

## Sex and the Internet: Gay men, risk reduction and serostatus

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### Abstract

Access to the Internet has increased dramatically over the past decade as has its use for meeting sexual partners (e-dating), particularly among gay men. Between June 2002 and January 2004, 128 gay/bisexual men living in London were interviewed one-to-one about their experience of e-dating, sexual risk and HIV prevention. The men were recruited both online (through the Internet) and offline (in clinics and the community); 32 men were HIV-positive, 59 HIV-negative, while 13 had never had an HIV test. A key finding was that both identity as well as anonymity are vital to e-dating. Through a process of online filtering and sero-sorting, HIV-positive men are able to meet other positive men for anal sex without condoms. While this does not present a risk of HIV transmission to an uninfected person it does have implications for the potential transmission of other STIs such as syphilis and LGV. Through e-dating, HIV-positive gay men can also avoid abuse, discrimination and sexual rejection. Our findings do not support the suggestion that the attraction of e-dating is that it affords absolute anonymity. We found that the gradual expression of identity is vital for e-dating among gay men. Internet-based HIV prevention campaigns need to take account of the different ways in which gay reflexively manage aspects of their identity online

**Keywords:** *Internet, HIV, gay men, identity*

### Introduction

Several years ago an article in *Out*, a gay men's magazine, reported a journalist's chatroom interaction with a gay man about using the Internet to find "bareback" partners, that is, finding partners for anal sex without condoms (Signorile 1997). The article was significant because it articulated two of the main HIV prevention challenges of the current era: the use of the Internet to find sexual partners and the idea that some gay men might choose to have risky sex.

Access to the Internet has increased dramatically over the past decade as has its use for meeting sexual partners, particularly among gay men (McFarlane *et al.* 2000, 2004, Bolding *et al.* 2004, Weatherburn *et al.* 2003). In 2003, approximately 50% of London gay men used the Internet to look for a sexual partner (“e-dating”) (Bolding *et al.* 2005).

The growing and widespread use of the Internet for sexual partnering has made it a focus for HIV prevention research. For example, it has been suggested that the Internet has HIV transmission implications because it is an efficient way of locating partners, thereby increasing risk in an epidemiological sense (Bull and McFarlane 2000). Others have suggested that the Internet allows people to interact anonymously thereby increasing the risk of HIV transmission (Cooper *et al.* 1999, Parsons 2005, Rietmeijer *et al.* 2001).

For some time we have known that there is a positive association between using the Internet to find sexual partners and risky sex (Benotsch *et al.* 2002, Elford *et al.*, 2001, 2004a, McFarlane *et al.* 2000). Risky sex is here defined as unprotected anal intercourse with a casual partner of unknown or discordant HIV status. This presents a risk for HIV transmission. The use of the Internet is also connected with the notion of “barebacking” where gay men seek partners for anal sex without condoms (Halkitis and Parsons 2003, Halkitis *et al.* 2003). Researchers who have explored barebacking have posited several explanations such as gay men being prone to irresponsible sexual behaviour (Crossley 2002, 2004), libidinal conflict (Carballo-Dieguez 2001), poor impulse control (Halkitis and Parsons 2003, Halkitis *et al.* 2003), and the advent of effective HIV treatment (Sheon and Plant 2000).

There is, however, cause to consider an alternative story about the Internet and HIV risk. Research in this area has tended to treat Internet-use as an independent variable, effectively reducing the complexities of the Internet to a “black box” and reinforcing a techno-determinist view whereby the Internet is seen to *create* high risk sexual behaviour (Castells 2000). Researchers working in the sociology of technology have, however, stressed the reflexivity of Internet users in connection with e-dating among heterosexual men and women (Hardey 2002, 2004) and have used ethnographic methodologies to explore the interconnections of society and the Internet (Hine 2000).

Through qualitative interviews with gay men who used the Internet to find sexual partners, Adam (2005), for example, has suggested that “barebacking” is associated with a *caveat emptor* approach to HIV prevention, where gay men with HIV in particular, expect their partners to take responsibility for themselves. Qualitative research about HIV prevention has also identified how HIV serostatus identity is linked with different assumptions and expectations about safer sex (Davis 2002, Keogh *et al.* 1997).

Recent quantitative research has extended our knowledge about HIV prevention and the Internet in two important ways. First, gay men are no more likely to have risky sex with someone they meet through the Internet than someone they meet in a bar or a club, casting doubt on the idea that the Internet produces risk as such (Bolding *et al.* 2005). Second, some gay men with HIV report having unprotected anal sex with casual partners who, like themselves, are also HIV-positive. They are more likely to meet one another *online* (i.e., through the Internet) than *offline* (i.e., in a bar or club) (Bolding *et al.* 2005). This does not present a risk of HIV transmission to an uninfected person, but it does have implications for the sexual health of gay men with HIV, such as acquiring syphilis, LGV and other sexually transmitted infections. Qualitative interviews have also explored the e-dating practices of gay men (Davis *et al.* 2006). That research suggests that e-dating makes it possible to represent the desirable self, express desires and manage identity (including HIV serostatus). It seems likely, therefore, that the relationship between the Internet and HIV risk is more complicated than previously thought and that HIV serostatus is an important dimension.

We need therefore to reconsider how we think about gay men, the Internet and sex. This paper questions some of the assumptions that underpin current research in this area. Using qualitative interviews, our study explores e-dating among London gay men, focusing on how safer sex is negotiated in e-dating with reference to HIV serostatus. The study also addresses the implications of e-dating for HIV prevention.

## Methods

Gay men's use of the Internet for seeking sexual partners, and its implications for HIV/STI risk, was explored using quantitative and qualitative research methods in four samples of London gay men. The four samples, recruited both online and offline were: (i) gay men using Internet chatrooms and profiles; (ii) HIV-positive men attending an outpatients clinic; (iii) gay men seeking an HIV test; and (iv) gay men in a community setting (central London gyms). The methods have been described in detail elsewhere (Elford *et al.* 2004b). Quantitative data were collected by means of confidential, anonymous self-administered questionnaires. Men who completed a questionnaire were asked if they would be willing to take part in the qualitative arm of the study. The qualitative arm matched the quantitative arm by recruiting gay men from each of the four samples. The samples were chosen to ensure that men who used the Internet for sex, HIV-positive men and recently tested HIV-negative men all contributed to the study.

### *The qualitative sample*

Additional purposive criteria were adopted to ensure the representation of a wide range of gay men by recruiting men of different ages, HIV serostatus (HIV-positive, HIV-negative and untested), educational attainment, employment status, and use of the Internet for sexual purposes. Online, as well as face-to-face (FTF) interviews were conducted to promote the participation of gay men who used the Internet for sex. The combination of matching the quantitative research in terms of recruitment sites, additional purposive criteria and the two interviewing methods resulted in 128 qualitative interviews (recruitment site: Internet=65; gyms=23; HIV testing clinic=20; HIV treatment clinic=20). All men lived in London. The sample had the following characteristics: age range 21 to 66 years, mean 38 years; education: 72 (69%) had a post-secondary educational qualification; 78 (75%) were employed at the time of the interview; 32 (31%) were HIV-positive, 59 (57%) were HIV-negative, and 13 (12%) were untested; 89 (70%) were currently using the Internet to find sexual partners.

Interviewees were asked to provide written or email consent once they had read an information sheet that described the study, how their interview would be anonymized and how it would be used in the research. Because the study included online data generation, textual consent was also gained at the beginning and end of those interviews (Eysenbach and Till 2001). The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committees for the City and East London Strategic Health Authority, the Royal Free Hampstead NHS Trust and City University London.

### *Interviewing methods*

The interviews were conducted between October 2002 and January 2004 by MD, in two ways: face-to-face (FTF) and online using synchronous Internet relay chat style technology

(Davis *et al.* 2004, 2006, Elford *et al.* 2004b; Mann and Stewart 2002). Where relevant, the interviewees were asked to describe and reflect on anal sex with Internet and non-Internet partners both with and without condoms. The same topic guide was used in both FTF and online interviews. All the interviews were of between 45 and 120 minutes in duration. FTF interviews were audio-taped for transcription and analysis. The online interview texts were copy-pasted for later analysis. Using constant comparison, themes were generated pertaining to the method(s) of risk management and HIV prevention, justified with analytical memoranda (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Analytic bias was addressed through transparent documentation (NVIVO) and team-based interpretive analysis (Barbour 2001, Popay and Williams 1998). The extracts that appear in this paper are identified by their alphanumeric interview ID (I=Internet, G=gyms, C=clinic, T=testing; FTF=face-to-face, OLC=online chat), and the known or reported HIV status of the interviewee (HIV-positive, HIV-negative, untested). In the discussion that follows, online interviews are signified by using brackets around <MD> and <Interviewee>.

## Findings

Three main themes emerged in this analysis of e-dating: “filtering” and its connection with safer sex and HIV serostatus; the formation of networks of desire and the avoidance of HIV discrimination; opportunities and challenges for HIV prevention.

### *Filtering, safer sex and HIV serostatus*

E-dating websites allow users to describe themselves and their desired partners, including their safer sex preferences and HIV serostatus. For example, users can mouse-click radio buttons to code their safer sex preferences according to “Never”, “Sometimes”, “Always”, “Rather not say” or “Needs discussion”. The depiction of HIV serostatus overlaps somewhat with the coding of safer sex preference, but it is also embedded in the images and texts of profiles and other aspects of e-dating communication. In effect, e-daters can filter in and out desired partners in terms of their appearance and sexual preferences, but also in terms of their approach to HIV prevention. There are three qualities of this filtering practice connected with safer sex: pre-empting, matching and declaring.

E-dating provides several ways of pre-empting safer sex. In the next example, the interviewee describes how e-dating removes the need for a discussion of safer sex:

MD: I am just wondering if like anal sex was kind of explicitly negotiated between you?

Interviewee: I think it was mentioned. Yeah I probably would of asked him what he was into, yeah.

MD: What about condoms?

I: Never mentioned.

MD: Not mentioned. A discussion of safe sex at all?

I: No.

MD: HIV status?

I: No.

MD: Do you recall from his profile what he said about safer sex.

I: Yes. That is why I did not ask (GFTF12, HIV-negative).

This example reveals that discussion of safer sex and HIV status in this context was not perceived as necessary, since this information is provided in the profile of the chosen partner. In this way, safer sex is pre-empted in the choice of sexual partner, rather than

negotiated face-to-face. E-dating therefore allows for the matching of preferences for safer sex.

In the following extract, the interviewee refers to choosing a sexual partner who matched his own preference for “always safer sex”:

MD: Yes and how did it go like fucking and condom use did it just sort of happen or did you have to say something or do they ask you?

Interviewee: Again I did not ask and they did not ask.

MD: It just happened?

I: Yes.

MD: Part of the process?

I: Yes they used condoms ... ..

MD: And did safer sex come up in the chat ‘you have to use a condom’?

I: No but it’s on my profile. I have got always safe sex ... .. and on their profile they had the same (IFTF18, HIV-negative).

This example gives the impression that safer sex had been predetermined by the choice of sexual partner. An extension of this pre-emptive safer sex was to back-up profile codes with online chat:

... it was very clear from the beginning because it was written “safe sex” in his profile, “safe sex always”. He even wrote to me saying “I’m allergic to latex so I have to wear some special condoms, I hope you don’t mind”. I said, “No, I don’t mind”. And he came over and we used his condoms and everything was fine (CFTF04, HIV-positive).

This interview suggests that condom use was signalled in the e-daters profile and in an online discussion. Another form of profile filtering for HIV prevention involved making intentions clear in online profile information:

<Interviewee> “If you come here, you’ll find condoms and lube; I’d expect you to have both if I’m visiting you, but if you don’t please tell me before I leave home” (IOLC11, untested).

E-dating therefore seems to provide opportunities for orchestrating safer sex prior to sexual encounters. Consequently, the Internet has HIV prevention value because it allows users to predetermine safer sex. In this regard, and as discussed elsewhere (Davis *et al.* 2006, Hardey 2002, 2004), e-dating reflects Goffman’s concept of the interaction order in which social actors bring conventions and assumptions about the identities of others to help them organize interpersonal experience (Goffman 1983).

E-dating also makes it possible to incorporate HIV serostatus into filtering. Like the practice of matching “safer sex always”, some interviewees referred to matching serostatus for anal sex without condoms: “He says on his profile that he is positive ... I say in my profile that I am positive” (IFTF08, HIV-positive). In these situations there is no need to discuss safer sex as the terms of risk management are negotiated in the filtering process. Interviewees also suggested that filtering reflected the HIV prevention responsibilities of gay men with HIV infection:

Yes, his username is “P——” So it was very clear that he is positive, he made that clear, and he wrote in the profile that he liked barebacking. So we did talk about it ... And, so there wasn’t any need for any negotiation, it had already been negotiated before ... When you hear the newspaper reports “Oh, people have been infecting people deliberately” it’s not like that at all. It’s all consenting adults doing something quite honestly, by an informed decision. I mean the guy was a solicitor, he knew

exactly what he was doing and so did I. So, nobody was using anybody and nobody was putting anybody in risks that they didn't know they were taking (CFTF04, HIV-positive).

We know from our quantitative research about e-dating, that some gay men with HIV report having anal sex without condoms with other HIV-positive gay men whom they met through the Internet (Bolding *et al.* 2005). The present qualitative analysis suggests that gay men with HIV achieve this sero-matching in their online communication.

### *E-dating, networks and discrimination*

E-dating is implicated in the differentiation of sexual partnering networks according to safer sex preferences and HIV serostatus, but also with reference to HIV-related discrimination and the HIV prevention responsibilities attached to different HIV serostatus identities. In particular, some gay men with HIV filter for other gay men with HIV, and refer to a “sub-culture” of e-daters with HIV who have anal sex with one another, without condoms. The accounts of e-daters suggest that this practice is a form of HIV prevention since it does not result in the transmission of HIV to an uninfected person. In addition, some e-daters with HIV appear to choose to have anal sex with one another without condoms to reduce the risk of rejection and blame associated with HIV discrimination.

In the following example, the interviewee talked about filtering in connection with HIV-positive serostatus and preference for anal sex without condoms:

...the fact that he didn't tick that safer sex. The fact that he responded to my profile. I mean my profile basically says if you are going to sleep with me I put the onus totally on the other person that they know my status. I will only sleep with other positive men because I want to have bareback sex. Therefore by implication, if you're going to be having sex with me you must be positive ... and if I am even slightly uncertain about that other person, other person's status I will ask them a direct question: “Are you positive?” (IFTF14, HIV-positive).

The interviewee assumes that sexual partners have filtered themselves into contact with him based on an understanding of his serostatus and his approach to HIV prevention. The interviewee also refers to “checking” as a strategy for profile filtering. Such filtering helps constitute sexual partnering networks. In the extract that follows, the interviewee refers to a transition in his practice as a movement into a sexual sub-culture:

<Interviewee> ...I set up a new profile that said “Never” to safe sex and I was completely blatant about my HIV status—it was only alluded to in the former profile...

<Interviewee> I had changed my old profile to use some of the euphemisms to allude to POZ status so I presume he did...

<MD> what are some of the euphemisms...

<Interviewee> “Positive outlook on life”...

<Interviewee> My uncompromising stance is less than 12 months old.

<Interviewee> Yes.

<MD> What uncompromising stance is that?

<Interviewee> That I only have unprotected sex.

<MD> What made u change?

<Interviewee> Realizing that I much preferred it.

<MD> What made u adjust yr profile

<Interviewee> For the majority of the period since I was diagnosed I had had only protected sex.

<MD> Can u expand?

- <Interviewee> Realizing that every man was out for the most pleasure HE could get—why should I not have the same rule?
- <MD> So is this a way for you to get pleasure while reducing HIV risk?
- <Interviewee> It is also only in the last 15–18 months that I had realized there was such a large subculture of POZ men having unprotected sex.
- <MD> What made u realize that?
- <Interviewee> I think that the number of profiles on gaydar explicit about that has risen markedly in that period.
- <MD> How do you feel about being open about yr status on the net?
- <Interviewee> I think it is important (IOLC14, HIV-positive).

This example points to some of the rules and assumptions of sexual partnering via e-dating, including a shared approach to explicitness about serostatus, preference for anal sex without condoms and a principle of optimizing sexual pleasure. It seems that some e-daters share an approach of making their own HIV serostatus explicit and also their desire for anal sex without condoms with someone similar to themselves. Importantly, the example depicts how the interviewee managed a shift in his approach to safer sex by altering features of his e-dating profile. There is also a sense of the imperative of individual pleasure, for example: “...every man was out for the most pleasure HE could get—why should I not have the same rule”. These rules and assumptions are combined according to a logic of HIV prevention where gay men with HIV choose similar partners to optimize pleasure and minimize the risk of transmitting HIV to an uninfected person.

There were other accounts of a sexual sub-culture among gay men with HIV. In this example, the interviewee talks of a “sub-scene”:

Interviewee: ...there is a sort of sub scene of guys who bareback and who are acknowledged as being openly HIV-positive ... guys who they know are in their mobile phone or little black book as being top, bottom, versatile, fisting whatever that is how it works ... this negotiation myth that a lot of LGB [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual] organizations like talking about in the gay press they do make me laugh because they're just so completely inappropriate to what is actually going on out there “negotiate your safer sex” and “tell the guy what you want and what you don't want”. It just doesn't happen. It is all based on assumptions. Guys talk to each other on Gaydar because they know from other people that the person they are talking to is into a certain scene and there is no negotiation whatsoever... (IFTF16, HIV-positive).

This example takes the idea of pre-determination a little further. It suggests that e-dating is used to create a sexual “sub-scene” of gay men with HIV. The example also suggests an HIV prevention rationality where condoms are not needed because of the decision to participate in a sexual network formed according to HIV-positive serostatus and a preference for anal sex without condoms. Importantly, the practice is seen as a rational choice. It is possible to argue that new HIV infections are minimized through positive-positive sex although the risk of other STIs remains.

Networking according to HIV serostatus and preference for anal sex without condoms is also connected with HIV prejudice. E-daters with HIV reported that other e-daters expect them to “keep to themselves”, in some instances through abusive online messages. Signalling HIV serostatus in e-dating profiles is therefore part of a strategy of moderating abuse and sexual rejection. In the following example, the interviewee provides a depiction of how the online presence of gay men with HIV is policed:

I remember ... I'd not been diagnosed very long, consequently I hadn't told many people ... I was in the London (chatroom) or something like that and they said “you should be in a bareback

room” or “you should be in the HIV-positive ward”. “What? I’m only talking, I’m not infecting anybody across the airwaves” ... couple of times I’ve had that, very early post-diagnosis, which was kind of scary (FTF02, HIV-positive).

In another example, the interviewee provided an account of online abuse related to his HIV status and appearance:

...you get people that come into a room and harass people ‘cos they’ve got HIV. You get a lot of that. Even the ordinary chatrooms like in the London chatroom you’ll get, you know, there’s a couple of people who are obviously disturbed or that, you know ... you get messages come up in the main chatroom, not personal to you, but they’ll say “fuck off you AIDS cunts” and all this sort of thing or “this person’s got AIDS” or “keep away from him” and things like this, you get all of that sort of thing there so you put yourself up for that when you go in there ... some people just look at the pictures and say “oh you look a bit thin in the face” then as far as they’re concerned you know you’ve got AIDS and that’s it. But you know, yeah I was really harassed a lot last year by this particular guy and everytime I went into a chat room he would start on me... (FTF03, HIV-positive).

These accounts suggest that gay men with HIV see that they are required to keep to themselves and contain the virus. Using e-dating profiles to signal HIV serostatus and preference for anal sex without condoms gives men with HIV a method of preventing HIV transmission. It also provides a way of fulfilling a cultural requirement of containing HIV and pre-empting abusive interactions. However, the accounts provided in this analysis suggest that choosing to have anal sex without condoms converts a requirement of containment into a celebration of autonomy.

Some previous attempts at understanding this practice have employed a simple notion of resistance and rejection of HIV prevention (Crossley 2002). In contrast, the present analysis suggests that gay men with HIV use e-dating to reduce the effects of HIV prejudice linked with their sero-identity (Parker and Aggleton 2003, Herdt 2001) or as Squire has suggested, to challenge and negotiate the meanings and imperatives of sero-identity in social interaction (2000). Through e-dating, gay men with HIV have found ways of forming sexual collectivities that help reduce HIV transmission, provide respite from social rejection and that convert the requirement of HIV containment into an expression of autonomy and sexual desire.

#### *Opportunities and challenges for HIV prevention*

The pre-determination of safer sex among e-daters presents several opportunities and challenges for HIV prevention. The deliberate pre-planning of safer sex helps reinforce and extend safer sex among gay men. In addition, some gay men with HIV use this method to minimize HIV transmission to an uninfected person and to moderate social and sexual rejection related to their serostatus.

In the next example, the interviewee describes how a sexual encounter was organized via the Internet, with an explicit arrangement about who would use a condom with whom:

Interviewee: Well it was an arrangement on the Internet ... we finally agreed to meet a London guy ... he was comfortable to go ahead with the scene ... and so we went back to my place and the three of us played. H— [the interviewee’s boyfriend] fucked me without a condom and fucked the other guy with a condom ... we had pre-arranged that it would be safe sex ... I know that there is a whole vanilla scene that is more complicated. I find on the S&M scene we have got one lot of people who are deliberately programming it for a successful sessions (CFTF17, HIV-positive).

This example reveals a deliberate and explicit arrangement of safer sex managed in online communication. The discussion of whether or not to use a condom reflects a logic of HIV prevention that refers to HIV serostatus. Importantly, condom use also reflects the different preferences of the partners. E-dating may also be favoured by gay men with HIV because it allows them to give information about their HIV serostatus while minimizing the negative impact of rejection:

It's always difficult when you sort of type out that message. And again that's another reason for using the net. Because if you are typing out a message you're not actually looking into somebody's eyes, his face or whatever to see "Aaagh" or whatever his reaction is. They can just send back a pre-recorded text "thanks, but no thanks. I don't think there's much hope", being polite, or they can just not respond. Just say "OK you've messaged me, I like this, this is what you have to know". Either come back to me if that is not a problem or just don't message me again if it is. 'Ehm very, very seldom do people say "why didn't you mention it in the first place?"' (FTF02, HIV-positive).

E-dating therefore allows gay men with HIV to control how they present themselves to other e-daters, therefore avoiding embarrassing or hurtful interaction. In a sense, gay men with HIV use e-dating to pre-empt the impact of their HIV serostatus on future offline social and sexual interaction. These practices comprise a form of reflexivity that mobilizes the social properties of online communication in ways that furthers autonomy while reducing the interconnected risks of HIV transmission and prejudice.

However, some gay men with HIV provided accounts of negotiation for anal sex without condoms where the HIV status of the other e-dater was negative or not known:

MD: Do you know what his status was HIV-wise?

Interviewee: Negative ... he was like well you know don't worry about that ... he said: "It is my choice. I understand the risks and this is what I want to do this is the kind of sex I want". So I said: "Fine" (CFTF19, HIV-positive).

No he didn't talk about his status but acknowledged that he was happy that I was HIV-positive and didn't want to have sex with a condom so assuming that he either was and didn't want to discuss it or wanted to play a dangerous game with himself, either way, his choice (CFTF03, HIV-positive).

In both these accounts, the free choice of the other is an important theme (Adam 2005). In situations of anal sex without condoms between a positive and negative man, responsibility for safer sex is managed in connection with the negative partner's free choice. This assumption of their sexual partners as knowing and free is important as it helps gay men with HIV avoid a sense of blame that might arise in the sexual encounter.

Some gay men who do not (openly) identify as HIV-positive choose to have anal sex without condoms. No-one we interviewed who believed they were HIV-negative reported having anal sex without condoms with a partner they knew to be HIV-positive. But two men we interviewed were not sure of their HIV serostatus: one had never been tested, the other's most recent HIV test result was negative. And both reported having anal sex without condoms with partners they knew to be HIV-positive. Both interviewees also reported that they expected to find they were HIV-positive at some stage in the future. These situations of sero-discordant risky sex create questions about the joint action of gay men with HIV *and* their partners who do not know their own HIV status. Gay men with HIV are a definable population accessible, for example, through clinics. But gay men who do not know their status and who have risky sex do not form a readily identifiable group because their risk identity is uncertain. In a sense, such men have a "liminal" sero-identity,

neither HIV-positive nor HIV-negative, but implied by the unprotected sex they have had with HIV-positive men. Such men may be unwilling to make themselves known for HIV prevention or research.

It is also clear that not all gay men with HIV choose to be explicit about their serostatus. In this example, the interviewee expresses his reluctance to discuss his HIV status and the fear of sexual rejection:

<MD> Does yr profile say that u r HIV-pos?

<Interviewee> No.

<MD> Why do you choose not to?

<Interviewee> But im hoping a date with a guy who i met on chat will meet me on Saturday who i admitted to being HIV will meet me/

<Interviewee> Just do not want to.

<MD> Can u expand?

<Interviewee> Just have not wanted to be open to all on the net (OLC10, HIV-positive).

This extract provides another example of the identity management practices that are possible in e-dating. For some gay men with HIV, one possibility in e-dating is being open about their own status. But it seems that others prefer to be less open. E-dating therefore provides different options for managing HIV-positive serostatus identity online.

## Discussion

This research has described how gay men living in London use the Internet to meet sexual partners and the implications for HIV transmission. In particular we identified how some gay men pre-determine safer sex in their communication for e-dating. HIV serostatus was also shown to have importance for this practice. Some gay men with HIV use e-dating to filter partners of the same status for anal sex without condoms. We argue that this practice allows gay men with HIV to reduce the risk of HIV transmission, to avoid abuse and sexual rejection and to deal with the social expectation of containing the spread of HIV.

Our account of e-dating challenges some of the assumptions that underpin current research around HIV risk and the Internet (Cooper *et al.* 1999, Parsons 2005) where risk is associated with apparently anonymous online communication. Based on our grounded analysis, we argue that identity management is vital to the practice of e-dating where the strategic depiction of aspects of the desiring/desirable self appears to be the underlying logic. It seems that social and sexual online connections, particularly those that are going to lead to satisfactory offline engagements, require the negotiation of identity. In particular, the anonymous potential of the Internet allows gay men with HIV to reveal their HIV serostatus in a manner that suits them. Instead of the sexual actor freed from the constraints of reality into anonymous cyberspace, e-dating is reflexively used to manage the viral and social risks of HIV. While anonymity has strategic value, identity, and particularly sero-identity, is important. We offer a depiction that contrasts with representations of barebacking as irresponsible behaviour (Crossley 2002). Some gay men with HIV do seek out HIV-positive partners for anal sex without condoms. But this practice resists, not HIV prevention, but the prejudice and moral judgements attached to HIV-positive serostatus. Positive-to-positive barebacking pre-empts the containment of HIV required of HIV-positive gay men. Practices of this kind do not undermine HIV prevention. On the contrary, they support it since they reduce the risk of HIV transmission to an uninfected person

although the risk of other STIs remains for positive men themselves. They also provide ways of avoiding prejudice and further the agency of gay men with HIV, satisfying personal needs to prevent HIV infections. Some gay men with HIV report another kind of barebacking with men who are negative, men who do not know or are uncertain about their status, or who are unwilling to disclose. This kind of barebacking was depicted in terms of choice and free agency on the part of the “indeterminate” or HIV-negative other. These perspectives therefore suggest that barebacking is situated and heterogeneous, structured by the circumstances of communication of serostatus and different HIV prevention expectations.

Our analysis addresses some of the current concerns for HIV prevention. In particular, it sheds light on why some gay men with HIV use e-dating to find other positive partners for anal sex without condoms. It also raises questions for HIV prevention about sero-discordant anal sex without condoms. Some HIV prevention strategies focus on the responsibilities of gay men with HIV (Janssen *et al.* 2001) while others argue that effective HIV prevention requires shared responsibility (Dodds *et al.* 2004, Summerside and Davis 2002). For gay men with HIV, an online profile that is explicit about their serostatus is a way of inscribing one’s responsibilities to others, a way of reducing uncertainty in the world of e-dating and HIV prevention. We suggest that future forms of HIV prevention could usefully focus on men who are uncertain of their status and who have unprotected sex with HIV-positive men.

The picture we have provided of e-dating, sexual risk and HIV prevention grounded in the accounts of London gay men marks an important advance. We have found that the Internet is valued by gay men, particularly men with HIV, because it helps them to manage their identity and extend personal control over sexual interaction. Our research suggests that gay men have developed e-dating practices that help them to manage safer sex and sero-identity. Future HIV prevention campaigns could build on the benefits of e-dating and address some of its drawbacks. Interventions should focus on the emergence of sexual networks based on sero-identity, their connection with HIV stigma and prejudice, and the different expectations attached to HIV-positive, HIV-negative and “status-unsure” identities.

## Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Medical Research Council (grant number GO 100159). The authors would like to thank Gaydar, gay.com, the Royal Free Hampstead NHS Trust Hospital, Barts and The London NHS Trust Hospital, central London gyms as well as all the men who agreed to be interviewed for their participation and support. We would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments.

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## Résumé

L'accès à Internet s'est élargi de façon considérable ces dix dernières années, de même que son utilisation pour des rencontres sexuelles (e-dating), en particulier par les hommes gay. De juin 2002 à janvier 2004, 128 hommes gay/bisexuels vivant à Londres ont été interrogés un à un sur leurs expériences en matière d'e-dating, de risque sexuel et de prévention du VIH. Ils avaient été recrutés à la fois en ligne (via Internet) et hors ligne (dans des centres de soins et dans la communauté) ; 32 d'entre eux étaient séropositifs, 59 étaient séronégatifs et 13 autres n'avaient jamais été testés pour le VIH. Un résultat clé est que aussi bien l'identité que l'anonymat sont essentiels au e-dating. A travers un procédé de filtrage et de séro-triage, les hommes séropositifs peuvent rencontrer d'autres hommes séropositifs pour pratiquer le sexe anal sans préservatif. Si cette pratique ne représente pas de risque de transmission du VIH pour une personne déjà infectée, elle a des implications pour la transmission potentielle d'autres IST telles que la syphilis et la LGV. A travers l'e-dating, les hommes séropositifs peuvent également éviter les violences, les discriminations et le rejet. Nos résultats n'étaient pas la théorie selon laquelle l'attraction pour l'e-dating résulte de sa garantie d'un anonymat parfait. Nous avons découvert que l'expression progressive de l'identité est vitale pour l'e-dating chez les gays. Les campagnes de prévention du VIH via Internet doivent prendre en compte les différentes manières dont les gays gèrent les caractéristiques de leur identité en ligne, par processus d'auto-dévoilement.

## Resumen

El acceso a Internet ha aumentado de manera espectacular en la última década y este aumento también se ha visto en su uso para encontrarse con compañeros sexuales (citas por Internet), especialmente entre homosexuales masculinos. Entre junio de 2002 y enero de 2004, 128 hombres gays/bisexuales que viven en Londres fueron entrevistados personalmente sobre sus experiencias de citas por Internet, el riesgo sexual y la prevención de VIH. Se captaron hombres en Internet y en clínicas y la comunidad; 32 hombres eran seropositivos, 59 seronegativos, y 13 nunca se habían hecho la prueba del sida. Los resultados indican que la identidad y el anonimato son vitales para las citas por Internet. A través de un proceso de filtración en línea y clasificación seropositiva, los hombres con VIH pueden encontrarse con otros en su misma condición para tener relaciones anales sin usar preservativos. Aunque esto no suponga un riesgo para la transmisión del VIH en una

persona no infectada, tiene implicaciones para el posible contagio de otras enfermedades de transmisión sexual como la sífilis o el linfogranuloma venéreo (LGV). Mediante las citas por Internet, los hombres homosexuales seropositivos pueden evitar abusos, discriminación o rechazo sexual. Nuestros resultados no respaldan la sugerencia de que lo atractivo de las citas por Internet es que garantiza el anonimato absoluto. Hallamos que la expresión gradual de identidad es de vital importancia para las citas por Internet entre los homosexuales. En las campañas de prevención del sida por Internet deben tenerse en cuenta los diferentes métodos en que los homosexuales adoptan de forma reflexiva aspectos de su identidad en línea.