

A qualitative study of cybersex and MSM's HIV risk behavior

GREGORY M. REBCHOOK, Ph.D., Principal Investigator; SUSAN M. KEGELES, Ph.D., Co-investigator; ALBERTO CUROTTO, Ph.D., Research Assistant

Contact information:
Greg Rebchook, Ph.D.
Center for AIDS Prevention Studies
Univ. of California, San Francisco
grebchook@psg.ucsf.edu

Abstract

The Internet has created new opportunities for men who have sex with men (MSM) to engage in a wide variety of sexual behaviors. Recently, a cluster of syphilis cases was traced to a San Francisco Internet chatroom. This incident raises numerous questions about the role of "cybersex" in emerging patterns of HIV risk behavior, including "barebacking." However, little is known about how the widespread use of this technology may be affecting MSM's sexual behavior. The goal of this study is to examine the role of the Internet in MSM's sexual lives and to explore the potential of using it for HIV prevention purposes. This study will use qualitative research methods to examine how MSM are using the Internet for sexual purposes. Additionally, the study will test the feasibility of conducting on-line HIV intervention activities with MSM. Since the project was only recently funded no data have been collected yet. The specific aims of this study are:

- To conduct in-depth on-line interviews and focus groups with 164 Internet-using MSM to: a) describe how and why they use the Internet for sexual purposes (e.g., engaging in on-line sexually-oriented conversations, using the Internet to meet sexual partners, viewing sexually explicit Web sites); b) determine the characteristics of MSM who use the Internet for sexual purposes; and c) examine how MSM's attitudes and HIV risk behaviors are influenced by these on-line activities.
- To determine the feasibility of using an Internet-based intervention to prevent HIV transmission by: a) assessing the willingness of Internet-using MSM to participate in on-line interventions; b) identifying the best mechanisms to deliver prevention interventions (e.g., Web sites, e-mail lists, on-line support groups, on-line counseling, on-line social marketing); c) assessing their privacy, anonymity and/or confidentiality requirements, time restrictions, and incentives necessary to participate in an on-line HIV intervention study.

Objectives & Specific Aims

- Collect qualitative data from men who have sex with men (MSM) to examine the Internet's role in their sexual behavior patterns
 - How and why MSM use the Internet for sexual purposes
 - Characteristics of Internet-using MSM
 - How Internet use influences their attitudes and HIV risk behavior
- Test the feasibility of conducting on-line HIV prevention activities with MSM
 - Assess the willingness of Internet-using MSM to participate in on-line prevention programs
 - Identify best mechanisms to conduct on-line prevention
 - Determine privacy needs and other concerns

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MSM continue to contract and transmit HIV

- MSM account for >25% of all new U.S. HIV infections and more AIDS cases than any other group
- In CA, MSM account for >71% of all AIDS cases and over 2/3 of estimated HIV infections
- Rates of unprotected anal sex among MSM are rising
- STD rates among MSM are increasing
- Drug-resistant strains of HIV are being transmitted



Internet use is widespread and rapidly increasing



- Internet tripled in size from 1994 - 1996
- 50 - 100 million users today
- 55% of U.S. adults accessed Internet in last month
- America On-line (AOL) alone has over 19 million members
- Internet has potential to reach millions of people of color

The Internet now supplements the role of gay bars & baths



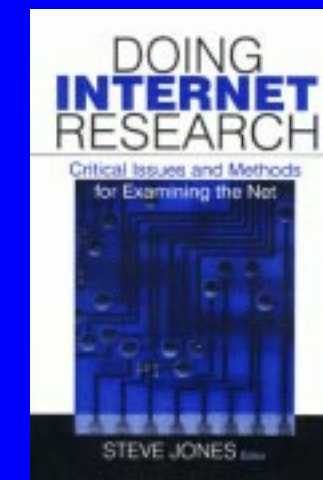
- Gay-oriented websites:** resources, education, health issues, pornography...
 - Some sites eroticize unprotected sex
- Gay chat rooms:** allow for real-time or synchronous communication in groups
 - Organized by location or special interests
 - Users can read each participants' personal profile
 - Some chat rooms devoted to unprotected sex
- Instant messaging/private conversations**
 - Development and maintenance of relationships
 - Can include cyber-sex or sexually explicit chat
 - May lead to immediate or future in-person meetings
- Personal ads:** can result in immediate or future in-person meetings

Internet and MSM's health



- In August, 1999 at least 8 men contracted syphilis from sex partners they met in AOL M4M chatrooms
- Internet study of 129 HIV+, gay men found that (West, JB 1999):
 - 95% identified the Internet as primary and preferred meeting place
 - They reported high rates of risk behavior including sex while high and inconsistent condom use
 - Serostatus routinely disclosed

Methods



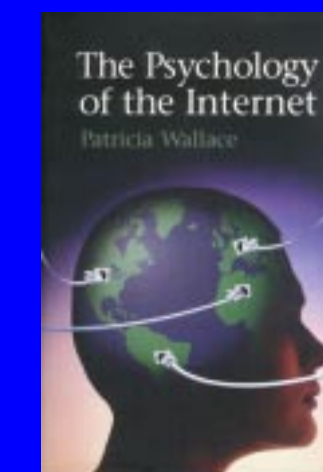
- Formative Phase (current)**
 - Hire and train staff, purchase equipment and activate Internet Service Provider accounts
 - Conduct two on-line focus groups and pilot interviews
- Data collection phase (3/01 to 12/01)**
 - 100 on-line interviews
 - 6 on-line focus groups
- Analysis/dissemination phase (1/02-6/02)**
 - Analyze data, prepare manuscripts, present findings

Participants

- Recruitment**
 - Research assistant recruits from M4M chat rooms (e.g., gay.com, AOL)
 - Recruitment dates and times systematically chosen to maximize representativeness
 - Polite invitations sent to potential participants
 - Additional on-line advertising may occur
- Eligibility screening**
 - Sexually active MSM
 - on-line sexually-related behavior AND
 - in-person sexual activity in last 2 months
 - At least 18 years old



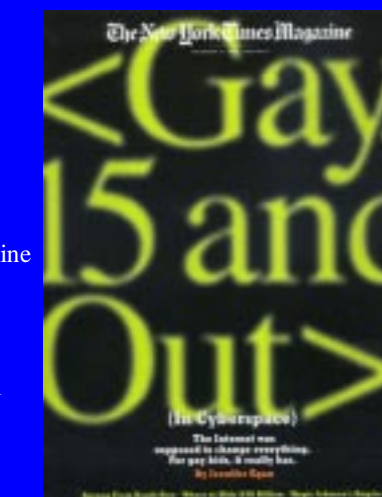
On-line interviews



- 100 participants
- Format--either:**
 - Real-time on-line interviews in private chat-rooms or Instant Messaging; OR
 - Asynchronous e-mail interview where participant receives initial and follow-up questions via e-mail
- \$30 electronic gift certificate
- Topics include:**
 - How and why they use Internet for sexual purposes: motivation, preferred mechanism, frequency, length of sessions, meeting partners, honesty, HIV disclosure, role of unprotected sex on-line and in-person, etc.
 - Relationship between sexual behavior on- and off-line
 - How does on-line fantasy about unprotected sex affect in-person sexual risk-taking

On-line focus groups

- 6 on-line groups (n = 6 to 8/group)
- \$40 electronic gift certificate
- Conducted in e-groups
- Topics include:**
 - Willingness to participate in on-line prevention programs & best delivery mechanisms
 - How and why MSM interact sexually on-line and how this affects in-person behavior
 - How the Internet has changed the gay community
 - Perception of on-line and in-person sexual norms and relative risk between Internet-using and non-Internet-using MSM
 - Norms regarding honesty and HIV status disclosure

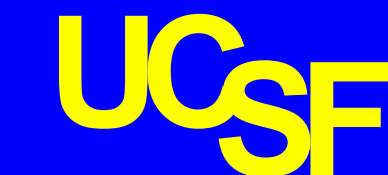


Brief survey and data analysis

- All participants will complete a brief on-line survey
 - Demographics
 - HIV risk assessment
 - Internet use patterns
- Code numbers assigned to link survey information to qualitative data
- Data analysis**
 - Narratives already in text form
 - MS Word files imported into Ethnograph for content analysis
 - "Middle-order" approach to analysis to coding the data for key themes and categories
 - Concepts will capture or reflect the underlying meaning, uniformity, and/or patterns within the narratives
 - Iterative and inductive process
 - Findings discussed and interpreted collaboratively



University of California
San Francisco



AIDS Research Institute