This involved 'coding' transcripts<sup>18,19</sup> and extensive discussions between researchers to come to a shared interpretation of young people's accounts of anal sex, taking into consideration our own characteristics (e.g. white, middle-

class, educated, women older than the interviewees) and how these may have affected the data collected. We made constant comparisons across cases and themes, and sought ‘deviant cases’ to challenge our emerging interpretations. Throughout the analysis, we simultaneously engaged with theoretical literature to put the work in context.

We use unique identifier pseudonyms throughout. Quotations are from one-to-one interviews unless otherwise indicated, with omissions marked [...].

## RESULTS

Anal practices reported ~~most commonly~~ usually involved penetration or attempted penetration by the man with his penis or finger ~~(15 and eight of the 71 in-depth interviewees respectively—19 of 71 reported anal practices in total), and~~ and, with one exception, were between opposite-sex partners. Anal practices generally occurred between young men and women in ‘boyfriend/girlfriend’ relationships. Although a small minority of interviewees said anal sex (i.e. penetration with a penis) was exclusively ‘gay’ it was widely understood as also occurring between men and women.

Initial anal sexual experiences were rarely narrated in terms of mutual exploration of sexual pleasure. Women reported painful anal sex:

As soon as the whole incident happened where he didn’t warn me it just hurt. It was just pain [*laugh*]. It was just like: no. No one could possibly enjoy that. It was just horrible [...] I guess he could have used lube, maybe that would have helped, but I don’t know.

Apparently if you’re tense it hurts more, I guess, which makes sense really, but I don’t see how you couldn’t be tense [*laugh*] in that kind of situation. (Emma)

The Young men in our study, while often keen on anal sex in principle, were sometimes unenthusiastic about the physical reality: “I thought it was going to be a lot better to be honest” (Ali); “sometimes it does feel better [than vaginal sex] but I wouldn’t say I preferred it” (Max).

### Risks

~~Anal sex was also often risky;~~ From the young people’s accounts, it seems that condoms were ~~only sometimes not often~~ used, and ~~then~~ when they were it was usually for basic hygiene, not STI prevention: “so you don’t get shit on your dick” (Carl). Some interviewees incorrectly stated that anal STI transmission was impossible, or less likely than for vaginal intercourse.

There were marked gender differences in how anal sex was described: its benefits (pleasure, indicator of sexual achievement) were expected for men but not women; its risks – interviewees rarely mentioned risks of STIs, focusing instead on risk of pain, or damaged reputation – were expected for women not men. ~~It was~~ Our interviewees did not ~~described~~ describe anal sex as a way to preserve virginity or avoid pregnancy.

### **Key themes**

~~Five key themes emerged from our interviews that help explain why the practice continued despite women's reluctance, expectations of pain for women, and apparent lack of pleasure for women and men: men 'copying pornography'; "it's tighter"; competition between men; the claim that "people must like it if they do it" (alongside the seemingly contradictory expectation that it will be painful for women); and – crucially – normalisation of coercion and 'accidental' penetration.~~

### ***Men 'copying pornography' and "it's tighter"***

#### **Reasons for anal sex**

The ~~two~~ main reasons given for young people having anal sex were that men wanted to copy what they saw in pornography, and that "it's tighter". The implication was that "tighter" was better for men and was something men were said to want. ~~Women, while women~~ were expected to find anal sex painful, particularly the first time. The 'pornography' explanation seems ~~inadequate~~ partial at best, not least because young people only seemed to see this as motivating men, not women. We found other important explanations and motivations in young people's accounts, as we will see below.

~~Key themes emerged from our interviews that help explain why the practice continued despite women's reluctance, expectations of pain for women, and apparent lack of pleasure for women and men: competition between men; the claim that "people must like it if they do it" (alongside the seemingly contradictory expectation that it will be painful for women); and – crucially – normalisation of coercion and 'accidental' penetration.~~

#### ***Competition between men***

~~Men~~ While not all young men in the study wanted to have anal sex (e.g. saying it was 'not for them'), many men said they encouraged one another to try the practice, and both men and women said men wanted to tell their friends they had had anal sex. Men in a group discussion said anal sex was "something we do for a competition", and "every hole's a goal". ~~Even the~~

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7 ~~men saying they found the idea of anal sex repulsive did not always rule out trying it.~~ By  
8 contrast, both men and women said women risked their reputation for the same act; a sexual  
9 double standard familiar from previous literature.<sup>4920</sup>

10  
11 *"People must like it if they do it"*

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13 Despite asserting that anal sex is inevitably painful for women, ~~interviewees and despite not~~  
14 ~~usually linking pain to any sexual pleasure, both men and women~~ often also expressed the  
15 seemingly contradictory view that ~~anal sex~~ was in fact enjoyable for women:

16  
17 Obviously people do enjoy it if they do it. (Naomi)

18  
19 There's quite a few, a lot of girls enjoy it. But I think most girls  
20 would like, I think they might do, on the quiet. (Shane)

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22  
23 ~~Commonly, women~~ That it 'must' be enjoyable was typically suggested as an explanation by  
24 ~~those who had not engaged in the practice.~~

25  
26 Women experiencing pain were often depicted as naive or flawed. Both men and women said  
27 that women needed to "relax" more, to "get used to it":

28  
29 I think that the boy enjoys it. I think it's definitely the boy that pushes  
30 for it from watching porn and stuff, they wanna try it. The girl is  
31 scared and thinks it's weird, and then they try it because the boyfriend  
32 wants them to. *They normally don't enjoy it because they're scared*  
33 and I, I know that like with anal, *if you're not willing, you don't relax,*  
34 like if you have, you have control over two of the muscles that are  
35 closest to the outside and then inside it's like involuntary and if  
36 you're scared or you haven't eased them off like they stay tight and  
37 then you can rip 'em if you try and force anal sex. (Mark [our  
38 emphasis])

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41 Note that Mark refers, almost casually, to the idea that a woman might be "scared" or "not  
42 willing" in a scenario in which anal sex is possibly taking place, seemingly assuming a shared  
43 understanding with the interviewer that this would often be the case. Elsewhere in the  
44 interview he talks about having hurt his partner during an anal sex 'slip' (see below), and so  
45 his talk about 'easing off' may reflect his own – perhaps more recent – understanding of how  
46 it 'should' be done.

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49 *Normalisation of coercion and 'accidental' penetration*

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51 The idea that women would generally not wish to engage in anal sex, and so would need to  
52 be either persuaded or coerced, seemed to be taken for granted by many participants. Even in  
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otherwise seemingly communicative and caring partnerships, some men seemed to push to have anal sex with their reluctant partner despite believing it likely to hurt her. ~~In-Persuasion of women was a feature to a greater or lesser degree of~~ most men's and women's ~~reports-of narratives about~~ anal sex events ~~'persuasion' of the woman featured to a greater or lesser degree~~, with repeated, emphatic requests from men commonly mentioned.

Women seemed to take for granted that they would either acquiesce to or resist their partners' repeated requests, rather than being equal partners in sexual decision making. Being able to say 'no' was often cited by the women as a positive example of their control of the situation.

Some men also described taking a 'try it and see' approach, where they anally penetrated a woman with their fingers or penis and hoped that she would not stop them.

Shane said he used digital penetration to see if a woman was likely to agree to anal sex and – if she said no – “I can be very persuasive. Like sometimes you just keep going, just keep going till they just get fed up and let you do it anyway”.

'Try it and see' generally either hurt the woman or was 'unsuccessful' (from the man's point of view) in the sense of not penetrating “it just didn't go in really”. (Jack) A verbal 'no' from the woman did not necessarily stop anal penetration attempts:

He tried putting it there.

[Interviewer] Right

And I just said 'no'.

[Interviewer] Had he asked you first or did he just try it?

Um, he kept asking me at first. I'm like 'no', but then he tried it and I said 'no way'.

[Interviewer] Right

'No chance' ~~:-~~ (Molly)

In some cases, anal penetration of the woman – digital or penile – ~~is~~was described by both men and women as happeninghaving happened accidentally (“it slipped”). Mark, mentioned above, for instance told us about a time when he 'slipped' during vagina-penis intercourse and penetrated his girlfriend anally.

~~Because of the nature of the data – we rely on reports at interview – it~~ is difficult to assess the extent to which events described as 'slips' were genuinely unintentional. One man



however described a 'slip' at first interview, which he said to the interviewer – and said he had told his girlfriend – was an accident, a story which he amended at second interview. He did not seem troubled by talking about having apparently attempted to penetrate his girlfriend against her wishes:

[Interviewer] I think you said [...] in the first interview that there had been a time where [...] you said it his penis slipped.

Well I, I tried, and I said it slipped.

[Interviewer] So it hadn't actually slipped? It wasn't an accident?

No, no, no it wasn't an accident. (Jack)

Describing events as 'slips', then, may enable both men and women to gloss over the possibility that penetration was deliberate and non-consensual.

### Complexities: a case study

~~It is important to state~~ The narratives suggested little expectation that young women themselves would initiate anal sex ~~was not a simple matter. Many young men on the other hand clearly described wanting to penetrate a woman anally. This mismatch may help explain why 'slips' and 'persuasion' of men pressuring/women resisting the woman were common features of the narratives about anal sex.~~

### Anal sex and pleasure

Among those who had had anal sexual experiences, few of the men and only one woman among this young age group referred to physical pleasure in their accounts. Alicia, the only woman narrating pleasurable anal penetration, exemplifies some of the complexities involved in women's navigating (and narrating) anal sexual practices. She described a fairly common pattern: her partner asked for anal sex, which she first refused but later agreed to. She found it painful, and also had a second experience where her consent was questionable ("it just kind of slipped in"). She was atypical, however, in that she related the story in a positive way emphasising her own agency ("I was curious about it") and described how she had subsequently enjoyed anal sex ~~which both she and her partner initiated, suggesting they had found a mutually satisfactory way to engage in the practice.~~

~~Alicia described her relationship in very positive terms, and said she was more sexually driven than her partner: "I'm not saying that I'm like wanting sex [all practices, not only anal sex] all the time, but I'd say I go for it more. I'd initiate it more"~~

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Her partner had had anal sex before. The first time she had anal sex with him was “really painful”:

I didn't wanna try it [anal sex] initially, well I was unsure about it initially. But I kind of, he didn't, he said 'that's fine', but I still wanted to try it for him because I was interested. I think I was interested to why he was interested. I was curious about it [...] So I think that's [...] I just sort of tried it for him.

She described the second occasion they had anal sex differently in the first and second interviews, ~~suggesting some discomfort with how the event had progressed:~~

[First interview] We were having [vaginal] sex another time and it [his penis] just kind of slipped in [into her anus] that way.

[Second interview] He just sort of slipped in [...] I think he thought it would make it less painful for me. And I think he thought he can make me like it like that.

At first interview, Alicia was ambiguous about what happened, ~~describingnarrating~~ the event as though it were accidental ~~“(“it just kind of slipped in”;)”~~, perhaps reluctant to draw attention to not having been involved in the decision. At second interview, she was clearer that he had deliberately penetrated her (she may also have spoken to her partner about it between interviews). She presents it in a somewhat positive way (“he thought he can make me like it”) but her consent remains unclear.

At both interviews, she emphasised how much she enjoyed subsequent anal sex with the same man, and that either of them might initiate it.

Alicia was the only woman we interviewed who described experiencing physical pleasure, including orgasm, from anal sex.

Yeah. I quite like it because I think I quite like the feeling of him against my bum, like against the meat of your bum, like it's kind of cushiony. So yeah, I think that's what I like about it, I'm not sure.

~~Alicia's case was also unusual in how she presented herself in relation to her partner as more sexually driven: “I'm not saying that I'm like wanting sex [all practices, not only anal sex] all the time, but I'd say I go for it more. I'd initiate it more”.~~

~~In previous work, we have shown how interpretations of apparently coercive events can change over time<sup>21</sup> and it is possible that better, later experiences in the context of a continuing relationship had allowed her to incorporate the initial, less enjoyable ones into a~~

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narrative of personal sexual growth within a stable relationship, particularly as she came to enjoy the practices that she had found painful at first.

Despite being generally positive, Alicia's account also contains indications of reluctance ("I didn't wanna try it [...] I was unsure"). It is possible that even as she talks about enjoying the practice, her narrative was shaped to some extent by social expectations about women resisting anal sex. Similarly, some men avoided talking about not enjoying anally penetrating a woman, only mentioning it after a series of questions, supporting other work describing an onus on men to articulate only a positive view of sex.<sup>22 23</sup>

## DISCUSSION

Few young men or women reported finding anal sex pleasurable and both expected anal sex to be painful for women. This study offers explanations for why anal sex may occur despite this.

~~Interviewees' accounts~~ Interviewees frequently cite pornography as the 'explanation' for anal sex, yet only seem to see this as a motivation for men. A fuller picture of why women and men engage in anal sex ~~appears in~~ emerges from their accounts. It seems that anal sex happens in a context characterised by at least five specific features linked with the key explanatory themes described above:

First, some ~~men appear unconcerned about~~ men's narratives suggested consent for anal sex was not always a primary concern. Interviewees often spoke casually about penetration without consent ("you can rip 'em if you try and force anal sex"; "you just keep going till they get fed up and let you do it anyway") suggesting that not only do they expect coercion to be part of anal sex (in general, even if not for themselves personally), but that many of them accept or at least do not explicitly challenge it. Some events, particularly the 'accidental' penetration reported by some interviewees, were ambiguous in terms of whether or not they would be classed as rape (~~however defined~~), i.e. non-consensual penetration but we know from Jack's interview that 'accidents' may happen 'on purpose'. The men who described apparently coercing their partners seemed oblivious to, or uncaring of, their role as possible rapists.

Second, badgering women in order to obtain reluctant consent to anal sex appears to be considered normal.

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7 Third, the commonly circulating ideas that ‘everyone’ enjoys it, and that women who do not  
8 are either flawed or simply keeping their enjoyment secret, help support the erroneous idea  
9 that a man pushing for anal sex is simply ‘persuading’ his partner to do something that ‘most  
10 girls would like’. ~~Even Alicia’s narrative contains some of the coercive features of anal sex  
11 that other women report in negative terms, despite Alicia reporting enjoying anal sex~~Even  
12 Alicia’s narrative contains some of the apparently coercive features of anal sex that other  
13 women report in negative terms, despite Alicia reporting enjoying anal sex. Women may also  
14 be under pressure to appear to enjoy or choose certain sexual practices: Gill describes a  
15 “postfeminist sensibility”, where women are expected to present themselves as having chosen  
16 behaviours that conform to heterosexual male fantasy.<sup>24</sup> We hope to explore such  
17 expectations and their effects in future work.

~~Fourth, anal sex today appears to be a marker of (hetero)sexual achievement or experience,  
18 particularly for men.<sup>20</sup> The society our interviewees inhabit seems to reward men for sexual  
19 experience per se (“every hole’s a goal”), and to some extent reward women for compliance  
20 in sexually ‘adventurous’ acts (enjoyment signifying not being naive, unrelaxed etc.),  
21 although women must balance this with the risk to their reputation.~~

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22 particularly for men.<sup>18</sup> The society our interviewees inhabit seems to reward men for sexual  
23 experience per se (“every hole’s a goal”), and to some extent reward women for compliance  
24 in sexually ‘adventurous’ acts (enjoyment signifying not being naive, unrelaxed etc.),  
25 although women must balance this with the risk to their reputation. The common portrayal of  
26 anal heterosex in terms of men breaking women’s resistance can be compared with narratives  
27 about first vaginal intercourse<sup>25</sup> and perhaps have superseded them to some degree in the UK  
28 context where premarital vaginal intercourse is considered normal and so perhaps less of a  
29 ‘conquest’.

Fifth, many men do not express concern about ~~the possible~~ pain for women, viewing it as  
30 inevitable. Less painful techniques (such as slower penetration) were rarely discussed.

Currently this apparently oppressive context, and indeed the practice of anal ~~sex~~heterosex  
31 itself, appears to be largely ignored in policy and in ~~sex~~sexuality education for this young age  
32 group. Attitudes such as the inevitability of pain for women, or men’s failure to recognise or  
33 reflect on their own potentially coercive behaviour, seem to be unchallenged. Alicia’s case  
34 demonstrates how women might absorb potentially negative experiences into an overall

narrative of control, desire and pleasure, all of which she emphasises in her account. We do not suggest that mutually pleasurable anal practices should not happen among this age group. Rather, we wish to emphasise how mutuality and pleasure are often absent in narratives of anal heterosexual and how their absence is not only left unremarked and unchallenged, but even seems expected by many young people.

~~Sexuality education, and specifically what it should contain, is the subject of global debate.<sup>21</sup> <sup>22</sup>Prevention of STIs, HIV, and violence are priorities for health promotion worldwide. Yet sex education, where it exists, rarely addresses specific sexual practices, such as anal sex between men and women—despite its potential for disease transmission and, as these accounts reveal, coercion.~~

~~This study was conducted in the UK and further~~Previous work has suggested gendered power may operate differently for different sexual activities, and that sexual ‘scripts’ (i.e. expectations about how practices will be done) for anal intercourse may not be as well established as for vaginal intercourse.<sup>13</sup> Our findings suggest that coercion could emerge as a dominant script for anal intercourse at these young ages if left unchallenged.

Further work is needed to assess the extent to which similar coercive discourses operate among young people in other countries. This is a qualitative study, with an in-depth analysis of a smaller sample than would be usual for epidemiological studies, but which spans three locations and diverse social groups. Whether or not the concept of ‘generalisability’ should be applied in qualitative research is a matter of debate,<sup>26</sup> but we would argue that this study provides useful, credible working hypotheses or theories about anal sexual practice among young men and women that are likely to apply outside our group of interviewees.

~~Sexuality education, and specifically what it should contain, is the subject of global debate.<sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup>Prevention of STIs, HIV, and violence are priorities for health promotion worldwide. Yet sexuality education, where it exists, rarely addresses specific sexual practices, such as anal sex between men and women – despite its potential for disease transmission and, as these accounts reveal, coercion. In the UK, where this study was located, discussions of pleasure, pain, consent and coercion are included in good sexuality education but such education remains isolated, ad hoc, and non-compulsory.~~

~~Previous work has suggested gendered power may operate differently for different sexual activities, and that sexual ‘scripts’ (i.e. expectations about how practices will be done) for~~

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7 ~~anal intercourse may not be as well established as for vaginal intercourse.~~<sup>13</sup> Our findings  
8 ~~suggest that coercion may be emerging as a dominant script for anal intercourse.~~  
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## 10 11 CONCLUSION

12 Anal sex among young people in this study appeared to be taking place in a context  
13 encouraging pain, risk, and coercion. Harm reduction efforts targeting anal sex may help  
14 encourage ~~debate~~discussion about mutuality and consent, reduce risky and painful techniques  
15 and challenge views that ~~promote~~normalise coercion.  
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