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Your Picture is Your Bait: Use and Meaning of Cyberspace Among Gay Men

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The Internet is seen by many as a form of cyberspace or environment in which to interact and socialise. This research project drew from the data of a quantitative and qualitative study of gay men in Perth, Western Australia. We examined gay men's usage patterns of chat rooms and other social aspects of the Internet to meet sexual partners. We then reviewed in detail the meanings gay men have for the various Internet environments, and the range of friendship, relationship, casual, or esoteric sex-seeking goals. We argue that gay men view and engage with the Internet differently from how they view and engage with other more traditional gay spaces. This different approach influences how interaction between the men, either online or face-to-face, progresses and how assumptions and expectations are built. This has implications for how sexual health promotion interventions determine the appropriate role and relationship they have with these online social spaces.

The Internet is often described in terms that imply a virtual place, venue, or cyberspace (Adams, 1997). The Internet is a system of interconnected computers creating a matrix of information exchange, through web sites (static and interactive pages), e-mail (electronic mail), and IRCs (Internet relay chat rooms) creating a virtual environment or cyberspace. This cyberspace is used by people as a place for congregating, communicating, and forming of community (Reymers, 2002). This opportunity did not exist in the early 1990s, and Internet access and use is increasing worldwide at a rapid rate (Kalnins, 2000; Poland, Green, & Rootman, 2000).

It has been proposed that cyberspace may act as a "salve" where there is little opportunity for or where there are barriers to the development of communities (Reymers, 2002). For people who are marginalised, the Internet has the capacity to remove barriers associated with geography, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and so on (Hillier, Kuras, & Horsley, 2001). The rapid growth of the Internet as a venue or space for communication, particularly online chat rooms and networks, demonstrates new ways in which this can occur.

The Internet is likely to have unique appeal for gay men because like other disenfranchised or marginalised groups, gay men have relatively few places in which they can meet

without fear of negative social consequences. Many gay and other men who have sex with men continue to meet in traditional venues, such as gay organisations, gay bars and nightclubs, gay cultural events, saunas, beats,¹ and via friends. However, over the past decade the Internet has become a popular venue for gay men to exchange information, discuss political and other issues of interest, converse in chat rooms, and place and correspond to personal ads, or to partake in cybersex fantasies (erotic discussions and fantasies online without any face-to-face contact) in an anonymous fashion without fear of reprisal (Benotsch, Kalichman, & Cage, 2002).

Similar to the role of the more traditional "gay bar," the Internet is becoming a popular method for gay and other homosexually active men to meet sexual partners. A range of studies from the U.S. and the U.K. of gay men have found between 17% and 34% of gay men have used the Internet to find sexual partners. This may be for casual sex or to seek a relationship (Benotsch et al., 2002; Bull & McFarland, 2000; Elford, Bolding, & Sherr, 2001). The Internet environments or spaces include a range of gay-related web sites providing chat rooms and other computer-mediated interaction. These "rooms" are often very specific in relation to geographic area as well as purpose (for friendship, relationship, casual, or esoteric sex-seeking goals).

The development of online venues and communities offers an attractive new setting for health promotion, especially in relation to HIV prevention and accessing previously hard-to-reach populations, which warrants further exploration (Brown, Maycock, & Langdon, 2003; Bull, McFarlane, & King, 2001; Elford, Bolding, & Sherr, 2002; Keen, 2002). For example, researchers might ask how the meanings the men ascribe to the Internet differ from other settings where men meet men, and how this influences the

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Graham Brown was previously the Education Manager with the Western Australian AIDS Council and continues his involvement through collaborative projects.

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¹ "Beat" is a colloquial term for public environments such as parks and beaches where men meet for sexual and social purposes. These spaces are significantly used by men who do not identify as gay or homosexual but do have sex with men. However, this study did not sample these non-gay identifying men.

different way the men present themselves, act, and interact in this online setting. They might also ask how this knowledge can be used to inform health promotion interventions. It was with these questions in mind that we conducted the following analysis of Internet use by gay men in Perth, Australia.

Our paper drew from the data of quantitative and qualitative studies of gay men in Perth, Western Australia. We examined gay men's use of chat rooms and other social aspects of the Internet to meet sexual partners, as reported through a quantitative study. We then review in detail the meanings gay men create for the various Internet environments and how these meanings impact their assumptions and interaction with the men in those environments, as reported through a separate qualitative study.

We argue that gay men view and engage with the Internet differently from how they view and engage with other more traditional gay spaces. This influences how interaction between the men, either online or face-to-face, progresses, and how assumptions and expectations are built. This in turn has implications for how sexual health promotion interventions determine their appropriate roles in and relationships with online social spaces.

METHODS

Quantitative Study

The quantitative results presented in this paper are drawn from a 2002 survey of 790 gay men in Perth (Hull et al., 2003). This cross-sectional self-completed survey was the third conducted since 1998 and investigated the associations between demographic, social, and HIV status variables and sexual negotiation and risk behaviour. The questionnaire was designed so that it was consistent and maximised comparability with "core questions" developed by the Australian National Centre in HIV Social Research (NCHSR) in conjunction with state and national AIDS councils² and implemented since 1996 (Van de Ven et al., 1999). Each survey comprised approximately 60 questions focusing on anal intercourse, oral sex, use of condoms, disclosure of HIV status, nature of sexual relationships, HIV testing practice and HIV serostatus, social attachment to the gay community, and a range of demographic items including sexual identity, age, education, occupation, and ethnicity. Men were recruited from gay social venues (gay bars and nightclubs), sex venues (male-only gay saunas or bathhouses), and the Perth Lesbian and Gay Pride Festival. The methodology is described in detail elsewhere (Brown, Maycock, Prestage, & Van de Ven, 2004). The survey was predominantly concerned with identifying what trends in HIV-related risk behaviour were occurring amongst Perth gay men.

Qualitative Study

We conducted a qualitative study to describe how Perth

gay men behave and explain why they behave as they do. The qualitative and thematic results discussed in this paper draw on in-depth one-on-one interviews conducted by the first author with 25 men who identified as gay, bisexual, or queer. Interviews were completed between January and September 2002. We used purposive sampling techniques to recruit participants from the Perth gay community, including community advertisements and flyers, word of mouth, and snowball methods, so we could recruit a diverse sample with a range of lifestyles and sexual experiences within the parameters of the study. To be eligible, the men had to identify as nonheterosexual (for example gay, bisexual, or queer) to be consistent with the quantitative survey. The study did not sample heterosexually identified men who have sex with men. The ages of the men ranged from 16 to 67. The sample included men who in the past 6 months had had sex only with casual partners, only with a regular or relationship partner, or with both casual and regular partners. This final category included men who had ended or started relationships during the previous 6 months, as well as men who brought a casual partner into an experience with their regular partner.

Sampling continued until saturation had been reached on all major elements of interest to the research. A total of 27 interviews were conducted with 25 subjects. Five interviews were conducted in participants homes, 6 in the rooms of a local youth outreach service, and 15 at the Western Australian AIDS Council offices.

We collected data via a 1- to 2-hour semistructured in-depth interview. The interview schedule was focused on the men's descriptions of meanings, actions, and interaction with others and self within different contexts. Symbolic interaction, as described by Blumer (1969) and Charon (2001), provided the theoretical perspective and analytical framework and directed the data collection and analysis. Symbolic interactionism studies how humans interact symbolically with one another and with themselves, and in doing so make decisions about risk, themselves, and their actions (Charon, 2001). This theory directed us to examine meaning and changes in meaning over time and in different settings, the role of the generalized other and reference groups in shaping that meaning, and the way individuals presented themselves in different contexts. This included investigating how gay men interpret and give meaning to symbols and actions in relation to HIV, sexual behaviour, risk, disclosure, and context. Consistent with the Goffman (1959) dramaturgical metaphor, we analysed the variety and use of sexual scripts such as those described by Gagnon and Simon (Gagnon & Simon, 1974; Simon & Gagnon, 1986), which the men used to manage how they presented themselves and directed their interaction within the various contexts and spaces.

All interviews were transcribed in full and analysed using a modified constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). We coded transcripts on the basis of context and theme nodes and cross-referenced using NUD*IST (QSR International, 2000) software. This allowed for the linking of similar concepts expressed in

² AIDS councils in Australia are community based organizations established by the gay and other communities affected by HIV/AIDS.

different terms within different contextual narratives. The development of codes and themes was cross-checked with another researcher to enhance validity. The previous quantitative studies described elsewhere (Brown, Maycock, Prestage, & Van de Ven, in press; Brown et al., 2001) directed us to examine some issues, and hence some themes were predetermined while others emerged from the data. From this process, we developed theory and models and reviewed them against each interview transcript. At the end of this process we developed a theoretical model that held true for all cases. This model is described in more detail elsewhere (Brown & Maycock, in press).

RESULTS

Internet Use by Gay Men in Perth: Quantitative Survey

The 2002 Perth quantitative study ($n = 790$) included questions about how often men use specific venues and environments to meet sexual partners. The respondents self-defined the terms *never*, *occasionally*, and *often*. For the purposes of this paper, only those men who reported having a casual partner in the previous 6 months (62% of the sample, $n = 494$) were included in the analysis. Table 1 provides the venue usage patterns

Table 1. Venue Use (Percentage) Among Men With a Casual Partner in Previous 6 Months by Age Group

Frequency	Venue			
	Social venue / gay bar	Beat	Sauna	Internet
< 25 years old*				
	$n = 100$	$n = 990$	$n = 995$	$n = 99$
Never	15	8	81	50
Occasionally	57	20	14	36
Often	28	0	5	14
25-29 years old*				
	$n = 72$	$n = 71$	$n = 71$	$n = 73$
Never	15	76	53	38
Occasionally	61	21	37	38
Often	24	3	10	23
30-39 years old*				
	$n = 155$	$n = 150$	$n = 151$	$n = 152$
Never	21	59	41	47
Occasionally	56	27	45	42
Often	23	14	14	11
40+ years old*				
	$n = 144$	$n = 141$	$n = 142$	$n = 142$
Never	45	53	28	66
Occasionally	40	38	45	27
Often	15	9	26	7
All men**				
	$n = 471$	$n = 461$	$n = 463$	$n = 466$
Never	26	63	46	52
Occasionally	52	29	38	36
Often	22	8	16	12

Note. This table excludes those men who have not had a casual partner in the previous 6 months, such as those in monogamous relationships or those who did not have any sexual relations with other men.

*The differences between the age groups' frequency of venue use are all significant at $p < 0.05$. **The difference in the frequency of venue use for all men across venues is significant at $p < 0.05$.

of these men. The survey did not ask about other uses for these venues.

Education level was not associated with Internet use. As indicated in Table 1, although younger men were more likely to use the Internet to find sexual partners ($p = 0.001$), particularly the 25 to 29 age group, the variability was less than in the use of other venues such as gay bars and nightclubs (most popular among younger men, $p = 0.000$) and saunas (more popular among older men $p = 0.000$). This is supported by evidence from U.S. studies that the "digital divide" may not exist as profoundly within the gay community as within other communities, with variables such as education, income, and age having limited or no predictive power on level of Internet access or use (Rhodes, Glorioso, & Hergenrather, 2002).

The association between the self-reported usage patterns of various venues, such as social venues, beats, and saunas, was compared to the self-reported Internet use. Because the purpose of this comparison was to determine if use of one venue was associated with use of the Internet, we used the kappa test for agreement between categorical variables (in this case, self-ratings of never, occasionally, and often). However, all associations were either very low (Internet and social venues: kappa = 0.171, $p = 0.000$), or not significant. This finding illustrated that the men's use of venues such as social venues, saunas, or beats gave little indication of or predictive value to the men's level of Internet use to find sexual partners. This suggested the Internet may have different usage patterns from these other venues, or that its use may be influenced by different aspects of the men's lives or interests. However, the quantitative study was not able to determine what these differences may be.

How Gay Men in Perth Described the Internet: Qualitative Interviews

The findings from the quantitative study provided information about what venues gay men reported using, but not how or why these venues were being used. This section reports on the in-depth interviews with Perth gay men about the spaces and environments they used, the meanings they developed, and the assessments they made during the interactions within those spaces.

We used the words *some*, *many*, and *few* to present how many men reported particular behaviours or views. Although based empirically on the approximations of counts of "mentions" produced by the coding process, these are not intended to stand up to significance testing, and no such claim should be inferred from the wording. Sometimes they include the behaviour of other men reported by research participants.

All men in the qualitative sample ($n = 25$) spoke about the capacity of the Internet to facilitate meeting other men; however, only two thirds of the sample ($n = 17$) spoke about having used it for this purpose. The men who did not use the Internet for social purposes ($n = 8$) either had limited experience on the Internet and did not trust the men in the envi-

ronment, had limited access to the Internet, or were in relationships where they saw no reason to use the Internet.

The uses expressed by the men who did use the Internet included looking for immediate sexual partners and/or social friendships. The in-depth discussions about the Internet tended to focus on the use of chat rooms, particularly those chat rooms that were targeted toward gay men in the Perth metropolitan area.

Figure 1 illustrates a summary of the process described by the men from initial online interaction through to any subsequent face-to-face interaction. The diagram also indicates the many opportunities for men to cease the interaction prior to revealing themselves in a face-to-face interaction.

There were five themes that came from these discussions about how men labelled or described the Internet, its benefits in comparison to other venues and spaces, and the men they expected to meet in this space:

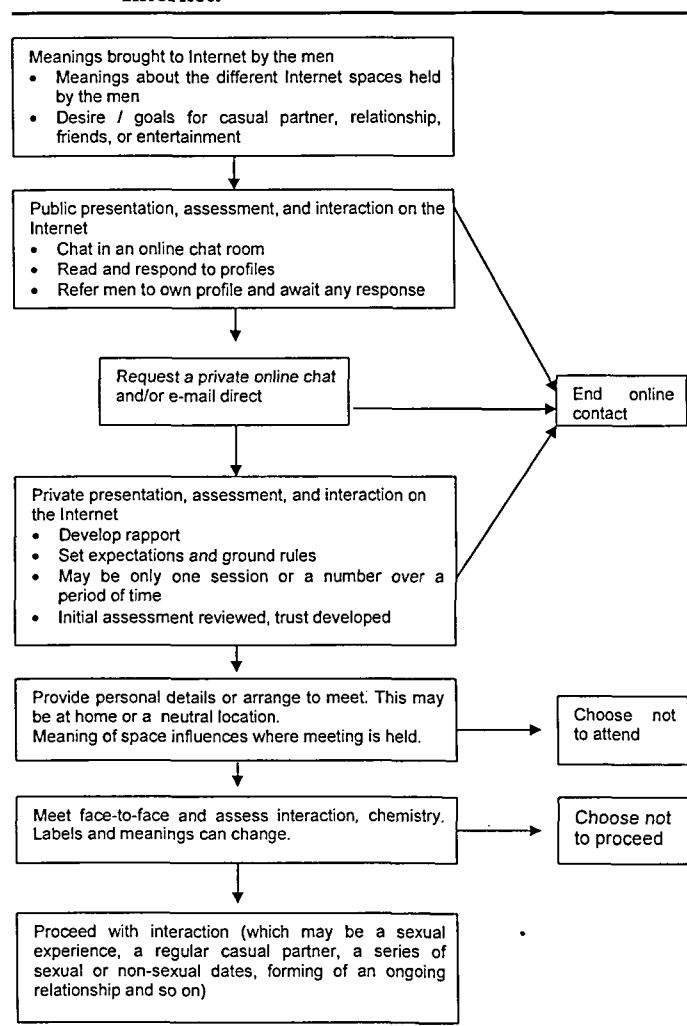
1. Internet as a variety of venues with different purposes that act as alternatives to other more traditional venues;
2. Internet as a socialisation tool for information, induction, and building networks or friendships;
3. Internet as a method of control over presentation of self and interaction through anonymity and discretion;
4. Internet as an experience of safety generated through the online interaction prior to any meeting; and
5. Internet as a source of novelty experiences, entertainment, and escape.

These themes are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Internet as a variety of venues and alternatives to traditional venues. Most men spoke about the Internet as a variety of venues, a community made up of different virtual spaces. For some men this enhanced their feelings of novelty, escape, or fantasy. For others it was a practical way of meeting a broader range of new people whom they would otherwise not meet. Most men who used the Internet experienced a stronger sense of anonymity than in the gay bar or nightclub environment, particularly in the small Perth community. They also reported that the Internet felt safer than a beat and more convenient than the sauna. Most men spoke explicitly about the range of spaces on the Internet, and all men had preferred spaces they would use depending on their sexual or social goals. Whatever the perspective or type of space preferred, the Internet was consistently seen as an alternative to the difficulties experienced in other more traditional gay venues and spaces.

Some of the sites and chat rooms are casual-sex focused while others are more friendship or relationship focused. Most of the men spoke explicitly about being selective as to which chat rooms and web sites they would access depending on their goals and in what sort of environment they wished to engage with other men. Steven³ explained how the specific site or venue and initial signals and pro

Figure 1. Process of interaction between gay men via the Internet.



file set clear parameters for what he and his partner may be looking for and allow reasonable assumptions about the person with whom they are in contact:

You have got different mediums...maybe go on [gay chat site provider] which is little pussey-ville, pathetic, and just put "in search of third, thirty- plus, read profile before" and that way they know that we are looking for sex. The reason we tell them to read our profile is because on our profile we have got the stipulations of exactly what we are after, who we are and what we are what we like to do. Generally you will find that you can pick up, sometimes you don't....Where [another gay chat site provider] is another whole avenue where you have got a much more explicit site. You are not having necessarily chat with anybody, you are just waiting for somebody to kind of put up the right ad with the right face. So your picture is your bait and your profile is your berley⁴ and then you just wait for the rod to do the work and see what you are going to hook. (Steven, 44, HIV-negative)

Although the Internet is predominantly a medium of text

³ Names of participants have been changed to pseudonyms.

⁴ "Berley" is an Australian fishing term referring to the practice of throwing crushed pieces of bait into the water to attract fish to the area and get them "interested."

and images, it is often thought of as an oral medium, a “conversational space like the telephone, rather than the more formal space of print” (Reymers, 2002, p. 4). The men generally experienced this conversation as easier and more open on the Internet, with different expectations of the people in chat rooms compared to other venues such as gay bars. Edward prefers casual-sex focused Internet spaces to venues such as gay bars, where he feels he experiences more mixed messages resulting in misunderstandings.

I might not pick up the social cues - or understand what you are getting at [at a nightclub where people are cruising]. That's why it's more clear-cut on the net. (Edward, 42, HIV-negative)

Darren finds the Internet chat rooms and profile pages a more pleasant alternative to the sauna or classified pages to meet men.

...you go to a sauna and you just have sex with strangers but when all your details are on computer it is different....The web site on the Internet, it doesn't feel as sleazy as what is in the papers. Even though it is the exact same thing. I notice that when I went on the Internet. I thought, this isn't like going through a paper and reading an ad and responding to it. The Internet just feels cleaner for some reason. (Darren, 25, HIV unknown)

Internet as a socialisation tool for information, induction, and building networks or friendship. For men who were in the process of exploring or understanding their sexuality, regardless of age, they described the Internet as a space to gain information, learn about being gay, and possibly build a network of friends. It was a space where men could covertly interact with a reference group through whom they could be socialised and acquire the knowledge, norms, attitudes, and language of the gay community on the Internet. For these men, the Internet was very much an initial step in this socialisation process. For some of the men, depending on their confidence level, this would result in face-to-face meetings. For others, the Internet did not meet their needs, and they would subsequently initiate contact with community groups to build friendship networks.

It is just a way of getting to know a bit of the gay scene or the terminology that they use. And I learnt most of that through the, or from the Internet. You know, like things like, what's a top, what's a bottom and different preferences like age groups and what types of men prefer different types of men... and trying to work out for myself where I stood and what I liked and what my preferences were. (Jacob, 32, HIV-negative)

However, the Internet had its limitations. Most of the men discussed how online interaction would only meet some of their needs, and at some point the men had to take the next step and move the interaction to face-to-face or cease it.

How quickly, if at all, the men met other men after they had interacted online could vary significantly depending on desire and convenience. This could sometimes be mediated by exchange of phone numbers and telephone interaction initially, or they could move directly to a face-to-face meeting. If the goal was friendship or a relationship, the process

was likely to be longer and have more online interaction to develop rapport prior to meeting face-to-face.

[If I was going to meet face-to-face it would] usually be within about a month, three weeks, two or three weeks. That is if you are chatting with them everyday. By then you sort of get a sense of like “oh yeah this could be quite”... you know like if you exchange names and mobile phone numbers and e-mail addresses and maybe a picture of their face or something like that. It gives you a bit more confidence. (Jacob, 32, HIV-negative)

However, if the expectation was casual sex, the meeting could happen immediately or within a few days.

I usually arrange for either them to come here or me to go to their place - I would say 70% turn up to 30% who don't... I mean some weeks it is unbelievable - it can happen that someone I met on Sunday decided that it was this Wednesday and someone I met on Monday decided it was going to be this Thursday. I mean I can be full throughout one week and then the next week nothing is happening. (Edward, 42, HIV-negative)

This benefit of meeting other men and developing friendships and peer groups was not only relevant for those just starting to act on their feelings or become sexually active with other men. Gavin had added significantly to his already existing friendship group through his interaction on the Internet.

I just find someone that is going to the Internet and just find friends. Like to go in chatting and meeting people....So I find different people with different attitudes and different sexuality.... Friends, that is what I like. (Gavin, 27, HIV-negative)

Internet as a method of control over presentation of self and interaction through anonymity and discretion. The men felt they had the control to decide when and with whom they interacted and how much they disclosed. The fact they could disconnect from the Internet at any time provided an experience of control over their privacy and how much of themselves they chose to present, which they did not experience in other spaces.

I didn't want my father to find out and I didn't want people at work to find out.... Definitely that discreteness or that privacy from chatting was important for me because I could do it in my own home, in my own time and not tell anyone and no one else would know in my family or friends or whatever. So yeah, it was control definitely. (Jacob, 32, HIV-negative)

One important attraction of the sexual uses of Internet chat rooms is the freedom from participants' identities being challenged, spoiled, or embarrassed through face-to-face rejection. The men found it easier than in other environments to give and take rejection.

[Using the Internet is] easy to do. It's so quick. You can just go on and go click, there is not a name and they will never know you. There is not the embarrassment or the chance of being rebuked. They can rebut you but it's not face-to-face. They can rebut you, but they don't know who they have rebutted. (Richard, 50, HIV-negative)

This safety from “spoiled identities” may relate to why the Internet may be so popular among gay men. Regarding most other environments, gay men spoke about having to negoti-

ate their identity and the identity of others with limited clues, particularly in beats. On the Internet there is less risk of misinterpretation, as much is negotiated first without the need to identify themselves and the men can be very specific about who and what they are looking for. The men can peruse other men's profiles and photos and present their own. However, during this chatting and interaction online or within their profiles it is anticipated that men can refine or even lie about their appearance and sexual abilities but still engage in flirting, sex talk, and fantasies. Edward explained that the expected culture in the chatrooms includes a level of refining and changing one's own presentation.

Sometimes when they call on the mobile – and I have put their name in John, and it comes up with their name but this time they say it's a different name, say Bill, and so I think – oh that's interesting – they are now called Bill. The only thing I lie about is my name – and my weight depending on how fat I feel at the moment – but no generally I tell the truth – I am not blonde, I am not six foot ten and so on. That way they have a mental picture when they come to the door. (Edward, 42, HIV-negative)

The Internet provides an opportunity for men to disclose their actual or believed HIV status without identifying themselves and to search out other men of the same HIV status. While many men from the study reported they had seen some profiles displayed on the Internet that indicated the owner's HIV-positive status, only a few men spoke about HIV status being disclosed during interaction in the Perth chat rooms. Stuart (44, HIV-positive) and Ryan (50, HIV-negative) reported that if disclosure was to occur, whether online or face-to-face, it usually only occurred if the issue of not using condoms was raised or if men were specifically looking for an HIV-positive partner.

Talk about HIV [on the Internet]? Hardly anybody. I've only seen a couple that actually come out and say "I am HIV" as part of the description. One of the questions that they ask you in the course of conversation is HIV, looking for casual sex, are you HIV? (Ryan, 50, HIV-negative)

Stuart (HIV-positive) reported that if a casual sexual partner was indicating to not use condoms (either online, verbally, or with body language), his experience was that this was generally an indicator that he was also HIV-positive. When Stuart asked, his assumption had usually been correct, and so reinforced this belief. However, assumptions about HIV status were generally inconsistent and influenced by the nature of the chat room.

As previously discussed, the men would at some point either move the interaction to the next stage of face-to-face or cease the interaction. The face-to-face or even telephone interaction was a time for the men to review their assumptions, expectations, and definitions of the other man that had been developed through the previous online interaction. Regardless of whether the context or goal was casual, social, or relationship, all the men who used the Internet to meet other men spoke about the initial period of face-to-face interaction as a time to assess if there was "chemistry" between them. The men spoke about how online interaction

would set the expectations and ground rules, but only face-to-face interaction could result in an assessment of chemistry or attraction, which would determine if further interaction was to proceed. Generally the men seemed to be looking for signs to confirm their expectations rather than dispute them, particularly in casual contexts, indicating the strength of the meanings developed in the online interaction. However, the period of assessing the face-to-face chemistry and the ability to withdraw from the situation at this point reinforced the men's experience of control.

So he came around and I went up and sat next to him and said "so what do you reckon" and he says "oh" and I said "you don't want to do you?" and he said "no." I said "that's ok." I can decide yea or nay or they can decide yea or nay. Because as I said there is so much bullshit on the net they can say anything to make it sound good. But once you meet them you have got more of an idea than over the net. (Richard, 50, HIV-negative)

Internet as an experience of safety generated through the online interaction prior to any meeting. With the sense of control also came a general impression of safety. This was most evident when men compared the Internet to other spaces, particularly beats. Men who were looking for casual sex on the Internet rarely had concerns about inviting partners to their homes. There was a sense of having already been able to build rapport, vet any dangerous types, and establish expectations while chatting online. The men described a more staged approach of initial assessment and interaction, allowing for strong labelling and expectations to be built prior to committing to a face-to-face interaction. This was different from the men's experiences in gay bars or at sexual spaces such as beats or saunas.

Men would consider personal safety issues to some extent, but more as a rationalization of the risk. Men who were looking for a relationship or peer group were more likely to arrange to meet in a safe or neutral space such as a café. Men looking for casual partners felt safe because they were meeting in their own homes or their partners would be with them. Other men felt safe because they were going to another home and felt they could leave whenever they wanted, or decide at the last moment not to go in at all.

I feel the Internet is safer. I don't really know why....Safer than using a beat. I mean if they are going to come around there is a history on the Internet and they can track them down if I get murdered or something – I am not sure if that is true – but that's what is in my head. But if you get murdered at the beach no one is going to know anything. And there is the entrapment thing with beats.... My view of beats is they are not safe any more. I mean I used to do my fair share of them – but it just seems unsafe now. (Edward, 42, HIV-negative)

You can do it in the safety of your own home. That security... Yeah I think it is a thing of comfort in your own environment. (Richard, 50, HIV-negative)

Most of the men described how the ground rules or expectations for their behaviour, which included but were not limited to ways to minimise the risk of HIV transmis-

sion, were determined either through direct chat or profiles.

For example I say that I am a top, and definitely not versatile, and then all the usual, kissing, mutual masturbation, all safe. Actually I had one time, where the guy said he was into something like barebacking⁵.... I said no no I am not into this at all...sometimes they have a profile ...and a link to what they look like. [I would provide my name and number when] it is a private chat line or something. Once I know what they are into and we want to move it up a notch. (Edward, 42, HIV-negative)

If all the ground rules had not been established while online, then there was still capacity to do this during the initial aspect of face-to-face. Steven described how he and his HIV-positive partner discussed ground rules and expectations either on the net or face-to-face with a third man they invited via the Internet, prior to moving into the bedroom for the sexual experience.

In that conversation we go generally right around whether the person likes to use rubbers, likes to be fucked, likes to fuck, likes to be, you know, hit or nipple torture. We go through all our criteria that we like and what we don't like. What our ability is and what we enjoy doing and then once that is done and out of there and when we get in there it is just a matter of just get down. No talking, just enjoy passion and whatever happens in there we have at least covered all the territory out here. But once our clothes are off in there we don't have to think about anything else now because we have already made all the ground rules and that's how it goes. (Steven, 44, HIV-negative)

None of the men described an experience on the Internet which they deemed to be negative compared to experiences in other environments or spaces. Most men's experiences reinforced their beliefs and assumptions about the Internet and the specific online spaces in which they chose to interact with other men.

Internet as a source of novelty experiences, entertainment, and escape. The experience was also likened by many of the men to entertainment or novelty, a game or chase within an emotionally safer environment. It was about escaping from day-to-day life to an environment where there was a wide range of men with whom they could chat and, if inclined, meet for casual sex or relationship.

It is a bit of a turn on talking to people, I must admit. Everybody raves on. But I think that's part of the fun of it too because it's as I said it's like Disneyland and fantasy world and if we get to the stage where we are interested we can give them our mobile number and if they are interested they will ring and then we will have a chat over the phone and if they want to come around. It's a bit of fun with someone else. (Ryan, 50, HIV-negative)

For some of the men, like Edward, the matching of face-to-face to the expectations established on the Internet is part of this entertainment.

It's the chase, it's the anonymity of [gay chat site provider], and when they turn up the match of what they actually look like. I think for me it's the whole novelty from the moment you click on, if they [chat to] me then there must be something that interests them. (Edward, 42, HIV-negative)

Interaction On and Via the Internet

Although "cybersex" carries no risk of STI transmission because no direct sexual contact occurs, use of the Internet to meet sexual partners for physical sexual activity may impose such a risk (Toomey & Rothenberg, 2000). Recent studies from the U.S. and U.K. of gay and other men who have sex with men have indicated that seeking sex on the Internet appears to be a potential risk factor for HIV and STIs (Bull & McFarland, 2000; Bull et al., 2001; Elford, 2003; Halkitis & Parsons, 2003; Hoppers, Harterink, Van den Hoek, & Veenstra, 2002; Klausner, Wolf, Fischer-Ponce, Zolt, & Katz, 2000; Rhodes, DiClemente, & Cecil, 2002). These developments have coincided with increases in unprotected anal intercourse between men who have sex with men in the U.S., U.K., and Australia (Flowers, 2002; NCHSR, 2002; Rosser et al., 2002). This is not to suggest that one is the cause of the other, but that these developments are happening concurrently.

Our study indicates that there are behaviours and interactions occurring via the Internet that may increase the HIV transmission risk, such as untested assumptions, while others may protect against HIV risk, such as the establishment of ground rules and expectations prior to meeting face-to-face.

With the development and uptake of Internet-based communication, a new range of interaction methods has developed involving its own etiquette, norms, and assumptions, which can vary across the different chatrooms and websites. Internet-based communication has become a stage for "actors" to act out in sexual ways and assess each other's visual and text cues (Sannicolas, 1997). Goffman's (1959) theories of the presentation of self and the meaning of spaces and the roles we take in those spaces can contribute significantly to our understanding of the development of this nontraditional setting, the behaviour it facilitates, and opportunities for health promotion within it.

Chat rooms, bulletin boards, and other computer-mediated communication tools have "become a stage for 'actors' to act out and communicate about sexual behaviour and attitudes in sexual ways" (Sannicolas, 1997, p. 2). The meanings and perspectives the men in this study brought to the Internet, particularly in the various chat rooms, and the roles they took as presentations of their selves, guided the men's assessment of the situation. As part of this interaction or communication, the men assumed roles and made assumptions about the roles of the others they interacted with (Goffman, 1959; Sannicolas, 1997). The men, influenced by their personal desires and the meaning the Internet had for them, would guide themselves through a range of interaction options. This included real-time interaction, reviewing static profile pages, or receiving and responding to e-mails, as indicated in Figure 1.

Although the online interaction does not always have the richness of face-to-face interaction, it does provide new opportunities for how people can present themselves to others (Miller, 1995; Sannicolas, 1997). The profiles

⁵ Colloquial term for sex without condoms, usually in a casual context.

and photos, watching the responses from people chatting to others, even the Internet site itself all provide cues to an initial assessment. Consistent with symbolic interaction theory (Charon, 2001), the men would converse or reflect within themselves, pull out stimuli or cues selectively from the environment (such as the online chat and posted profiles), assess their significance and compatibility, interpret the situation, judge the actions and responses of others and self, and ascribe meaning. Interaction also took place within the individual men as they assessed their own feelings, attractions, moods, and sense of risk. This process may have included going through mental checklists or ground rules, or rationalising decisions. This online interaction also set up the expectations and assumptions for any subsequent face-to-face interaction, which for some men may have played a protective role in establishing safer sex expectations.

One of the differences in and advantages to interaction on the Internet compared to face-to-face environments is the simultaneous experience of distance and intimacy (Hillier et al., 2001), which allows individuals safety in conveying their sexual (or other) personal aspirations without having to risk face-to-face rejection and its potential for spoiled identity (Longmore, 1998). The Internet, as illustrated in Figure 1, provides numerous opportunities or stages to exit the situation without repercussions. This also allowed men new to the setting or new to exploring their sexuality to experience control and safety over how they engaged with other men or the Internet generally.

Men spoke about the reduction in misunderstandings through some Internet chat room mechanisms due to expectations, preferences, and profiles being determined prior to any face-to-face meeting. In this context, a shared sexual script or expectation could be formed. This was seen as a significant advantage of the Internet over their experience in gay bars. This sexual scripting highlights the important symbolic interactionist assumption that "to communicate sexually it is essential to see the world from the other person's point of view and to see things, including oneself, from the other's perspective" (Longmore, 1998, p. 52). The men indicated a belief that the ability in this situation to understand the other's perspective and expectations or to "role take" (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934) was more effective and accurate through the Internet than in other environments. This was due to the capacity of the Internet environment to facilitate and encourage up-front discussion either through public or private chat, resulting in shared expectations and possibly increasing the sense of safety and control.

Some Meanings Changed While Others Stayed the Same

The assessment and assumptions could change as the interaction took place (either online or later face-to-face), as well as later during subsequent reflection. This included changes in feelings for others and in which roles the men took for themselves and inferred for the other men, such as

potential partner, casual sex partner, or disinterested party.

Generally the men did not report any experiences that challenged the beliefs or assumptions they had about the Internet or the men in the spaces in which they participated. Thus, the meanings the men brought to the Internet tended to remain relatively constant. The primary purpose for which men used the Internet may have varied, ranging from a space for information and social contact to searching for specific sexual experiences and types of men. However, due to the nature of the Internet and the capacity for expectations to be negotiated or established prior to face-to-face interaction, men's experiences tended to be consistent with their expectations.

Men could also alter the spaces they used to ensure consistency with their goals. An example of this was Edward's experience: He reported falling in love with one of his Internet partners, and it became an on-going brief relationship. This was not Edwards's original intention.

Usually when I go on the Internet I am looking for and expecting a one-night stand and that is what I thought this guy was going to be – but it turned out completely different – it went off on another tangent....I was not expecting love to happen and it happened.
(Edward, 42, HIV-negative)

However, Edward's view of his use of the Internet remained constant as a place for casual and not relationship experiences. Edward reinforced this by being more selective in the cyberspaces he entered, limiting his activities on the Internet to sites and chat rooms that he viewed as more explicitly casual.

It is important to recognise that individual spaces within the Internet may be developing their own cultural assumptions. For example, Stuart's experiences of accurately assuming the HIV-positive status of some partners reinforced his beliefs that certain behaviours indicate HIV status. However, some men starting to use the more sexually explicit sites used by Stuart may not be aware of these assumptions.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Internet is clearly a setting where people engage in specific social interactions (Kalnins, 2000; Poland et al., 2000); where they seek information, knowledge, and perspective; and where risk assessments and risk behaviours are being facilitated (Ciesielski & Flynn, 2002; Elford et al., 2001; Keen, 2002; Pitts et al., 2002; Rebhook, Pollack, & Kegeles, 2002). Due to these factors, the Internet has been identified as an important setting for which health promotion programs should be targeted (Kalnins, 2000; Moodie, Edwards, & Payne, 2003; Poland et al., 2000).

Growing Use of the Internet: Potential for Risk and Protective Factors

Our findings are supported by research from the U.S. (Bimbi, Parsons, Halkitis, & Koken, 2002; Ciesielski & Flynn, 2002; Rebhook et al., 2002), Europe (Akeret et

al., 2002; Elford et al., 2001), and China (Wang & Lin, 2002), which has found that 35% to over 60% of men who have sex with men use the Internet to meet and have sexual relations with other men. Although the proportion of HIV-positive men seeking sex with other HIV-positive men is not indicated from our study, quantitative and qualitative studies in the U.S., U.K., and Australia have examined the Internet use of HIV-positive men seeking sexual partners on the Internet (Benotsch et al., 2002; Bull, 2001; Ciesielski & Flynn, 2002; Elford et al., 2002; Halkitis & Parsons, 2003; Hospers et al., 2002; Hussey, 2002; Mansergh et al., 2002; Rosser et al., 2002). Indications from these studies are that some HIV-positive men are actively using the Internet to meet other positive men for unprotected anal intercourse. The majority of these studies have found that risk behaviours of HIV-positive Internet users were associated with casual partners who were believed to be of the same HIV status, and so potentially limited health risk. However, while the disclosure of HIV status was sometimes explicit in profiles, online chat, or face-to-face interaction, other times there were assumptions made based on the specific chat room environments (such as chat rooms for HIV-positive gay men) or indications from online or face-to-face interaction.

Internationally, the Internet is developing its own cultural norms, and men who use the Internet are experiencing stronger feelings of anonymity, safety, and convenience than they do in other spaces. Toomey and Rothenberg (2000) argue that this is not so much a new phenomenon, but perhaps a logical extension of behaviours that are already in place among people with the motivation and initiative for making new sexual connections.

This paper has shown that the Internet is a space where both risk factors (such as increased assumptions of trust and rapport) as well as protective factors (such as partner sorting on the basis of expectations, ground rules, and safe sex negotiations) can operate simultaneously. To respond to the Internet as a sexual health risk in and of itself, as has occurred previously in sensationalised media reports (Hurley, 2002), would be misleading. While the men are likely to be engaging in risk and behaviour assessments differently in Internet environments than in other environments, as with any social or sexual space, the environment can influence but does not determine the behaviour. It is the assumptions, choices, and actions taking place via the Internet that are of interest.

Need and Opportunity for Interventions

Like other social spaces, men use Internet venues as a source of reference groups and perspectives. However, the Internet is seen and interacted with by men as an alternative to other more traditional gay community spaces. For many men this is a more accessible first or interim point of socialisation about their sexuality and being gay. For others it is a more convenient environment with fewer social misunderstandings and mixed signals. Rather than a single setting, the Internet offers a range of specialised chat

rooms, bulletin boards, and other settings, each possibly developing its own cultural rules and norms among very specific subcultures and groups. The communities developing and interacting on the Internet present an opportunity to create a space that encourages safe sex among men who may otherwise not be reached.

However, much of the current health communication use of the Internet has relied on static information-based sites, whose effectiveness has been equated to the 3 a.m. public service announcement (Toomey & Rothenberg, 2000). Effective setting-based HIV prevention strategies have been grounded in the culture and perspectives of the different communities using those spaces (Moodie et al., 2003). If health promotion initiatives are to maintain this effectiveness within cyberspace, they need to engage with participants in ways that are consistent with how the Internet is used and what it means to participants to be part of the environment. For example, there are specific reasons why men are accessing these environments, and if interventions undermine or change the meaning of the environment to these men, the potential of the outreach opportunity could be limited.

Bull et al. (2001) argue that unlike other health promotion programs that attract the "worried well" and do not effectively reach those at high risk, the Internet may be of high appeal and an ideal medium in which to promote risk reduction to gay and other men who have sex with men. Given the specific nature of some chat rooms and other Internet-based environments, it should be possible to target very specific subcultures with selectively tailored messages and reach some groups more effectively than more traditional venues for STI/HIV prevention messages. The challenge is not in describing new risk behaviours but in identifying new methods to assess how sexual behaviours will be enacted and what role effective Internet interventions can play to reduce the risk of transmission of STIs and HIV.

But What Sort of Interventions?

A number of studies have reviewed at a quantitative level types of interventions that may be acceptable to online communities in the areas of sexual health. Interventions generally include strategies such as static information sites, interactive approaches such as bulletin boards or chat rooms (either developing their own or reaching out to already established environments), question and answer e-mails, and so on. While websites were found to be popular, significant interest was been expressed in e-mail and chat platforms (Bull et al., 2001; Hospers et al., 2002). However, these may need to be implemented unobtrusively to reach men who have sex with men who wish to keep their behavior a secret (Simmons & Lampkin, 2002) or who feel that health interventions are unwelcome in their online "escape" world.

While there are calls within the literature for the development and evaluation of chat-room-based outreach interventions (Keen, 2002; Pitts et al., 2002; Rebhook et al., 2002; Remafedi & Howard, 2002; Rhodes, Glorioso et al.,

2002; Rosser et al., 2002), there have been few published examples of experimental chat-room-based outreach. The few examples have generally been peer based and included overt outreach, in which the outreach is identified as a peer educator (Harterink, 2002; Rhodes, Glorioso, et al., 2002), or covert outreach, in which the outreach pretends to be another chat room participant (Simmons & Lampkin, 2002). Both approaches present advantages and disadvantages. Other Internet-based initiatives have included online interactive sexualised games; however, sustained government and funder support has proved to be a barrier (Keen et al., 2002).

Health promotion initiatives need to approach the Internet in an innovative and community-grounded approach similar to that which has been used in bars, beats, and saunas throughout the HIV epidemic—an approach that respects and understands the range of meanings and purposes for the medium and the culture that has been developing. Peer and participatory approaches to action research that have been highly effective in other areas of HIV prevention (Moodie et al., 2003) may be very useful in this context. As indicated above, research in this area is only now emerging in the literature, and while early findings look promising, there is a need for more rigorous evaluation techniques to develop both effective health promotion practice and sustainable impact.

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