

Moral Exposures, Public Appearances: Contested Presences of Non-Normative Sex in Pandemic Berlin

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Ursula Probst  and Max Schnepf 

Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Freie Universität Berlin,
Berlin, Germany

Abstract

Since its reunification, Berlin has regained its reputation as a sexually liberal European metropolis, offering spaces and infrastructures for non-normative sex to become present in the cityscape. However, with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany and the concomitant measures to contain its spread, sexual practices and their open display have become highly contested and subject to increased regulation. In this article, we attend to sex work and casual sex among gay men, who, both historically and at present, have been placed under particular public scrutiny and moralised (health) governance. Yet, non-normative sex did not vanish from the city during the pandemic, but (re-)appeared in the form of both moralising media exposure and politically motivated public appearances. Attending to the intersections and divergences within these shifting presences of casual gay sex and sex work, we highlight how the biopolitical governance of pandemic sex has been evaded, contested and incorporated into efforts to normalise certain sexual activities. We therefore conclude that the pandemic had ambivalent effects on non-normative sexual practices in Berlin. It contributed to a further politicisation in the fight for their place in the city and to the (re-)emergence of normative assumptions about the respectable sexual subject for and within communities centred around non-normative sexual practices.

Keywords

COVID-19, gay sex, sex work, urban space, biopolitics, public health, normativity, sexual subjects, media, digitalisation

Corresponding author:

Ursula Probst, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany.
Email: ursula.probst@fu-berlin.de

Following the first lockdown to contain the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany in spring 2020, regulations were loosened again in the summer. Consequently, the organisers of Pornceptual, a well-known fetish party in Berlin, were able to hold an open-air event at the end of October, organised in accordance with mandated hygiene regulations. Thus, the venue did not provide any cruising areas for on-site sex, guests had to have their temperature taken at the entrance, and face masks were required at all times. In spite of the party having official permission, and regardless of its hygiene concept, the police disbanded the crowd an hour before the official closing time, tweeting that for the approximately 600 guests, the party 'did not come to a satisfying end' (Polizei Berlin Einsatz, 2020). This provoked heated discussions about the moral and health-related justifications for holding such an event during a pandemic.

In the spirit of the provocative tweet by the Berlin police, other Twitter users added their own comments, joking about the double meanings of masks, handcuffs and uniforms in the context of a fetish party. Yet many also voiced their outrage at what they regarded as the irresponsible behaviour of the party-goers, demanding harsh punishments for organisers and guests alike. Politicians publicly condemned it for taking place at a time when corona cases in Germany had started increasing again and stricter regulations were being discussed. The former Berlin Senator for health, Dilek Kalayci, voiced her criticism in the Berlin House of Representatives: 'I am shocked that there are still these parties. Some still haven't heard the warning shots' (Perdoni, 2020).

Supporters of the party, on the other hand, reacted with indignation at the shutting down of an official event where hygiene measures were, according to the organisers, being followed diligently. Comments on social media especially took issue with the police tweet's sarcastic undertone and its alleged ridiculing of sex-positive parties, emphasising the importance of maintaining safe spaces for queer people in Berlin. In an official statement, the organisers accused the police of having a conservative bias against non-normative sexualities (Pornceptual, 2020). They concluded: 'We find ourselves amidst a *cultural fight*. This was not only an attack on culture but also its minorities. We will keep standing up regardless of all the difficulties of these times. We will stand up for our community and fight for our space in this city' (Pornceptual, 2020; emphasis added).

In this article, we attend to the reinvigorated 'cultural fights' over the presence(s) of sex in Berlin's urban landscape by discussing two specific cases of non-normative sex, namely sex work and casual sex among gay men. The pandemic evoked broad re-evaluations of almost every aspect of social, economic and political life around the globe (Manderson et al., 2021). Sexual intimacies and practices were not exempt from this development (Dawson and Dennis, 2020; Schnepf and Probst, 2020), as they found themselves governed by new rules and regulations, as well as being delegated to coupledom and the privacy of the household (McKenzie, 2020; Newerla, 2021). These emerging 'pandemic mononormativities' (Rothmüller, 2021) also call into question the taken-for-granted place of casual and transactional sex in Berlin's cityscape, whose material presences in the famously sexually liberal capital almost entirely disappeared due to the governance of urban spaces during the pandemic.

Yet, as the example of Pornceptual shows, these disappearances and regulations did not remain uncontested by communities centred around non-normative sexual

practices. Indeed, sex did not simply vanish in pandemic Berlin, but rather emerged in specific instances, acquiring presences that oscillate between scandalising exposures and public appearances that contest moralised governance. Following the shifting presences of sex work and casual gay sex – two distinct and heterogenous forms of non-normative sex which nevertheless share a similar history of public (health) governance – we ultimately aim to highlight the complex intertwinings of both (re-)emergences and contestations of cisheteronormative regulations of pandemic sex in the German capital.

Pandemic effects on fraught infrastructures: the sudden absences of sex in the city

I (Ursula Probst) was confronted with an unusual sight when I revisited Kurfürstenstraße, my former field site, in summer 2020. Between 2017 and 2018, when I conducted field-work on migrant sex workers in Berlin, the streetscape of Kurfürstenstraße was characterised by cis and trans women soliciting sex between parked cars, shops and scaffolding for new apartment buildings. In pre-pandemic Berlin, the presence of sex workers had contributed to the city's international reputation for sexual permissiveness - together with gay men cruising in nearby Tiergarten park and the many sex shops, saunas and 'LGBT-friendly' bars and restaurants around the 'rainbow neighbourhood' of Motzstraße. Throughout the twentieth century, the area made the ambivalences of Berlin's sexual liberalism tangible by providing refuge and infrastructures for those living on the margins of the sexual and gendered norms of German society. However, it also made present economic precarities and vulnerabilities, especially for racialised migrants and members of the working class (Hax and Reiß, 2021; Probst, 2020).

Although the area served as an example of sexual experimentation in urban spaces, it was also a site where 'sexuality is most intensely scrutinised, policed and disciplined' and where 'sexual orders have been worked and reworked' (Hubbard, 2012: 13–14). Particularly in the last decade, tensions have been rising over the presence of mostly racialised migrant cis and trans women from eastern Europe soliciting sex, with demands for a spatial prohibition on sex work in the area growing among residents and politicians. These tensions reflect broader developments in the city, characterized increasingly by forms of neoliberal governance. Since the reunification of Berlin, marketing the city's sexual liberties has contributed to the normalisation of certain non-normative sexual practices and communities as one of the imaginations of Berlin as a liberal metropolis. However, evocations of sexual minorities' rights to the city have also been criticized for lacking an intersectional perspective on current urban developments, since the presence of (German, white, cis, able bodied) gay spaces has also reinforced the exclusion of other (migrant, racialized, trans and/or disabled) communities (Çetin, 2018). This became particularly tangible around Kurfürstenstraße and the adjacent 'rainbow neighbourhood', where restaurants, bars and other establishments catering to mostly wealthy (white) German audiences and tourists are advertised as part of Berlin's 'LGBT-friendly' atmosphere. Simultaneously, rising rents and the securitisation of Kurfürstenstraße have pushed migrant (trans) sex workers further into precarity through losing their places for working and living.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this already ambivalent situation of non-normative sex and its presence in the city. On the one hand, the well-established place of non-normative sex in Berlin provided the conditions for the transformation of being seen into moments of *exposure* (Trott, 2020: 90), rendering non-normative sex more prone to surveillance and moralisation (Butler, 2015: 33–35). In the case of the fetish party, this happened when kinky sex practices were joked about on social media or controlled by public institutions like the police. On the other hand, non-normative sex vanished further from the material cityscape. A total prohibition on sex work, unprecedented in the Federal Republic of Germany, made women working in Kurfürstenstraße disappear from the public eye. But also the 'rainbow neighbourhood' around Motzstraße had become almost unrecognisable, as Mr Fischer¹, an expert in the German AIDS Service Organisation (*Deutsche Aidshilfe*), expressed to me (Max Schnepf) in an interview conducted as part of my investigations of HIV-prevention and queer intimacies in Berlin. With the gay bars, cafés and sex shops closed, only a single queer bookshop remained as a lonely reminder of the neighbourhood's queer history, he remarked. The sudden loss of places to socialise, engage in sex and/or earn money evoked a strong expression of solidarity and support in and between the affected communities (Trott, 2020), as exemplified by the Pornceptual statement's call to 'fight for our space in this city'. These (bodily) *appearances* in public present an act of taking up a space in which to be recognised and to demand 'a livable life' during a pandemic for those who live beyond the confines of cisheteronormativity (Butler, 2015: 26).

As we began a conversation about the effects of the pandemic on our respective fields of research, namely casual gay sex and sex work in the city, we noticed commonalities and differences regarding exposures and appearances of sex workers and gay men. Tracing and contrasting the shifting presences of sex work and casual gay sex in the material and discursive cityscape, we argue that the moralisation and governance of non-normative sex in the pandemic, as well as its contestations and evasions, indicate an ambivalent (re-)negotiation of biopolitical norms (Laufenberg, 2014). First, the loss of (material) spaces for non-normative sex in the city contributed to a (re-)politicisation of sex and the fight for the rights of sexual minorities. Second, (re-)emerging public health discourses also made apparent and contributed to neoliberal (homo-)normativities within communities centred around non-normative sexual practices along the lines of defining the (ir-)responsible pandemic sexual subject (Laufenberg, 2014: 274–279).

Studying paid sex and homo-sex in conjunction, in a pandemic

Our focus on casual gay sex and paid sex continues in line with investigations and critiques of 'the policing of non-normative sexual behaviors' (Colter et al., 1996: 14) that do not comply with heteronormative orderings of the public and private spheres. However, our comparison of the pandemic effects on sex work and casual gay sex in Berlin should not be understood as a conflation of these two practices as a homogenous epitome of non-normative sex. Instead we acknowledge both the heterogeneities within these fields and the existence of other non-normative sexual practices. Since sex work and casual gay sex share a history as well as pandemic present of moral scrutiny and

governance, we focus on their intersections and divergences as expressions of non-normative sex.

The brothel and the bathhouse exemplify this shared history of policing non-normative sex in urban space. These venues for commercial and gay sex became the object of government control and closure most prominently at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, but also in the face of earlier syphilis outbreaks. Alexander (1996: 233–234) argues that, instead of containing the spread of HIV and other STIs, regulating sex work and closing down sex venues mainly served the symbolic purpose of constructing sex workers and gays as morally and physically contagious and, consequently, as a threat to mainstream (heterosexual) society. This biopolitical governance of sex work and casual gay sex in the name of public health is not an issue of the past or one confined to periods of epidemiological crisis. For example, ‘chemsex’ – the use of substances such as crystal meth to enhance sexual experiences, especially in group settings – has become a major concern to many HIV-prevention programs. Instead of approaching chemsex as meaningful practices, many awareness campaigns and most epidemiological literature have adopted a pathologizing view of gay men as prone to self-destruction (Møller and Hakim, 2021; Race, 2015: 256).

This article builds on our expertise in the ethnographic study of sex work and gay sex respectively. Because of our engagements with communities of sex workers and HIV prevention services for gay men, the pandemic has urged us to (re)turn to our fields when we saw our research participants and collaborators being heavily affected by the unfolding crisis. In circumstances of physical contact being limited if not impossible, we began to trace the effects of the pandemic in different ways. We ventured into digital ethnographies and discourse analysis, following the unfolding debates around transactional and casual sex through social media, local and national newspapers, and (political) statements by support services, politicians, NGOs and activists. Ursula Probst revisited her field site of Kurfürstenstraße, digitally reconnected with research participants who suddenly found themselves out of work due to the prohibition on sex work, and engaged in many informal and often sorrowful conversations with sex work activists and researchers in an attempt to make sense of the situation. As part of his ethnographic research, Max Schnepf participated in gay sex culture in Berlin and engaged in conversations with employees, volunteers and customers at HIV prevention organisations. He also conducted two interviews online, one expert interview with an official from the German AIDS Service Organisation, and one with Lukas, a gay man who has regularly organised and attended private sex parties during the pandemic.

Our methodological approach of drawing on diverse sources and materials for the study of sex partly stems from the complexities and limitations in the pandemic situation and partly from the elusiveness of our research object. Due to ‘the intangible and ephemeral nature of sex’ (Spronk, 2021: 114), it is almost impossible not to engage with the discourses, norms, identities and communities that assemble around ‘bare’ erotic acts. Writing about sex thus necessarily touches on the ambiguity of sexuality (Schnepf, 2020). Nevertheless, we try to stay as closely as possible to sex acts in our selected cases – how they are discussed, defended, regulated, accessed and experienced. As we aim to show, it is especially these volatilities of pandemic sex that allow us to observe, and critically engage with, emerging normativities. To discuss the new configurations

of non-normative sex in pandemic Berlin, we attend to different spheres in which sex work and casual gay sex became present, either because sex was morally exposed from the outside or because those engaging in non-normative practices decided to appear publicly.

Pandemic victims and villains: moral media exposures

In the summer of 2020, Hasenheide park in Berlin was prominently featured in local and national media because of the unofficial parties taking place there, inciting commentaries about the younger generation's irresponsible behaviour and their 'embarrassing rituals of a fuck-it society' (Kurianowicz and Leister, 2020). When I (Max Schnepf) read the articles, I was struck by what seemed to be a meaningful omission: the park's history as a cruising area where gay men meet for anonymous sex was strangely absent from most media coverage, with only a few exceptions. One report about the new 'party hotspot' dedicated its last lines to the gay sex that is *still* taking place in the park, remarking in a voyeuristic tone: 'There are almost only men standing at the margins of the glade – all of them ripped and bare-chested, they kiss and hug each other' (Götzke, 2020). For the journalist, the 'kissing and hugging' of shirtless gays embodies the irresponsibility of those at Hasenheide and is thus depicted as part and parcel of the parties held there. Attending to the changing demographics at the park, the gay magazine *Siegessäule* portrayed cruising at Hasenheide quite differently. Featuring voices cautioning against a further expulsion of gay sex from the park by increasingly straight party groups (Mannes/as, 2020), gay sex in public is made present as the *other* story of Hasenheide, and thus portrayed as endangered due to the pandemic.

In their media content analysis, Döring and Walter (2020) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent restrictions on contact have put sex and questions of sexual and reproductive health on the agenda of German media outlets. They observe that, apart from the glorification of solo-sex and online-sex, news articles discuss the situation of sex workers and LGBTQI+ people within a problem-focused framework around the absence of casual and transactional sex (Döring and Walter, 2020: 73–74). However, this victimizing narrative about heightened discrimination, diminished physical contact and economic precarity needs further nuancing when non-normative sex is addressed not as an absence, but as an ongoing albeit clandestine activity, as shown in the reporting about Hasenheide. Either gay men were portrayed as the victims of pandemic transformations in urban space, or their sexual permissiveness served as the epitome of recklessness.

The two interpretations of Hasenheide's history and its pandemic present were indicative of a broader shift in media discussions of sex practices (Hakim et al., 2021). In the years and decades prior to the pandemic, gay men's lives in particular have been represented in more nuances beyond a victim-or-villain narrative in the media, especially given biomedical control of HIV in the Global North (Gross, 2001). However, this normalisation had been achieved by bracketing the physical act of sex and adjusting to homonormative ideals of respectable citizenship. With the advent of the new coronavirus and the subsequent media attention to physical intimacy and sex, we are witnessing new moralisations of non-normative sex that fall back into victimizing or scandalizing narratives.

A similar pre-pandemic normalisation was not observed in the case of sex work, which has long been characterised by a voyeuristic representation of sex workers as either helpless victims or independent entrepreneurs in the German media (Hill and Bibbert, 2019: 68–73). A continuation of this polarisation was evident in the media coverage of sex work during the pandemic, although Döring and Walter (2020: 74) note that media reports included the voices of sex workers, which previously tended to serve rather as an object than a subject of public debates (Hill and Bibbert, 2019: 68–73). However, based on our observations on media coverage of Berlin's sex industry, these inclusions need to be further, and critically, analysed. Their focus on the effects of the prohibition on sex work, expressed by mostly white, German sex workers, left unattended the complex situations of multiply marginalised sex workers. The latter's precarities did not relate solely to the prohibition on sex work, but to various forms of socioeconomic exclusion. Rather, the bodies of migrant women who were left with no other option than continuing to engage in street-based sex work continued to be exposed by the media in order to negotiate pandemic moralities. Furthermore, the media's attention later began to turn towards a concern about sex workers as a factor driving the pandemic (Rodenkirch, 2020), reinvigorating the moralisation of sex workers as a danger to society.

The reporting about Hasenheide park and Kurfürstenstraße shows the ambivalent media presence of non-normative sex in pandemic Berlin. Sex workers and gay men are portrayed either as suffering most from the hygiene measures or as irresponsible super-spreaders of the virus. To contradict stereotypical media representations and the scandalisation of non-normative sex, sex workers and HIV-prevention organizations used their institutional power to intervene in public discourse and policy-making. We will discuss these public appearances in the next section.

Negotiating public health concerns: public (re-)appearances as responsible subjects

As the pandemic progressed, the situation of sex workers became more and more precarious due to the continuous loss of income. Even those who could afford not to work saw their savings shrinking, while many of those without savings or access to government financial support had to find new ways of making money by venturing into digital forms of sex work. And those who continued to practice in-person sex work not only faced potential exposure to the virus, but also increased policing and fines. This led local support services and NGOs to criticize local authorities publicly for further punishing an already precarious and vulnerable group (Frank, 2020). Answering these criticisms, the Berlin Senate amended the decree which provided the legal basis for the prohibition (Berliner Senat, 2020), making sex workers (unlike clients and managers) exempt from fines. Underlying problems nevertheless remained, as many sex workers could not access the emergency financial aid provided by the state because they did not have the necessary paperwork or residence status. Additionally, with rumours of police controls on the streets spreading through social media, despite the announced changes, some sex workers adapted their tactics so as to disappear further from potential surveillance. This invisibility allowed them to evade stigmatisation and harassment,

though as Shewly et al. (2020: 509) point out, it 'makes it impossible to claim their rights and improve their social and economic situations'.

Improving the conditions of sex workers required their active (re-)appearance in public spaces. During the summer of 2020, as the first wave of the pandemic slowed down and the restrictions were slowly lifted, sex work remained prohibited and sex worker organisations began to complain publicly that they had been forgotten by the state (BesD, 2020b). After issuing a statement demanding legal work opportunities, the largest nationwide sex worker organisation underscored their discursive reappearance by organising protests in material urban spaces throughout the country, including Berlin, where a demonstration was held in the vicinity of the German Bundesrat (*Morgenpost*, 2020). Similarly, using Berlin's central position in the German political landscape, the Sex Worker Action Group was formed in the capital with the aim of making sex work(ers) visible at various central locations throughout the city at a time when members of parliament were returning from their summer break (Sex Worker Action Group, 2020).

The demands of various sex worker groups and associations focussed strongly on lifting the total ban on prostitution. Sex work activists incorporated public health rhetoric into their demands by arguing that sex work can be carried out in accordance with pandemic hygiene regimes. One organisation even published a 'hygiene concept' for various sectors of the sex industry (BesD, 2020a). The emergence of hygiene norms thus provided sex workers with an opportunity to normalise their profession as one of many jobs that involve close physical contact, which continues an ongoing process of professionalisation of the sex industry (Bernstein, 2007). However, this approach also (re-)enforced hierarchies and moralisations within the sex industry by (re-)creating distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' sex workers, that is those who stayed within the framework of public health regulations and those in conflict with the regulations.

Negotiations of what counts as responsible sexual activity and how to appear as respectable sexual subjects also occurred in relation to gay sex, most prominently in the German AIDS Service Organisation's explanations of and justifications for why gay men seek casual sex during a pandemic. Mr Fischer admitted that his organisation had made mistakes during the early days of the pandemic, as they 'fell back into old patterns' of the beginning of the HIV/AIDS epidemic: they moralized casual sex and asked gay men to abstain from hook-ups. As Mr Fischer told me (Max Schnepf), the organisation soon changed its directive and acknowledged the strong desire for physical intimacy, returning to sex-positive messages and slogans such as '*Keine Rechenschaft für Leidenschaft*' ('No Accountability for Passion'), borrowed from German AIDS activists of the 1990s (AIDS-Forum, 1990).

Instead of telling gay men what to do, Mr Fischer encouraged them to make informed decisions about their sexual desires during the pandemic: 'Well, you can only suppress a thing for so long, but you can't do it permanently, because sexuality is a basic need, after all. And it is actually a good approach to evaluate: How can I live out my sexual desires in some way?' He made use of mental health discourses and warned against higher rates of drug use and suicide among gay men due to the absence of physical intimacy. Yet, Mr Fischer also seemed well aware that framing sex as a 'need' can lend itself to biologizing arguments about a 'right to sex'. He therefore demanded that gay men act

responsibly in the pandemic, while also taking care of their psycho-social well-being. To ensure such responsible behaviour, Mr Fischer wanted to present creative but practical solutions to allow for safer casual encounters. He mentioned as positive a Belgian initiative asking people to reduce their sexual contacts to a limited number of ‘fuck buddies’ and a Canadian initiative that proposed building one’s own glory hole (a hole in a wall used for anonymous sex among gay men) to minimize the risk of contracting or spreading COVID-19. With their own information material, the German AIDS Service Organisation not only invoked gay men as responsible sexual subjects. Mr Fischer actively opposed long-existing media representations that exposed gay men and their supposedly insatiable sexuality as spreading diseases.

Public (re-)appearances of institutions like sex workers’ organisations or the German AIDS service organisation introduced different arguments for the necessity of a differentiated approach to non-normative sex during the pandemic. Sex worker organisations stressed the question of the economic survival of sex workers, while Mr Fischer highlighted the issue of mental health and potential isolation. Therefore, the appearances of these organisations can be understood as a response to moralising media exposures of transactional and casual gay sex. Underlying both appearances, however, is also an attempt to produce a responsible gay and/or sex working subject dealing with their desire or profession in line with current public health measures. Organisations and institutions advocating for sex workers and gay men did not reject pandemic regulations, but rather emphasised the complexity of the situation and its effects on different forms of sexual encounter, using the concern for public health as a way of counteracting the renewed moralisation of non-normative sex practices. These discursive interventions had ambivalent effects: by evoking the ‘responsible’ sexual subject, they themselves enforced a moralized distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sexual behaviour, dismissing all those who did not adhere to the practices suggested by the organisations as ‘irresponsible’. This evoked further arguments and efforts to evade the governance of non-normative sex on the part of those who were neither able nor willing to adhere to these emerging norms of sexual responsibility, which we will discuss in the following section.

Opposing and evading governance: emerging sexual normativities

Journalists mused about the lives of sex workers and LGBTQI+ people in often scandalizing or victimizing ways, while organisations representing those groups mobilized public and mental health discourses to rationalize casual and commercial sex. Those engaging in non-normative sex, however, negotiated the pandemic biopolitics of sex in multiple ways (Hakim et al., 2021). I (Max Schnepf) became aware of Lukas, a wealthy German gay man in his forties, when he vehemently defended his behaviour in several online forums. In contrast to Mr Fischer’s investment in respectability politics, Lukas did not see the need to restrict himself, continuing to have sex with multiple partners. Already before the pandemic, Lukas had regularly visited different cities in Germany – among them Cologne, Frankfurt and Berlin – to frequent gay bathhouses

and clubs. On one such occasion, he changed his opinion about the adequacy of the hygiene regulations, as he recounted in our interview:

In May [2020], the gay saunas were open again in Cologne, after the first wave had flattened. And one evening we were at this Babylon Sauna [...] And this evening, the authorities closed it down again. We were kicked out and were standing on the street – and of course we felt like shit. And in rage, I told my friend: 'That's enough, now we will have our own parties'.

Lukas started organising his own sex parties with his friends, but together they also visited so-called 'sex-chills' as guests. He learned to appreciate these privately organised gatherings for their intimate atmosphere, which allowed him to explore his new liking for sex under the influence of drugs. Visibly excited, Lukas reported how he had got to know different parts of Berlin with his best friend, spending entire weekends high on drugs taking taxis from one sex-chill to the next. By texting people on dating apps who are already at the sex-chills, one can easily get invited, Lukas explained. He thereby illustrated the importance of dating apps as 'infrastructures of the sexual encounter' (Race, 2015: 254) that are helping gay men evade the policing of promiscuous sex during the pandemic.

For sex workers too, the internet presented options for circumventing the full prohibition of in-person sex work and related closures of work places. With the above-mentioned financial concerns being one main reason for many sex workers to switch to online sex work, digital spaces also presented other advantages during the pandemic. On the one hand, web-camming or publishing digital sexual contents on platforms like OnlyFans enabled sex workers to generate an income without potentially exposing themselves to the virus in in-person encounters. Regarded as a 'safer' form of transactional sex during the pandemic, sex work activists and organisations in Berlin therefore started to offer skill-sharing workshops for those wishing or needed to transition to digital sex work, as it also presented certain challenges and access barriers. Lack of internet access, language problems and limited photo- and/or video-editing skills hindered some sex workers in transitioning to fully digital sex work. However, whoever needed or wanted to continue engaging in in-person sex work was faced with the problem of increased policing. In such instances, digital spaces also presented an opportunity to evade government control of transactional sexual activities, which could be arranged through various platforms, websites or social media.

As the pandemic progressed, other arguments for evading the pandemic prohibition of sex work started to appear on social media. Following the growing challenges to the pandemic regulations, a few sex workers began to oppose the pandemic governance of social life in general. After some restrictions on contact were eventually eased in the summer of 2020, many others began to point out the moral hypocrisy of the continued prohibition of sex work at a time when, for example, casual sexual encounters in hotel rooms were legally possible again, as long as no money exchanged hands. While throughout all these months sex work organisations exhibited a strong sense of solidarity by organising not only workshops and protests, but also emergency funds for those outside the German social welfare system, many efforts also relied on a questionable argument – the right to

keep working. Certainly this was a necessary intervention in the context of moralised sex work governance. However, it ignored discussions of the right *not* to work during a pandemic and the related necessity of access to social security systems, especially for those sex workers who belonged to risk groups or did not wish to do this kind of labour in the first place. Rather, some even contested the prohibition of sex work by arguing that sex work was an ‘essential labour’, reproducing problematic normative assumptions about the ‘necessity’ of (transactional) sex.

A similar reliance on understandings of sex as a necessity could be found in Lukas’s arguments for his attendance at sex parties. Lukas knew that prioritizing his own sexual desires ‘over saving some old people’ was controversial – he even called it ‘antisocial’. Yet, he was convinced that he was not alone. The moralizing calls on dating apps to ‘stay at home’ seemed hypocritical to him, since they did not comply with his experience: ‘I go to so many parties. I’ve seen hundreds of them in Berlin, and the apps are packed. It just can’t be possible that everybody does the “stay at home” thing’. By defending his sexual behaviour online against those he called ‘moralists’, Lukas not only wanted to dismantle the hypocrisy of others. He was also rebelling against what he regarded heteronormative policy-making, focused on and catering to the needs of the nuclear family exclusively. To Lukas, this unequal treatment was more than a matter of fairness. Since queer kin networks, consisting of friends and fuck-buddies, replaced biological families for many gay men, this was a matter of psychological survival for him. He saw the sex parties he attended as social events that prevent gay men like himself from suffering loneliness and depression. In his justification of his ‘antisocial’ behaviour, Lukas referred to the same mental health discourses as Mr Fischer. However, while Mr Fischer was invested in evoking gay men as respectable sexual subjects, Lukas unashamedly put his own sexual needs over ‘saving some old people’.

While many explored mediated forms of sex, others used the digital infrastructure to arrange in-person encounters in an attempt to evade the biopolitical governance of pandemic sex. As individuals opposed the aforementioned politics of respectability, underlying sexual normativities came to the fore *within* communities centred around non-normative sex. Those contesting the moralisation and governance of casual and transactional sex mobilised an uncritical interpretation of sex as a necessity, albeit in different ways: Worrying about their economic survival, some sex workers framed sex work as ‘essential labour’, while some gay men justified their promiscuity as an anti-normative stance against society’s neglect of their psycho-social needs. In promoting the continuation of in-person sex as necessary, the arguments at times resembled cisheteronormative and biologicistic arguments of sex as a basic need, particularly for (cis) men. Thus, the dichotomy between socially sanctioned online-sex and the demand for in-person sex as a need leaves little room for imagining other forms of pandemic sex beyond knee-jerk moralizations.

Conclusion: intersections and divergences of pandemic sex

After their fetish party was shut down, the organisers of Pornceptual made a public appearance and proclaimed a ‘cultural fight’ in which they would not shy away from defending ‘our community’ and ‘our space in this city’. The tweets, news articles and

political debates commenting on Pornceptual's case attested to the strong emotions evoked by the public nature of sex in the pandemic. Throughout this article, we have shown that COVID-19 indeed exacerbated conflicts over non-normative sex and those who engage in it up to a point where one might speak of 'cultural fights'. Analysing sex work and casual gay sex, we have complicated Pornceptual's evocation of *one* community claiming *one* space in the city. Instead, we have paid attention to the different spheres in which non-normative sex became variously present in order to highlight the intersections and divergences of these exposures and appearances in pandemic Berlin.

Historically sex work and gay sex have shared a place in the imagination and commercialisation of Berlin as a city of sexual permissiveness. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed once again the different social positionings of sex workers and gay men. While the pandemic affected middle-class white gay men and migrant sex workers differently, the presences of sex work and casual sex also intersect in different spheres. In the material cityscape, COVID-19 clearly displayed the ongoing dependence of non-normative sex practices on public institutions and infrastructures. With sex workers leaving Kurfürstenstraße and venues closing in Motzstraße and elsewhere, non-normative sex has become almost invisible in a material cityscape once famous for its sexual openness. Simultaneously, the discursive presences of casual and transactional sex have shifted: on the one hand, queer histories, like the importance of Hasenheide park as a place for gay cruising, have faded into the background; on the other hand, the media have exposed sex work and casual sex to public scrutiny and moralisation.

Faced with regulations and policing, transactional and casual sex has been dislocated into digital and private spheres, allowing for and necessitating the creation of pandemic counter-publics (Berlant and Warner, 1998: 562). At the same time, sex workers and gay men who engage in casual sex have publicly reappeared for various reasons: the increasing economic precariousities of sex workers on the one hand, and resisting the invisibilisation of gay men who engage in sex outside of normative coupledness on the other. In their efforts to be recognized, both adapted to established and emerging biopolitical norms of (mental) health and hygiene, contributing to a (re)production of norms of respectability and responsibility. Occasional rejections of these biopolitical discourses also revealed normativities about the necessity of sex within communities engaging in non-normative sex. The insistence of sex workers on their right to work largely ignored the question of whether there should also be a right *not* to work under precarious conditions. And individualised arguments for having gay sex during a pandemic – as a matter of mental health – stood in stark contrast to the calls to practice solidarity and prudence by completely abstaining from casual sex.

In the process of writing this article, some restrictions have been lifted or moderated, and calls to return to normality have gotten louder. However, we understand the events described here as initiating and perpetuating long-term developments which may change the presences of non-normative sex beyond the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering the precarious situation of many bars, clubs and saunas prior to the pandemic, the ability of sexual communities in Berlin to return to those same material spaces is becoming ever more questionable the longer the pandemic regulations are in force. Additionally, sex workers voiced the fear that the regulations might not be lifted at all, as the pandemic has strengthened the abolitionist stance of some politicians and activists (Schmidt-Mattern, 2020). Nevertheless, pandemic transformations of non-

normative sex in Berlin did not just cause the (re-)emergence of tensions and frictions. As the example of Pornceptual and the appearances of sex workers and gay men in urban spaces highlight, the pandemic has also brought about a renewed political mobilisation of marginalized groups in the fight for their spaces in the city. The fragmenting effects of pandemic regulations and restrictions hold out the potential for forming new alliances and support structures. They therefore not only expose the fragilities, but also reveal the resilience, of those who engage in non-normative sex in Berlin.

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ORCID iDs

Ursula Probst  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6445-1949>

Max Schnepf  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6698-9876>

Note

1. To grant anonymity to our interlocutors, we have used pseudonyms in this article. We address Mr Fischer in a formal way and Lukas more informally to highlight the different interview formats in which Max Schnepf engaged with them. Mr Fischer spoke as an expert of the German AIDS Service Organisation, whereas Max Schnepf conducted a narrative interview with Lukas about his subjective experiences.

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