

The process of seeking sex partners online and implications for STD/HIV prevention

S. SALYERS BULL,¹ M. MCFARLANE,² L. LLOYD³ & C. RIETMEIJER³

¹Colorado Health Outcomes Program, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, ²Centers for Disease Control and Prevention & ³Denver Public Health Department, Denver Health and Hospital Authority, Colorado, USA

Abstract *Research has shown that online sex-seeking among men who have sex with men (MSM) is related to elevated risk for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV infection; however, the process of seeking sex online is not well understood. It is important to understand the process of seeking sex partners in order to determine the best method for reaching MSM at high risk for infection. We report on baseline data from the Smart Sex Quest, an Internet-based STD prevention intervention targeting MSM (n = 1,776, 79% white, mean age = 33 years). Results indicate that older, white, college-educated men solicited sex partners on AOL, whereas Gay.com was a more frequent choice among younger men. Yahoo was named as a solicitation site more frequently by those with no college education, as were 'bareback' websites devoted to facilitating anal sex without the use of condoms. Following online solicitation, men tended to meet in public restrooms (86%), partners' homes (74%) and their own home (57%). Though results are limited by the self-selected nature of the sample, the data have important implications for online outreach, study recruitment and intervention.*

Introduction

Several articles have been published about the relationship between seeking sex partners on the Internet and elevated risk for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV or elevated STD/HIV risk behaviors (Ashton *et al.*, 2003; Bull *et al.*, 2001; Kim *et al.*, 2001; McFarlane *et al.*, 2000; Wang & Ross, 2002). In response, researchers have called for the use of the Internet itself as a medium to share information about STD prevention (Bull *et al.*, 2001; Halkitis & Parsons, 2003).

While there have been papers published on the efficacy of Internet-based health intervention trials, so far these are limited to areas outside STD prevention (Clarke *et al.*, 2002; Flatley-Brennan, 1998; Gustafson *et al.*, 1999; Lorig *et al.*, 2002; Oenema *et al.*, 2001; Patten, 2003; Winzelberg *et al.*, 2000). In this paper we report on data from the Smart Sex Quest, an Internet-based STD prevention intervention targeting men who have sex with men

Address for correspondence: Sheana Bull, PhD, MPH, Associate Professor, Colorado Health Outcomes Program, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, PO Box 6508, Mail Stop f-443, Aurora, CO 80045-0508, USA. Tel: +1 (303) 724 1238; Fax: +1 (303) 724 1839; E-mail: sheana.bull@uchsc.edu

(MSM). Previously presented preliminary data from this study showed substantial methodological problems related to participant retention—more so than those seen on other Internet-based health interventions (Bull *et al.*, 2003). This evidence suggests that MSM who seek partners online may be willing to complete a survey one time, but may not be interested in follow-up investigations or interventions at the same time they are engaged in sex partner solicitation (Bull *et al.*, in preparation).

Data from research on the social context of STD risk and the process of sex partner seeking in public venues can offer helpful insight into the process of risk taking and ideas for appropriate locations to engage in interventions (Binson *et al.*, 2001; Somlai *et al.*, 2001). Somlai and colleagues (2001) described the social ecological environment where sex partner seeking among MSM occurs, and showed that outreach workers can effectively communicate with MSM about safer sex in these environments. In a study of MSM frequenting sex venues and bathhouses, Binson *et al.* (2001) uncovered important differences in risk behaviors in bathhouses versus other sex venues and suggested that interventions should occur in bathhouses where the majority of those engaging in high risk behaviors can be found.

Similar information on the process of sex partner seeking and where we can find and engage with MSM online is scarce in the peer-reviewed literature. Kim *et al.* (2001) showed evidence that MSM with sex partners first met over the Internet are at higher risk but offered no specifics as to how and where partners are solicited. In one of the earliest descriptions of online sex partner seeking, the authors only described how the process occurs in chat-rooms and on bulletin boards (Bull & McFarlane, 2000). Researchers in London were able to give us more detail on the process of sex partner seeking by offering data on participant access to the Internet and what types of things men did online (e.g. sex partner seeking, seeking safer sex, seeking HIV testing) (Elford *et al.*, 2001). Other researchers, who examined the risks youth face for being sexually solicited by others when online, demonstrated proportions of their sample that went into chat-rooms, talked to strangers online and used the Internet at other people's houses (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001).

What these studies have not generated is an understanding of the process of sex partner solicitation online among MSM. This is needed to generate ideas for how to best develop Internet-based STD prevention interventions. In this paper, we present baseline data collected for an intervention study. We aim to describe the process of sex partner seeking in an effort to generate such ideas.

Methods

Smart Sex Quest was the first exclusively Internet-based STD prevention intervention for MSM. Men were recruited to participate in multiple ways. We went to MSM chat-rooms online and 'lurked', i.e. posted a screen name and profile and waited for people to either click on a link to the study in our profile or send us an instant message (IM) requesting more information about the study. We paid for banner advertisements on websites and in print media targeting MSM. We also produced and distributed flyers with information about the study to health departments and social service agencies in all 50 states. We provided links to the site on several STD and HIV prevention organization websites, and we sent messages to list serves targeting MSM to recruit participants. The intervention was developed using a peer-education and role model story model similar to that used in the AIDS Community Demonstration Projects (CDC AIDS Community Demonstration Projects Research Group, 1999). Details on the intervention for this study are available elsewhere (Bull *et al.*, 2004).

Men self-selected to participate in the study by navigating to the study link on their own and enrolling once at the study site. Men aged 18 or older who spoke English and lived in the US were eligible to participate. Being identified as gay or having sex with exclusively men was not an eligibility criteria; however, we did exclude men who indicated they only had sex with women. Thus, we have MSM and MSM/W (men who have sex with men and women) in the study sample.

Participants were asked to complete a baseline risk assessment survey online, covering demographics, sexual risk behaviors and Internet partner seeking behaviors. Smart Sex Quest was confidential—we only collected e-mail addresses for each participant, and no other personally identifying data. The AMC Cancer Research Center and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Institutional Review Boards initially approved the Smart Sex Quest study and then the Colorado Multiple Institutional Review Board (COMIRB) re-approved the study when the Principal Investigator moved to a new institution.

Baseline measures used in the analysis for this paper include demographics—we asked men to tell us their race/ethnicity—this question was programmed to allow men to check more than one category, and we combined both race and ethnicity in the same question. We asked men to tell us their education level, i.e. less than high school, high school or GED (general education diploma) graduate, some college or technical school, college graduate or post graduate. We also asked men to tell us their age, employment status, income and whether they had health insurance.

We asked men to identify sexual risk behaviors such as condom use at last sex, number of Internet partners (i.e. partners met through the Internet) in their lifetime and over 12 months, and number of non-Internet partners (i.e. partners first met somewhere other than the Internet). We asked whether current Internet and non-Internet partners were main or non-main partners. The most relevant sexual risk behavior variables considered in the analyses presented here are whether they had sex with a man they first met online; and whether their Internet and Non-Internet partners were exclusively male or both male and female.

To document the process of sex partner seeking, we asked men to first identify ways in which they looked for partners. We created a multiple choice list of options, and asked men to check all that applied—if they found their partners through chat-rooms, browsing personal ad profiles for men, or posting or responding to electronic bulletin board ads. We also allowed men to indicate 'other' and describe other methods used to meet sex partners.

We then asked men to identify how often they went online seeking sex partners, i.e. monthly or less often; more than once a month but less than once a week; one or two times each week; three to six times each week; or daily or multiple times each day. We also asked men to tell us what sites they would use to meet men. We offered a list of what we had observed to be popular sex-seeking sites, and asked them to 'check all that apply'. In addition, we also allowed men to indicate 'other' and name other sites used to meet sex partners.

We wanted to know where men go to have sex with their partners once they have solicited them online. As with the other process variables described here, we offered a list of locations (e.g. their home, my home, a public park or other outdoor location; a rest stop or public bathroom, etc.) and asked them to 'check all that apply', and also provided an 'other' category so men could identify additional locations.

The study began in January 2002 and baseline enrollment continued through September 30 2003, at which time we had 3,625 persons registered at the site (meaning they clicked on a 'start here' button from the home page and were taken to a page with an electronic informed consent). Of these, there were 3,062 eligible to participate in the study; 1,776 enrolled and completed the baseline risk assessment that we are reporting on here. The remaining 1,286 men left the site after registering but before completing a baseline risk assessment.

Data were analyzed by generating descriptive statistics, i.e. frequencies and percentages for each variable of interest. We were interested in differences in the process of sex partner seeking across demographic and sexual risk behavior variables. Because many in the sample identified as white, we created a 'white/non-white' dichotomous variable for comparison. We also compared process of partner seeking by level of education and age. Finally, we created a variable for MSM alone, i.e. men who only had male partners, to compare to men who had both male and female partners, to compare process of partner seeking for MSM to MSM/W. Comparisons were made using chi-square analyses and *t*-test where appropriate and results are presented at multiple levels of significance, i.e. **p* < 0.05, ***p* < 0.01, and ****p* < 0.001.

Results

Demographic characteristics of the 1,776 baseline participants are shown in Table 1. Participants were well educated, most were employed, had health insurance and were white. Almost a quarter of the sample made over \$50,000 annually. When we examined differences in these characteristics by age and race/ethnicity of participants, we saw some interesting differences. White men were significantly more likely than non-white men (African American, Hispanic/Latino and other men) to be employed and to make more than \$50,000 annually. Men under age 29 were significantly less likely to be employed, and also less likely to be earning \$50,000 or more annually. Almost a quarter of the men (22.5%) reported they had a history of STD infection, and 6.8% indicated they were HIV infected.

We asked men to tell us if they ever had sex with a person they first met online, and 1,714 (97%) said they had. In Table 2, we show the different processes used by men in partner seeking across multiple groups: white versus non-white; those with a college education versus those without; those aged 29 and younger versus those aged 30 and older; those who have

Table 1. *Demographics of participants at baseline, N = 1,776*

Characteristic	%
Mean age	32.6
<i>Education*</i>	
<High school	2.8
High school graduate or GED	13.6
AA degree, some college or technical school	41.2
College graduate or post graduate education	39.5
Employed	79.0
Health insurance	74.2
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>	
White	78.2
African American	6.6
Hispanic/Latino	10.9
Other	5.4
<i>Income*</i>	
<\$10,000	10.3
\$10–20,000	11.2
\$21–30,000	15.5
\$31–40,000	13.2
\$40,000+	34.9

*2.8% of men refused to indicate their level of education and 15% refused to indicate income.

Table 2. Differences in sex partner seeking process by selected demographic and behavioral characteristics

Process	Race		Education		Age		MSM		Total
	White	Non-white	Completed college	Not completed college	<30	30+	MSM	MSM/W	
Has had sex with partner first met on Internet+	94.3	92.8	94.6	93.6	94.3	93.8	100.0***	81.3	83.7 (1714)
<i>Of those with Internet partners:</i>									
Found partner through chat	79.3***	63.9	77.2	75.2	77.6	75.0	91.6**	87.9	90.7
Found partner browsing profiles	57.1***	43.6	55.4	53.5	55.0	53.7	65.9	60.9	64.7
Found partner through bulletin board	27.4**	21.7	29.0	24.2**	24.4	27.5*	31.8	29.3	31.2
Looks for partners > once each week	36.7	31.4	85.0	86.0	82.5	88.2**	85.8***	65.8	85.8
Look for partner on AOL	62.9***	50.0	59.8	60.6	56.1	63.4***	72.4	71.2	71.8
Look for partner on Gay.com	60.1***	43.6	58.0	55.6	61.1	53.4***	71.5***	55.6	67.6
Look for partner on Yahoo	23.3	20.5	20.9	24.0*	23.5	22.2	26.2	30.2	27.0
Look for partner on Cruising for Sex.com	23.1***	13.9	25.3**	18.3	16.6	24.7***	26.2	22.5	25.2
Look for partner on bareback site	13.5	10.9	10.9	14.3*	10.8	14.6**	16.9***	10.6	15.4
Meet partner in public restroom	77.9***	65.6	77.9	73.5*	74.1	76.3	89.2	92.1	86.0
Meet partner at their house	67.5***	56.4	66.7	64.1	66.6	64.1	77.4	78.8	74.3
Meet partner at my house	53.0***	38.4	51.4	49.0	47.7	50.2	63.8***	46.9	57.0
Meet partner at coffee shop or restaurant	46.1***	33.4	47.3**	40.8	46.0*	41.6	53.9***	45.9	49.6
Meet partner at bar	29.5***	18.1	24.5	28.9**	26.6	27.5	35.3***	23.2	30.9

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ for whites versus non-whites; college versus no college; aged 29 and younger versus 30 and older; MSM versus MSM/W. Proportions add to more than 100% in several categories because they are not mutually exclusive.

only male partners (MSM) compared to those who have sex with men and women (MSM/W); and the prevalence of each process for the total sample. The only differences among groups related to having sex with Internet partners were among MSM versus MSM/W—but note that almost all MSM reported having sought sex partners online.

Almost all men had experience of finding a sex partner through a chat-room and this process was used significantly more often by white than non-white men and by MSM than MSM/W. Many men found partners through browsing profiles, and white men did this more often than non-whites. Less than one-third of the men indicated they looked for partners on electronic bulletin boards, although this was more popular among whites than non-whites, men with less education than those with more, and men 30 and older compared to men under 30.

Men indicated that seeking sex partners was a common occupation; 85.8% said they did so at least once a week. MSM sought partners more frequently than MSM/W, as did older versus younger men.

Men named America On Line (AOL) as the most commonly accessed site for sex partner solicitation, and more white than non-white men and older than younger men named this site. Sex partner solicitation also happened on Gay.com more prevalently among whites versus non-whites, MSM versus MSM/W and older versus younger men. Yahoo was named as a sex partner solicitation site for just over a quarter of the sample and was more frequently named by those with no college education compared to those with college education and for MSM/W than MSM. Cruising for Sex.com was named as a solicitation site for a quarter of the men, more frequently named by whites than non-whites and older than younger men. Several ‘bareback’ sites, i.e. sites explicitly devoted to facilitating anal sex without condoms, were named by men, with more non-college educated men than college educated, more MSM than MSM/W and more older than younger men frequenting these sites. More MSM/W than MSM named a site called ‘Adult Friend Finder’ as a place to solicit partners.

We asked men to tell us where they met their sex partners in person after meeting online. The most popular place cited for meeting was a public restroom. More whites than non-whites named public restrooms as a site to meet sex partners. Meeting partners at the partners’ homes was cited by almost three-quarters of the men and more frequently by whites than non-whites. Meeting partners at participants’ homes was also common, and more so among whites than non-whites and MSM than MSM/W. Meeting in coffee shops was more common among college educated than non-college educated, whites than non-whites and MSM than MSM/W. Finally, more whites than non-whites, those with no college education compared to the college educated and MSM than MSM/W met in bars.

Discussion

We have demonstrated important differences between different segments of MSM as to where on the Internet they recruit sex partners and where (in the real world) they meet to have sex. Therefore, dependent on the sub-population of MSM (young versus older, white versus non-white, MSM versus MSM/W), this information can be very helpful in considering how to develop and target both online and offline HIV/STD prevention interventions.

Interventions online

We know of no published studies demonstrating the efficacy of an online intervention for STD/HIV prevention, although some provisional data from Smart Sex Quest related

to outcomes are forthcoming (Bull *et al.*, 2004). We also anticipate that online STD/HIV prevention interventions are likely to proliferate, and may very well outpace online evaluations of efficacy. The evidence we present here regarding the proportion of men who find sex partners through chat-rooms (91% of the sample) suggests that chat-rooms are a good place to try intervention, for example through active participation by intervention staff in the chat-room. However, evidence from other work suggests that men may resist being actively recruited in chat-rooms (Bull *et al.*, 2001) and that health education intervention in chat-rooms will require creative adaptation to chat-room norms. Community groups have tried some innovative ways to intervene in chat-rooms by designing chat interventions that use the tone and language preferred by chatters, for example, 'I'd like to put the condom on you with my mouth' or 'I'm getting hot thinking about sliding a condom on' (Southern Colorado AIDS Project: personal communication). Efforts such as these may have promise, but do require evaluation.

Another strategy that could take advantage of the attention of sex partner seeking men in chat-rooms would be the development of 'environmental' interventions; for example, in the form of compelling banners posted online that, when clicked on, may lead to prevention websites. While it may make sense to post such ads in chat-rooms themselves, evidence from AOL suggests this strategy may not be productive; AOL indicates they have substantially lower 'click-through' rates (i.e. the proportion of people who actually click on a banner after being exposed to it) in chat-rooms compared to other locations online (e.g. <0.01% click through rate in chat-rooms compared to 0.05–0.09% in other locations, such as on search engine pages) (personal communication, AOL advertising). In addition, banner ads can be very expensive (e.g. \$10,000 per month) and such high costs for participant recruitment may be prohibitive.

Knowing that sex partner seeking is happening on specific websites, and knowing that some websites are highly popular for this activity should give us some leverage to work with Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to facilitate delivery and evaluation of health education online. We can advocate for free or reduced-cost advertising (similar to the public service announcement mechanism on television) or consider ways to develop public–private partnerships for STD/HIV prevention online. We should also consider developing relationships with ISPs to facilitate evaluation of online interventions. Our findings showed that AOL and Gay.com were similarly popular, although MSM/W used Gay.com significantly less frequently than MSM. These data showed that MSM/W more often use 'Adult Friend Finder'—a site targeting both heterosexual and homosexual men and women—and Yahoo to find men; this may suggest that the sites not explicitly targeting gay men may hold appeal for MSM/W. Younger men preferred AOL and Cruising for Sex to Gay.com, while Gay.com was more popular among older MSM. AOL, Gay.com and Cruising for Sex were all more popular among white MSM than among non-white MSM. As expected, bareback sites were almost twice as likely to be frequented by men who only had sex with other men than by MSM/W. Use of bareback sites for partner solicitation was more frequently reported by younger MSM and by MSM who had not completed a college degree. These are helpful data because they also underscore that we can target interventions, e.g. those developed for younger men could be disseminated more widely on sites where younger men solicit.

Interventions offline

Interestingly, the most frequently cited place to have a sexual encounter with an Internet partner were public restrooms, particularly by MSM/W, followed by the partner's house. Men who only had sex with men reported more frequently than MSM/W that they met at their own

house, or in coffee shops or restaurants. We could potentially use the Internet to establish which public locations are frequented for meeting online partners and increase STD/HIV prevention interventions in those areas, e.g. 'social marketing' interventions, including posters and flyers as well as placement of condoms or condom vending machines.

There are important caveats to our study. While we have attempted to recruit in many different Internet venues and thus have tried to cast our net as widely as possible, our sample is a self-selected convenience sample. While we made an effort to recruit participants from non-white locations online, our results are from a largely white sample, so the differences between white and non-white may be more a function of having so many white men in the sample. This leads us to consider that some of the other differences (i.e. MSM versus MSM/W or differences between younger and older men) may be more meaningful and helpful when considering the utility of our findings.

Another caveat to consider related to self-selection is that we cannot identify the prevalence of risk or partner seeking behaviors across websites. To do this, we would have to have randomly selected websites from a known sample of sites where MSM solicit partners. As of today, we do not have accurate and up to date information on sex partner seeking websites to accomplish this.

With those caveats in mind, these data are important for multiple reasons. They illustrate a 'cross-over' risk between gay men and the heterosexual community. While these data show that a higher proportion of MSM have had online sex partners and they seek sex partners more frequently than MSM/W, we should consider the evidence that over 80% of MSM/W have had sex with a partner first met online and well over half (65%) seek partners more than once each week. This raises important epidemiologic questions about whether and how much STD/HIV risk is increased for heterosexual women who have sex with MSM.

These data have given us some insight not only into the process of sex partner seeking, but more importantly, alternatives and strategies for utilizing the Internet to reduce HIV/STD risk.

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