

bareback sex and the quest for HIV: assessing the relationship in internet personal advertisements of men who have sex with men

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Technological changes have led to the development of numerous niche markets for personal ads. Included is the market of men seeking men for bareback (i.e., unprotected) sex. Both common assumptions and the scant literature suggest these men are actively seeking HIV infection. This research assesses a sample of Internet personal ads in order to identify a profile of barebackers and to determine whether barebackers are actively seeking HIV infection. Results suggest Internet personal ads are more explicitly sexual than traditional personal ads, and, although despite large numbers of such personal ads there is little evidence of a direct link between a preference for bareback sex and an active quest for HIV infection.

Personal advertisements today are a common means for individuals to seek out and find others with whom to share romance, social activities, no-strings-attached sexual relationships, and for some individuals, diseases. The explosive growth of computer technology in the last two decades has

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greatly expanded opportunities to share information about oneself and to search for similarly interested others. So, too, has the availability for highly specialized forms of personal advertisements grown significantly. One very specialized form of personal advertisement found on the Internet today caters to men who have sex with men and prefer to do so outside the guidelines of safer sex. Barebacking, as this form of sexual practice is called, is sometimes associated with individuals who are actively seeking HIV infected sexual partners and wish to become infected themselves. For many, this practice—referred to as “bug chasing” (see Gauthier and Forsyth 1999)—is clearly confusing if not incomprehensible as a goal and practice. However, there are a number of Internet sites that cater to this market, providing opportunities for HIV+ and HIV– men to meet for purposes of sexual activity.

The present study provides an assessment of the content of personal advertisements found on one such website, with a focus on identifying the characteristics of men expressing interests in barebacking, and assessing whether men using this forum are in fact bug chasing. The website in question is quite large (at the time of data collection it contained more than 180,000 personal ads from men worldwide), and this fact coupled with the stated purpose of the website guided the selection of it for this research. As the creators explain, “It’s up to you . . . to decide how you want to run your life, who you want to fuck, whom you infect, and what you even believe. Also since you are an adult, you can decide to live this lifestyle or not, and accept the consequences for doing so. We are here for those who want to live this lifestyle, and don’t feel that they fit into the ‘safe-sex world.’” Although there is no explicit statement that bug chasing is the reason for the website, it is strongly implied in this introductory statement and throughout the contents of the site (www.barebackcity.com). This suggests a potential limitation to the present research. Social stigmas or fears of public health policing efforts may lead men to “hide” their bug chasing intentions; hence, information on the site may be less than full disclosures. In addition to assessing the characteristics of men who post “personal profiles” on the site, the research allows an assessment of whether or not the implied purpose of the website is in fact what users are pursuing in their posted personal ads.

THE LITERATURE ON PERSONAL ADVERTISEMENTS

Personal advertisements contain a wide range of information, and the information contained in them can suggest the intentions of the advertiser. There are also some clear differences based on sex and sexual orientation in personal advertisements' content. For instance, when men describe partners they seek in personal ads they are more likely than women to list physical traits (Frigault et al. 1994). Additionally, personal ads placed by women are more likely than personal ads placed by men to make direct reference to physical appearance and age (Frigault et al. 1994). Individuals who disclose more information in personal ads are those who also are more descriptive about the characteristics they seek in others (Parrott et al. 1997).

In personal ads from gay men, descriptions of one's own body and physical characteristics are the most common (Bartholome et al. 2000). For gay men placing personal advertisements, this is probably a wise move, as men are highly likely to be influenced by statements of physical attractiveness in personal ads (Goode 1996, 1998), and among gay men specifically, physical appearance is presented as a top priority among characteristics desired in partners (Hatala and Predhodka 1996). If seeking a specific type of physical appearance in a man, it is logical to believe that those considering responding to one's ad also have a high priority on physical appearance. This same idea may be behind the fact that it is not uncommon for individuals who respond to personal ads to include photographs in their responses; studying responses to personal ads placed in newspapers, Goode (1998) reports that 23.5% of responses to ads included photographs.

In an attempt to assess what is important in gay men's personal ads, Bartholome et al. (2000) examined 167 ads of men seeking other men on a Canadian telephone personal ad system. Results show advertisements have a strong emphasis on physical appearance descriptions and sexual relationships. The most common contents of ads were physical descriptions and advertisers' age (both in 81% of ads). Included in such descriptions, three of every four men include their height, seven of ten include weight, and slightly more than one-third include hair length and/or color and eye color. Three of

every ten ads include mentions of the advertiser's possession or absence of facial and body hair. Additionally, these gay men's personal advertisements often (45%) contain explicit language referring to and describing the advertiser's genitalia. When making specific references to one's penis, a majority (52%) of men state specific measurements. In addition to descriptions of themselves, these gay men included in their ads discussions of specific sexual acts they sought (38%) and their preferred sexual roles (40%). Only one in nine ads (11%), however, stated the race of either the man placing the personal ad or of his desired partner(s). This study concluded that personal ads placed by gay men show "a general theme of sexual content, often explicitly described, ... a pre-occupation with physical appearance, male genitalia, and sexual activity" (Bartholome et al. 2000:318).

Gay men's personal advertisements are clearly more sexual in content than those typically placed by women or heterosexual men. When including statements of preferred/desired sexual acts in personal ads, gay men are most likely to mention oral sex (79%), followed by desires for anal sex (25%) (with advertisers most often not specifying a preferred role in anal sex) (Bartholome et al. 2000).

In addition to physical descriptions and sexual content, statements of HIV status in personal ads of men seeking men also are fairly common. One review of personal ads of men seeking men between 1986 and 1993 reports that the proportion of ads mentioning an individual's HIV status increased from 1.9% to 12.2% (Hamers et al. 1997). Older men were more likely to specifically state their HIV status. Others have shown that since the onset of the HIV epidemic, gay men have increasingly rejected stereotypical presentations of self in personal ads and more frequently make statements regarding health status (Davidson 1991). Furthermore, despite the overrepresentation of HIV infection among gay men, only about 10% of gay men's personal ads published between 1985 and 1996 make references to "safety" (i.e., safer sex issues) (Smith 2000). There has been no association identified concerning personal characteristics of gay men with ads that do and do not mention safer sex issues (Smith 2000). However, although not a significant difference, older men appear more likely to mention the issue.

THE LITERATURES ON BAREBACKING AND BUG CHASING

Social science investigations of the phenomena of bareback sex and intentional efforts to become infected with HIV (i.e., bug chasing) are rare. This is notable because both forms of behavior are quickly becoming a part of the cultural landscape, especially in communities of men who have sex with men. To date there are only two significant studies of barebacking among men who have sex with men.

The first of these studies (Gauthier and Forsyth 1999) presents an overview of the issue, provides anecdotal data from assessments of Internet websites devoted to the discussion of barebacking, and presents an initial set of four explanations for bug chasing behavior: fear and relief; risk taking as eroticism; loneliness and group solidarity; and political action. These explanations are derived from the authors' review of Internet website contents and theoretical literature regarding the development of gay communities and identities.

The only available quantitative data regarding the behavior comes from a survey of 554 men who have sex with men in the San Francisco area (Mansergh et al. 2002). Among these men, 10% report having engaged in unprotected sex with a non-primary sex partner. Of concern to HIV prevention educators, more than one in five (22%) HIV+ men had engaged in bareback sex, compared to 10% of HIV- men. However, no differences based on either race or sexual orientation identification were observed. While most men engaging in bareback sex claim to have done so with partners of the same HIV status as themselves, a "sizeable portion" had engaged in unprotected sex with a partner of a different or unknown HIV status.

Because of the scant literature on the topic, many questions regarding the phenomenon of barebacking and bug chasing remain. As Gauthier and Forsyth (1999:97) conclude, "in particular, the characteristics of the bug-chasing population are unknown." The present research is an attempt to address this important gap in the literature and provide a more thorough understanding of men who are bug chasers, and to assess the degree to which men who have sex with men and advertise for partners on sexually explicit websites are explicitly engaging in bug chasing.

METHODS

This research is based on assessment of the content of "profiles" posted on one specific website catering to men interested in bareback sex. All profiles (or, ads) posted to the website during a one week period in January 2003 were identified, downloaded, and printed. Only ads from men in the United States were included in the sample (approximately 15% of all ads were from men outside the United States). A total of 880 different men posted ads during the study period. (Approximately one dozen men were found to have posted multiple profiles during the week; only the first ad posted was included in the sample.) This represents a fairly large amount of traffic on the website. The total of 880 ads posted during this one-week period computes to one new posting every 11.5 minutes.

All profiles follow a standard format, with listings of specific items and areas where men can elaborate in text. Profiles also may contain photographs (a seemingly unlimited number of photos can be included in a profile, as many as eight photographs were found in a single profile). Standard pieces of information in a profile (which therefore serve as variables in the present study) include: the individual's geographic location (city and state), age, height, weight, HIV status, desired HIV status for potential partners, sexual role (top, bottom, versatile), whether the individual is seeking a long-term relationship, one-on-one sex, three-way sexual encounters, sex parties/orgies, gang bangs or social activity partners. Also included are indications of the individual's willingness to "give" and "take" in oral and anal sex, interest in bisexual encounters, whether he has tattoos or body piercings, and whether he is into PNP (Party and Play, the use of drugs during sex). Four open-ended comments sections are on each profile as well: turn-ons, turn-offs, more stats, and comments. All four of these sections were reviewed on all profiles, as these sections often included statements of the individual's race and genital descriptions. The first page of the profile contains a location for a photograph, and at the end of the profile there is room for "more pictures of this hot barebacker."

Once all ads were printed they were coded and entered into an SPSS database for analysis. Analysis utilizes both descriptive and inferential statistics.

FINDINGS

Table 1 presents an overview of the mean values on each of the primary descriptive variables included in the profiles. As can be seen, the large majority of men are White, of average height and weight, in their mid-30s and do include a photograph in their profile. More than one-quarter of men report having at least one tattoo and/or one body piercing. Photo-

TABLE 1 CHARACTERISTICS OF MEN WITH PROFILES

Demographics and Ad Contents	% of Ads
Race	
White	83.7%
African American	9.6%
Hispanic	5.7%
Other	1.0%
Age	
Mean	34.5
Median	34.0
Height	
Mean	5'10"
Median	5'11"
Weight	
Mean	180.6
Median	175
Tattoos	30.8%
Body piercings	26.1%
Photo in ad	61.9%
Face photo	34.0%
Chest photo	34.5%
Ass photo	25.7%
Flaccid penis photo	14.5%
Erect penis photo	30.2%
Penis Size	
Listed	18.8%
Mean	7.7"
Median	7.5"

graphs of one's face or chest are the most common types of photographs to be included in a profile.

Comparison of the frequency of including certain pieces of information in a website profile versus what is known about gay men's personal ads in other sources (Bartholome et al. 2000) show that age, height, and weight are more likely to be included on a website profile, yet descriptions of one's physical characteristics are more likely to be included in a "traditional" personal ad (i.e. ads in newspapers, magazines, and locations that are not sexually explicit) than is a photograph in a website profile (81% vs. 61.9%). One problem noted by Gauthier and Forsyth (1999) with assessing the characteristics of men stating an interest in bareback sex via personal ads is that there may be no way to assess the individual's physical attractiveness. The fact that a majority of men include at least one photograph in their profile/ad may be a way to overcome this issue. However, because of the highly subjective nature of assessing "physical attractiveness" this has not been done in the present research. Also, in a traditional personal ad, 45% of men describe their genitalia (with 23% stating a measurement), compared to 39% including a genital photo, and 18.8% stating a size on a website profile.

Profiles come from men listing residence in 44 states (plus the District of Columbia). Men come from all states except Alaska, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Vermont. The largest number of ads comes from men in California (23.0%), followed by New York (9.4%), Florida (9.3%), and Texas (8.0%); no other state generates more than 5% of the ads. When assessed regionally, 16.7% of ads are from men in the Northeast, 17.1% from men in the Midwest, 31.3% from men residing in the South, and 34.9% of all ads are from men living in the West.¹ This is an interesting finding and suggests possible cultural differences among men who have sex with men in different regions of the country.

¹The Northeast includes Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island. The Midwest includes Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and West Virginia. The South includes Alabama, Arkansas, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. The West includes Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, New Mexico, Nevada, Oklahoma, Oregon, Utah, and Washington.

Interestingly, there are some differences across men of different regions. For instance, men from the Midwest report a mean age fully 1.5 years younger than men from all other regions. Men from the Northeast and West are more likely than men from the South or Midwest to report having a tattoo. Southern men are significantly more likely than Northeastern, Midwestern, or Western residing men to include a photograph of their face, chest, buttocks, and erect penis in their advertisement; a photograph of a flaccid penis is most likely to be included by men from the Northeast. Also, men from the Northeast and Midwest report an average penis size one-third of an inch shorter than men from the South and West.

In regards to HIV status, the majority of men (70.6%) report that they are not HIV infected. One in five (19.3%) men report being HIV+ and one in ten (10.1%) report their status as "unknown" or do not report an HIV status. It is interesting to note that despite the website's strongly implied purpose of providing a means for men to seek out and meet men of a discordant HIV status, only 4.8% of all profiles state that they seek an HIV+ other. More than one-half (57.1%) request others to be HIV-; nearly four of every ten profiles, however, state "no preference" regarding a potential partner's HIV status.

The literature has suggested that older men are more likely to include a statement of their HIV status in a personal ad (Hamers et al. 1997). However, in the present analysis this relationship is not found. Correlation analysis shows that age and listing of HIV status are significantly correlated ($r = -.076$). However, this relationship is negative, the opposite of that reported for gay men's personal ads from a decade earlier (Hamers et al. 1997).

The sexual interests men report in their profiles (see Table 2) show that oral sex is a more frequently sought activity than anal sex, and one-half of all men consider themselves sexually versatile (willing to both give and receive sexual acts). Additionally, less than one-third of men report any interest in bisexual encounters, and slightly more than one-third report interests in combining drug use and sexual activities.

Few statistically significant differences in self-reported sexual roles/interests are seen for demographic/descriptive variables. The only statistically significant differences are that

TABLE 2 SEXUAL ACTIVITIES

Sexual Role/Interest	% of Ads
Sexual role	
Top	19.6
Bottom	30.7
Versatile	49.7
Performs oral sex	67.7
Receives oral sex	80.8
Performs anal sex	69.7
Receives anal sex	55.0
Bisexual interests	31.7
Drugs/sex interests	37.7

White men are more likely to report performing oral sex than non-White men (71.3% vs. 62.7%, Chi-Square = 8.98, $p = .011$) and White men are less likely to report interests in bisexual encounters than non-White men (26.5% vs. 30.0%, Chi-Square = 15.59, $p = .001$). No other statistically significant differences are found.

When reviewing the types of interactions men are seeking with their personal ad, it is clear that men are more interested in sexual encounters than intimate relationships or social activities. Nearly nine of every ten men (88.1%) report seeking one-on-one sexual encounters, 80.4% are seeking threeway sexual encounters, 70% desire group sex or orgies, and are interested in gang bangs. Only one-half (51.7%) of men report an interest in meeting someone for social activities, and one-third (34.1%) are seeking a long-term relationship.

Assessment of sexual/social interests across men based on self-reported HIV status shows that HIV– men are more likely to be interested in bisexual and sex/drugs encounters, and the least likely to be seeking orgies and social activity partners. HIV– men are also less likely to have a tattoo. HIV+ men are more likely to report having a body piercing, and to include photographs of their face, chest, buttocks, or penis (both flaccid and erect). Also, men who list their HIV status as unknown are more likely than men who report their HIV status to be seeking gang bangs. Interestingly, HIV+ men are

not more likely than other men to state that they seek a long-term relationship, as suggested by previous research (Hatala et al. 1998).

One final descriptor included in a significant number (18.8%) of profiles is penis size. As reported above, for the entire sample the average reported penis size is 7.7". Four variables show statistically significant differences in self-reported penis length. HIV+ men report an average penis length one-half inch longer than HIV- men (8.0" vs. 7.5", $p = .02$). Also, men who are seeking an HIV+ partner report an average penis length eight-tenths of an inch longer than men seeking HIV- partners (8.4" vs. 7.6", $p = .038$). Men who describe themselves sexually as bottoms report an average penis length one-half inch shorter than men who describe themselves as either tops or versatile (7.2" vs. 7.7", $p = .023$). Finally, and not surprisingly, men who include in their profile a photograph of their erect penis report a one-half inch longer average penis length than men who do not include an erect penis photograph in their profile (7.4" vs. 7.9", $p = .006$).

ARE THESE MEN BUG CHASING?

Analysis of whether the website is actually being used by HIV- men to find HIV+ men to infect them, and/or HIV+ men looking for HIV- men wanting to be infected is done by cross tabulating profiles' statements of the individuals' own HIV status and the HIV status sought in a partner. As shown in Table 3, there are very few men specifically seeking HIV discordant partners. Less than 1% of uninfected men say they are seeking an infected partner, and less than 2% of infected men are specifically seeking an uninfected partner. While this would initially suggest that bug chasing is not a common trait among these men, it is also important to note that many men are indifferent regarding the HIV status of those with whom they seek to partner. Among HIV+ men fully 71.9% indicate no preference in a partner's HIV status. Significantly fewer (17.4%), but still a significant portion of HIV- men report no preference in a partner's HIV status. It would appear that these men might in fact be willing to "risk" possible infection, although perhaps not actively and adamantly seeking infection.

TABLE 3 CROSS TABULATIONS OF INDIVIDUALS' OWN HIV STATUS AND HIV STATUS SOUGHT IN OTHERS

HIV Status	Seek HIV+	Seek HIV–	Seek No Preference
Own HIV+	26.6% (37)	1.4% (2)	71.9% (100)
Own HIV–	0.6% (3)	82.0% (414)	17.4% (88)
Own HIV unknown	—	21.1% (15)	78.9% (56)

Further analysis of men seeking HIV+ others is done using logistic regression analysis.² As reported in Table 4, there are six statistically significant variables that emerge as predictors of men seeking HIV+ men via their personal ad on the website. Older men are more likely to be seeking an HIV+ other, as are men with tattoos and those who include a photograph of their chest. Men who report an interest in bisexual encounters have a 2.26 times lower likelihood of seeking an infected man than men who do not report bisexual interests. And, men who are seeking a long-term relationship and social activity partners are more likely to report interests in meeting HIV+ men.

TABLE 4 LOGISTIC REGRESSION PREDICTING INDIVIDUALS SEEKING HIV+ OTHERS

Variable	B	ExpB	S.E.	Significance	Tolerance
Age	.07	1.08	.03	.004	.998
Tattoos	1.09	2.97	.40	.007	.977
Bisexual interests	–2.26	.10	.66	.001	.966
Photo of chest included	1.28	3.59	.41	.002	.950
Seeking long-term relat.	.80	2.22	.40	.046	.961
Seeking social activity	1.01	2.73	.42	.016	.990
Constant	–6.35				

$N = 425$; Chi-Square = 66.375 $df = 6$ ($p = .001$)

²One reviewer questioned whether the men seeking HIV+ others were all HIV+ themselves. This question is answered in Table 3, showing that 92.5% (37 of 40) of men seeking HIV+ others are themselves HIV+. It is not possible to do separate logistic regression analyses for HIV+ and HIV– men, due to the sizes of the subsamples.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

There are two main findings in this research. First, there does not appear to be a deviant or skewed profile for men who utilize Internet sources to search for bareback male sexual partners. In fact, there is a wide diversity of men that do so, and the characteristics of these men are very similar to the characteristics of men using other forms of personal advertisements (such as newspapers, magazines, and other non-sexually-explicit personal ads) to find other men. The use of personal advertisements in this sample is clearly focused on locating sexual (rather than romantic or social) partners. The second main finding in this research is that although linked in both many popular culture venues and the scant existing social science literature on the topic, interests in bareback sex and active pursuit of HIV infection do not appear to be related. Results of this research suggest that no more than 1% of men seeking bareback sex partners are also actively seeking opportunities to either become infected or infect others with HIV.

One elementary piece of data in the present study that may be eye opening for some is the raw number of men who are engaged in the pursuit of bareback sex with other men. The fact that one week's worth of newly posted personal ads totaled 880 (and were additions to a website with more than 180,000 previously posted ads) clearly indicates that bareback sex is not an uncommon form of deviance. Gauthier and Forsyth (1999) have argued that barebacking is a sociological (as opposed to normal or pathological) form of sexual deviance (also see Forsyth 1996). As such, there are social structures in place to recruit and train participants; structures to gather people together to engage in sexual acts; social support systems in place for participants; and, typically, opportunities to exploit new technologies. Barebacking among men who have sex with men clearly meets this definition. However, based on the growth in numbers of persons involved in bareback sex this activity may be redesignated by theorists as normal sexual deviance in the near future.

The characteristics of men listed in the personal advertisements show a wide range of diversity with the primary shared characteristic being an apparent strong interest in sex and often forms of sex that could be considered normal

sexually deviant acts. The purpose of personal ads in this forum is clearly for sexual purposes. Less than 1% (0.8%) of ads indicates an interest in a long-term relationships and does not state the advertiser is seeking any sexual activities; similarly, only 1.3% of all ads state an interest in locating others for social, and not sexual, activities. Not only do men state that they are seeking sexual liaisons, but the information they post (both in text and photographic form) is strongly sexual (39% include a genital photograph in their ad).

While clearly a site for finding sexual contacts, it is important to note that based on the posted characteristics of men in the profiles and the relationships uncovered among variables, there does not appear to be any significant degree of bug chasing occurring among this sample of men seeking to have sex with other men in bareback style. As shown, although there are considerable numbers of men posting profiles stating that they are HIV+, very few of these men express a desire to meet sex partners that are HIV-. Essentially no men who identify as HIV- express a desire for meeting exclusively HIV+ male sex partners. Although significant numbers of men state that they do not have a preference regarding others' HIV status, this does not appear as it would be an efficient way to pursue infection, if that were an individual's only/primary goal. Clearly, among men who have sex with men the association between bareback sex and active pursuit of HIV infection is all but absent in this sample and environment. Rather, it seems clear that other motivations draw men to bareback sex, including the risk and eroticism of the event, seeking of group solidarity, excitement from the fear and relief from fears, and possibly political activism.

Some men do report a preference for finding HIV+ others. However, these men tend to be HIV+ themselves and as shown in the logistic regression analysis, these men are primarily seeking long-term relationships and social activity partners, not sex partners. Again, the idea of men looking for HIV+ others for the sole purpose of becoming infected with HIV is unfounded.

In the end, bug chasing does not appear to be a significant interest of this sample of men pursuing opportunities for bareback sex. Although the practices of barebacking and bug chasing are real and significant concerns to those in the HIV

(and other STD) prevention efforts/movements, an interest in barebacking does not appear to be synonymous with bug chasing. This may seriously question the efforts and initiatives that some HIV prevention entities are currently employing. Barebacking is a risky behavior, but engaging in bareback sex does not seem to suggest that an individual is seeking infection. It certainly is a possibility (if one's partner is HIV+ or of unknown infection status), but assuming that a barebacker is motivated to become infected appears to be in error. In conclusion then, the reasons identified by Gauthier and Forsyth (1999) for barebacking (in addition to bug chasing) appear to be much more common: Safer sex is not perceived by many men who have sex with men to be intimate and while barebackers recognize the presence of risk, it is defined as an acceptable risk in exchange for the rewards.

The ever-increasing spread of Internet access and availability coupled with evolving cultural norms and values regarding sex has converged to introduce important changes to the world of personal advertisements. Personals are more informative today, can easily and efficiently be targeted at niche markets, and can simultaneously be accessible to an almost unlimited number of viewers. As a result it may be assumed that personal ads of today may be more effective (i.e., more likely to lead to desired relationships) than in the past. This is a question that remains unanswered, however, and just one of the issues that future research should address. For now we know that personal advertisements are very popular and are of significantly different form and content than those of the not too distant past.

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