

The use of the Internet by gay and bisexual male escorts: sex workers as sex educators

J. T. PARSONS,^{1,2,3} J. A. KOKEN^{2,3} & D. S. BIMBI^{2,3}

¹Hunter College of the City University of New York, ²Graduate Center of the City University of New York & ³Center for HIV/AIDS Educational Studies and Training (CHEST), USA

Abstract *While prior studies have targeted street-based male sex workers as potential vectors of disease transmission, the number of men who work independently through Internet chat-rooms and other online endeavors has steadily increased. It is likely that these men differ substantially from their street-based counterparts in terms of sexual risk behaviors with their clients. The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which the Internet has impacted the work of male escorts and their sexual practices with clients. Semi-structured qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys were administered to 46 such men. Less than half the men reported unprotected anal sex with clients. The qualitative data lend support to this finding, in that the majority talked about refusing any unsafe sex with clients, and many reported taking the extra step of educating their clients about the dangers of risky sex. Some of the escorts described the methods used to incorporate safer sex practices into sessions with their clients. Internet-based male escorts can play an important role as potential sex educators on the front lines of the fight against HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.*

Introduction

While men who are paid for sex are not new as a topic of study, the advent of the AIDS epidemic brought about an increase in research on this population, much of it asserting that male sex workers (MSWs) were ‘vectors of disease transmission’ into the heterosexual community (Gattari & Spizzichino, 1992; Morse *et al.*, 1991). The majority of these studies examined young men who worked on the street, who were often referred to as ‘hustlers’ (Sagarin & Jolly, 1997). These men engage in what some call ‘survival sex’, or the exchange of sexual services for money, drugs, shelter or food. Often these men face violence or not being paid for services rendered due to the limited control over their sexual encounters with clients (Calhoun & Weaver, 1996).

There is evidence that these men remain a group at risk. Recent studies with populations of street-based MSWs have identified high rates of HIV sexual risk behaviors (Williams *et al.*, 2003), drug use (Weber *et al.*, 2001; Williams *et al.*, 2003), HIV prevalence (DeMatteo *et al.*, 1999; Pfeifer & Oliver, 1997; Roy *et al.*, 2000; Weber *et al.*, 2001) and HIV incidence

Address for correspondence: Jeffrey T. Parsons, PhD, Hunter College-CUNY, Department of Psychology, 695 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10021, USA. Tel: +1 (212) 772 5533; Fax: +1 (212) 650 3271; E-mail: Jeffrey.parsons@hunter.cuny.edu

(Roy *et al.*, 2003; Weber *et al.*, 2001). One recent study found that involvement in sex work was strongly associated with both HIV prevalence and incidence among young gay and bisexual men (Weber *et al.*, 2001). Several differences between the sub-sample who reported sex work and the other gay and bisexual men emerged from this study: those with a history of sex work were younger, had lower levels of educational attainment, were more likely to report having unstable housing, were more likely to self identify as bisexual, and were more likely to report a history including incarceration, mental illness, various types of substance abuse and injection drug use. Further, men reporting sex work also reported increased HIV sexual risk practices with their regular and casual sex partners.

However, some issues with data measurement in the Weber *et al.* (2001) study should be considered when interpreting their findings. First, participants were not asked to separately report their sexual risk practices with clients compared to other sexual partners. It is possible that some clients were perceived as 'regular partners' and other clients as 'casual partners'. Thus, it is impossible to evaluate if these MSWs were engaged in unsafe sex with clients, with unpaid sex partners or with both. Further, the researchers failed to assess the venue of their sex work activity (i.e. were they street-based, bar-based, employed by an agency or brothel, or working independently). However, judging from the demographic characteristics of the sex work sub-sample, it is likely that these MSWs were primarily street-based.

While this and other similar studies raise concern about the potential risks faced by MSWs and their clients, a growing body of literature has indicated that most MSWs do, in fact, use condoms during their sessions with clients (Browne & Minichiello, 1996; Estcourt *et al.*, 2000; Estep *et al.*, 1992; Hickson *et al.*, 1994; Joffe & Dockrell, 1995; Minichiello *et al.*, 2000; Overs, 1991; Perkins *et al.*, 1994; Pleak & Meyer-Bahlburg, 1990; Ziersch *et al.*, 2000). Many of these studies have included MSWs from across a variety of venues, rather than relying solely on samples of street-based males involved in sex work. By including men who work through escort agencies, brothels, bar venues and those who provide 'bodywork' (a term usually referring to massage services which include manual stimulation of the client's genitals), researchers have begun to refute the stereotype of the MSW as a 'Typhoid Harry'; or a man with the potential to spread HIV to large numbers of individuals. Instead, some researchers have begun to identify ways in which many of these MSWs work to negotiate safer sex with clients.

Browne and Minichiello (1995) have identified important contextual aspects of commercial sex encounters between men that made the use of condoms a 'natural' part of sex work itself, in that they provide a physical and psychological barrier between the worker and client, and aid the worker in framing the sexual encounter explicitly as *work*. This 'occupational framing' not only institutionalized the practice of condom use, it was also found to give the MSWs a sense of professionalism and self-efficacy.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the sexual practices of a particular type of MSW, male escorts working in a relatively new venue—the Internet. These men were expected to differ from their street-based counterparts in several respects. Their access to computer technology enables the men to work from home, screen clients before meeting them in person, set their own fees and keep all of the profits (unlike men who work through escort agencies, which generally take 50% of the client fee). The status of these escorts as independent entrepreneurs, able to pick and choose their clients and what they do with them, positions them far from MSWs who make contact with clients via the street, and closer to other small business owners and independent contractors (Gaffney, 2003).

In this paper, we focus on the sexual risk practices of these Internet escorts with their male clients. Further, through qualitative analyses, we examined the ways in which male escorts negotiated whether or not commercial sex encounters would involve unsafe sex. We

also explored the ways in which some of the men provided education about safer sex to their male clients. Data regarding the sexual practices of these men with their casual sex partners are reported elsewhere (Bimbi & Parsons, in press; Parsons *et al.*, 2001).

Methods

Participants and procedure

The e-mail addresses of potential participants were identified through America Online user profiles and various male escort websites. An e-mail describing the project was sent to each valid e-mail address ($n = 370$), and men were invited to call to be screened for the study. The e-mails ensured potential participants of the confidential nature of the research study, which was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the research team, as well as a disavowal of any link to law enforcement. A total of 60 phone calls were received, 57 men were scheduled for in-person appointments, and 50 showed up for their appointment.

Men were screened by telephone to determine eligibility (self-identified as a gay or bisexual male, engagement in sex work in the past 90 days and age greater than 18). Individuals who were interested and eligible were then scheduled for data collection. Participants provided informed consent and then completed a qualitative interview. Following the interview, participants completed a self-administered quantitative survey. Each participant received a total of \$75 for participating in the qualitative interview and the quantitative survey. Complete qualitative and quantitative data were obtained for 46 of the participants, representing the sample for this paper.

Materials

Qualitative interview. The questions were asked in a semi-structured format that encouraged participants to elaborate on their thoughts, feelings and experiences. The interview protocol included questions focused on a variety of areas, including limits and boundaries for sex work (i.e. barebacking unsafe sex, sexual practices, etc.), as well as detailed narratives of their most recent sexual experiences with clients and non-paying partners (which could be either their current primary partner or a casual partner). All interviews were conducted in a private, one-on-one setting by trained male interviewers and took from 45 to 75 minutes to complete. Interviews were audio-recorded, sent to an independent firm for transcription and subsequently verified for accuracy by a member of the research team. All identifying details were removed from transcripts to protect participants' privacy.

Quantitative survey. Following the interview, participants completed a self-administered quantitative survey. Participants were asked to self-report their age, race/ethnicity, employment status, income, education, HIV status, sexual orientation and if they had a primary partner. Additionally, participants were asked to report length of time working as an escort and the amount of time they spent each week devoted to sex work-related activities such as communicating with potential clients, soliciting clients on the Internet and time spent traveling to and from appointments. Sexual risk behaviors were assessed by asking participants to indicate the frequency of unprotected receptive and insertive anal and oral intercourse (both with and without ejaculation) during the past three months. Participants reported these frequencies separately for work-related and non-work-related sexual partners. Prior to the participant leaving, completed surveys were reviewed for missing data as well as

improbable or conflicting responses. Participants were asked to provide missing data or clarify responses, as needed.

Analytic strategy

Interviews were organized utilizing a qualitative research software program (QSR NUD-IST), which allowed participants' statements concerning their limits and boundaries for sex work, strategies for staying physically and emotionally healthy while maximizing profit, as well as narratives on their experiences negotiating safer sex with clients to be identified and captured within each narrative. Using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), emerging themes and patterns were noted as they arose from the transcripts. Such themes included 'refuses *all* unsafe sex with clients' and 'educates clients about safe sex'. Excerpts from the interviews for this paper are accompanied by the participant's ID number.

Results

Descriptive results

The mean age of the participants was 31.76 (SD = 6.50, range = 22–47). The majority of participants identified as white, gay-identified and reported at least some college education (see Table 1). The majority reported being HIV-negative ($n = 40$, 80%), 16% ($n = 8$) reported being HIV-positive. Two of the men (4%) had not been tested for HIV at the time of data collection. Twenty-one (46%) of the men reported a history of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) other than HIV.

More than a third of the sample (37%, $n = 17$) reported currently having a male primary partner, while none of the men reported having female primary partners. Fourteen of the 17 men in relationships reported having disclosed their sex work to their partners. In the past three months, the men reported engaging in sexual activity with an average of 45 (SD = 41, median = 35) work-related and 25 (SD = 52, median = 15) non-work-related sexual partners.

The average length of time men reported working as escorts was three years (SD = 5), with a range from three weeks to 25 years. Half of the men ($n = 23$) reported spending at least 12 hours a week escorting or performing escorting-related activities (such as answering phone

Table 1. *Participant demographics (N = 46)*

	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Sexual orientation		
Homosexual/gay	38	82.6
Bisexual	8	17.4
Ethnicity		
African American	5	10.9
Asian/Pacific Islander	3	6.5
Caucasian/European American	31	67.4
Latino	7	15.2
Education		
High school or less	2	4.3
Some college	14	30.4
Bachelor's degree	21	45.7
Graduate coursework/degree	9	19.6

calls or communicating with potential clients online); 26% ($n = 12$) reported spending more than 20 hours a week escorting and could be considered full-time or nearly full-time MSWs. However, all men (including those we might classify as full-time MSWs) did report non-sex work sources of income, with the median income ranging from \$10,000 to \$19,999. The median income range reported from sex work was \$20,000 to \$29,999. Most men (70%, $n = 32$) charged at least \$200 an hour, with a range from \$75 for body work to \$250 for services including a wider range of sex behaviors, from manual or oral stimulation of the client to anal sex or specialized fetish activities.

The role of the Internet for sex work

Many of the men commented on the way in which the Internet has had a dramatic role in increasing the opportunities for commercial sex encounters:

Mostly on the Internet, and it's mostly in escort sites, yeah. Or escort bulletin boards. For the different web servers. You know, the AOLs, the Yahoos, and everything else. They all have them. They're all there. I know, the first time I got on the Internet I was just amazed at what was going on—on the Internet. It was like, was ninety percent of the Internet gay? [laughs] It's like if all the gay people pulled out of the Internet, the whole thing would collapse (#154).

Although all of the escorts in the study used the Internet to either advertise or solicit clients, some also used other methods, such as ads in gay publications or magazines, and some also obtained clients referred by escort agencies. Many of these men, however, commented on the ways in which the clients they obtained via the Internet differed from clients obtained from other methods:

The guys from the computer tend to be a little bit more classy, a little bit more intelligent and very well to do (#146).

Yeah, you get a different clientele. . . . Magazines, you get a lot of people that are drunk or on drugs or high. Here they have this free magazine. They're flipping through the magazine, and they have a cell phone and they're calling you. And they're fucked up. So you get a lot of strange people. As where on the Internet—I mean you can still be screwed up on the Internet, but for the most part, businessmen like to plan their business meetings in advance and have everything set, so when they get there, they make the phone call. They already know, you know, have corresponded in e-mail on there (#132).

Well, there are various ways of advertising. But when I was placing advertising in *Next Magazine*, many of the clients called you up. They wanted you for an hour or so. When I do it off of the web, more and more people want me for more than one hour—two hours, three hours, overnights. Many clients will take me out to dinner and such for the overnights. I get a lot of overnights. . . . Maybe it's because of the way I present myself on the web. When I'm in a chat-room, too, one important aspect of when I am in a chat-room, I may advertise, hey, anyone want to see my web page? And I give the link, and then they can click on it and go there (#108).

Other men discussed additional benefits of Internet-based sex work, including being able to make more money, increased safety and fewer concerns about law enforcement:

I only use the Internet. Because that's where a very large population of gays are. And it's free. I mean, I guess it's free to a degree because I'm already paying for the service—for

the America OnLine service. They get something like a twenty-five million customer base. So it's easy to find clients immediately without having to spend a lot of money in print media, which makes me nervous, because I have friends who cops have come and picked them up from those ads. So I feel much safer having an Internet clientele, because they seem to be a little more savvy, and fluent, educated, and I'm not as worried (#111).

Some of the men reported beginning their sex work careers through other venues, but abandoned these approaches for the more independent-work opportunities afforded by the Internet:

I started out basically at [a gay bar] and the escort agency. So then I did that routine for about two years, but I found that I was not getting along with the guys who run the escort agencies. They're mean and you cannot make your own schedule. A lot of times people call at the most inconvenient times. It's always when you can't do it or don't want to do it or just, you know, whatever. So, but if it's your own ad, you can say no. . . . Then on top of it, you know, not only do you have to go and do the appointment, then you go from the appointment to their office to give them money. So, it's a lot of running around. They take their share and on top of it, all the transportation comes out of your share (#146).

I had been working with agencies for a year and a half and finally just realized that they were not going to get me as much work as I wanted. I decided I didn't have too much time left to work in this business and I wanted to make as much money as I could. I also didn't like certain things about the way they did business (#106).

Actually, I started escorting when I was 18. I wouldn't say I was like a street hustler, but I had like two sugar daddies that I always seen like three times a week, and they gave me money like three times a week. . . . And then, I didn't do it for a long time, and I decided that I wanted to try it again. So, since I was just being nosey, looking at things on the Internet, I decided just to try to advertise on the Internet and see how it would be instead of like in a newspaper or something. And I actually like it (#139).

The new technology has made the oldest profession in the world now the newest profession in the world. Because now, you know, you don't have to go out to a bar and hang out or go on the street. And it's very sort of slick and easy to do. And I think it's—it's appealing to people who want to do it just part-time, and, you know, they don't want to put themselves into dangerous situations, and the Internet's changed that (#131).

Sexual risk and sexual safety with clients

As shown in Table 2, more than half these Internet-based escorts reported practicing safer sex consistently during their encounters with clients, while 39% ($n=18$) reported any form of unprotected anal sex with their clients. Significantly more men reported any unprotected anal sex with their casual partners (44%, $n=20$; $\chi^2(1) = 19.11$, $p < 0.001$). Overall, 50% ($n=23$) of the sample reported not engaging in any unprotected anal sex with any type of partner in the past three months.

Although participants were not asked directly if they engaged in unsafe sex with clients as part of the qualitative interview protocol, the subject of 'barebacking', or intentional unprotected anal intercourse, arose naturally in most of the interviews (87%, $n=40$). This topic was discussed most frequently in response to queries regarding the limits and boundaries

Table 2. *Unprotected sex behaviors with work partners of concordant and discordant/unknown serostatus (N = 46)*

	HIV-negative/untested (<i>n</i> = 40)		HIV-positive (<i>n</i> = 6)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Anal receptive				
Anal receptive, w/ ejaculation with serodiscordant/unknown partners	1	2.5	2	33.3
Anal receptive, no ejaculation with serodiscordant/unknown partners	5	12.5	3	50.0
Anal receptive, w/ ejaculation with seroconcordant partners	2	5.0	0	0.0
Anal receptive, no ejaculation with seroconcordant partners	3	7.5	1	16.7
Anal insertive				
Anal insertive, w/ ejaculation with serodiscordant/unknown partners	4	10.0	1	16.7
Anal insertive, no ejaculation with serodiscordant/unknown partners	9	22.5	3	50.0
Anal insertive, w/ ejaculation with seroconcordant partners	5	12.5	0	0.0
Anal insertive, no ejaculation with seroconcordant partners	7	17.5	1	16.7
Oral receptive				
Oral receptive, w/ ejaculation with serodiscordant/unknown partners	6	15.0	4	66.7
Oral receptive, w/ ejaculation with seroconcordant partners	5	12.5	1	16.7
Oral insertive, w/ ejaculation with serodiscordant/unknown partners	24	60.0	4	66.7
Oral insertive, w/ ejaculation with seroconcordant partners	15		37.5	

the men set in their sessions with clients. Most of the men (80%, *n* = 37) reported receiving requests for unprotected sex ('barebacking') from clients:

Like they'll ask me, will you fuck me without a condom? Either on the phone when you talk to them or when you're with them. And, I'm always shocked when a guy asks you to fuck them bareback. I'm always shocked (#151).

I've had people talk to me online that are only into barebacking and that are HIV-positive, and then I think like what are they talking about? They want to top me, and they're HIV-positive. I'm HIV-negative. And I don't get it, right? So, they're like, 'Well, sooner or later ...' then they say crazy comments: 'Well, sooner or later, you'll wind up catching it if you keep doing what you're doing ...' blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah (#139).

Despite such frequent requests for bareback sex, and overall increases in barebacking being reported among gay and bisexual men (Halkitis & Parsons, 2003; Halkitis *et al.*, 2003; Mansergh *et al.*, 2002; Suarez & Miller, 2001), the vast majority of men in our study (80%, *n* = 32) reported that they did not purposely seek out bareback sex as either a top or a bottom. Among those escorts who did report barebacking or agreeing to unprotected anal sex with

clients ($n=9$), many of them still discussed safer sex issues and HIV status openly with their clients before agreeing to such risk behaviors. As one of the HIV-positive escorts said:

I don't really like to do barebacking. If they insist on it, I will, but I don't—I just don't think it's a safe thing to do, not for my own safety. I am selective doing that. I don't bareback on the bottom. I will bareback top, but again, that's their choice. But I let them know up front that I am positive when they want me to do that. So, you know, I'm advising them at the time. . . . I feel like . . . I would feel badly not telling them that and doing it (#130).

Another participant reported refusing unsafe anal sex with clients in most situations, but did describe one commercial sex encounter in which he briefly engaged in this behavior and then stopped himself due to concerns about sending the message to the client that unsafe anal sex is acceptable:

Actually, he seemed willing to let me not use a condom on him actually. Well, I was on top of him, and I inserted my penis for a second, and I was like, 'Wait a minute, I can't do this.' So I pulled out—and he was, he knew what was happening. He probably would have allowed it. But I said, 'Just got to go get a condom.' He said, 'Okay, yeah.' . . . I suspect he was—that we would have been safe anyway. But again, I knew that if I had unprotected sex with him, I'd feel—or I'd be worried later. And even kind of like, more like, ethically speaking, I don't think it's right to do that. I just think—he would probably wonder about it later and worry about it if I fucked him without a condom. And to fuck someone without a condom is kind of saying that it's okay to have unsafe sex in a way. That's kind of my way of saying—even though he's more at risk than I am—I still feel like a kind of responsibility to say, 'Well, I'm putting a condom on. You should have mentioned that already, but I'm going to do it' (126).

Most participants explicitly refused requests for barebacking or unsafe sex with their clients:

You get a lot of guys who don't want you to use condoms. They'll say, 'I want you to fuck me without a condom and come inside me,' or whatever. I mean, it's just incredible. They just don't care. I just see more risk on their part, but in the calls I get, guys are very unsafe as far as, you know that they're not going to get it from me, but there's going to be somebody out there who's going to come along and do this for them. The thing is they don't care (#143).

I will always have safe sex, and if the client mentions something about unsafe sex—it's not going to happen. It's such a turn-off. I cannot sustain an erection like that. Because it's just, it's like this person is unsafe. . . . I will assume that every client that I have can be HIV-positive. I will never do anything unsafe. I will never take any liquids in my mouth, other than saliva from kissing. . . . I find that with most of the people, there's no discussion. They know what I do and what I don't do. It's all listed on my web page too (#108).

Many times these requests for barebacking and unsafe sex were made by potential clients on the Internet prior to scheduling an in advance of making an appointment:

What I typically do is, I will turn on my computer. I have an automatic answering machine on the computer, and when I get IMs [instant messages], people generally come in and ask certain particular questions like rates, and, you know, like barebacking will

come up. And it's come up frequently—a lot lately, you know. It seems like every other request is for barebacking these days. Seriously. Now, I don't know if that's because of a shortage of people who do it, and these people are kind of desperate, I don't know. But I'm getting a lot of requests for it (#105).

With other participants, however, the requests for barebacking on behalf of clients occurred during the commercial sex encounter, rather than ahead of time. And in some cases, escorts reported that clients used non-verbal methods to try to facilitate unprotected anal sex during the session:

It is a big thing. I'm shocked. I'm really shocked at how—how people are taking risks. It's amazing. Yeah, I do get a lot of requests. Not a lot of requests through e-mail, but when I'm there doing it, people will—they will—I mean, unless I bring it up or get out the condom, they—they would just sit on my dick and without even asking about it (#119).

For Internet-based escorts who refuse to engage in unprotected sex with their male clients, the economic implications of doing so are apparent. Men reported actually losing clients because of their refusal to engage in unprotected anal sex:

Oh, I lose a lot of clients because of that. Lots. I'd say between 30 and 40% maybe. One guy keeps hounding me about it, and, you know, to the point where he wants to fly me to where he lives just for that [bareback sex]. Yeah, that's kind of strange (#132).

Some of the men specifically talked about how the immediate financial reward of complying with a client's request for unsafe sex was not worth the potential long-term costs:

Yeah. Because I know a lot of people out there. They might look at me. Or they wonder what you're doing. 'You're a barebacker. You want me to pay extra for you not to wear a condom.' I'm like, 'No.' I say no because—it's forever, and I don't care how much money you got, it won't last me forever. I don't want to be sick. That's all I got is my health (#158).

They request that I bareback. That's a huge request. I've been in sexual situations where the clients have actually removed my condom and asked me to fuck them raw, and, you know, with the prospect of paying a lot more money to do so. One guy said a thousand bucks if I fucked him raw. . . . But at that point, I just excused myself. I, you know, it was getting out of hand. I stopped the session. I left (#105).

Other participants made it perfectly clear to clients through online chats or via their websites that unsafe sex was not an option under any circumstances:

I mean I only ever have sex with condoms. I mean it's never really an issue. I've had one guy who has tried to convince me that because he's married, but I'm just like—'Oh, please if you're seeing me, you're seeing like probably 50 other escorts. And even if you weren't, even if you were married, and you've never had sex with anyone except your wife for the last 47 years, it's not even remotely a question that we're possibly ever going to do this without a condom' (#134).

Well now a year ago, I decided to make a website, and this has like changed everything. Because how much can I say about a service in a one-inch newspaper ad. It's hard. So I just try to be provocative enough to get them to call me up, because I'm really good on the phone. Now, with the website, my only concern is to get them to the website, because on the website I've got 50 pictures showing absolute everything. It's all safe sex (#137).

Sex workers as sex educators

Perhaps in response to the pressure from clients to engage in risky sexual behaviors, many of the escorts interviewed for this study reported that they went beyond simply refusing unsafe sex with their clients. Some men described engaging clients in discussions about the risks involved in unprotected sex, as well as finding creative ways to incorporate safer sex practices into their sessions. They acted, in effect, as sex educators to the men who paid for their services. Strategies for raising the client's awareness of the risks of bareback sex ranged from the direct confrontation to the highly orchestrated. For the following participant, negotiating safer sex required a very assertive dialogue with a client:

There was one time, actually quite recently, where a guy that I had seen once before—and, you know, we had been safe before—and then he actually, he tried—he tried to fuck me without one [a condom]. He just tried to stick it in before, you know. But, obviously, that wasn't going to happen. So I said, 'Here, take this and put it on.' Because he really just wanted to, you know, ram me. I said, 'Do you want me to leave?' . . . I said, 'No, no, no. You have to put it on.' And he said 'I don't like condoms.' And I said, 'Well, I do.' And he said, 'Well, I'm negative.' I said, 'So am I, and I plan to stay that way. Slip it on.' Those were my exact words. And he said, 'Okay,' then, he did (#113).

Another man specifically talked about how being an independent Internet-based escort has meant that he is more in control of what happens with clients, as compared to when he worked for an agency, and as such he now consistently refuses to have unsafe sex with clients:

When I was younger, I worked out of an escort service, and I would have sex with people, and I used to do things that I didn't want to do. And I hated that. And that made me feel bad about it, and that made me feel like a whore. And so, when I started doing this [advertising on the Internet independently], even though I sort of am a whore, I said, I'm going to arrange so that I don't feel like a whore. So I don't do anything I don't want to do. Anything, I don't want to do. . . . I don't have unsafe sex. They'll say 'Do you do bareback,' and I say 'No.' That's it, you know. That's all they want to hear. But I don't want to lie, and I try and give 'em a little lecture. . . . I'm also thirty-six. I mean, I say over the phone I'm thirty-two, but I'm thirty-six. I think a lot of these young kids, these 21-year-olds, they didn't see the generation before them die of AIDS (#114).

Safer sex practices are not limited to just using a condom for anal sex. Many escorts also discussed the risks involved with oral sex, and how they engage clients who request this:

A guy would ask me if I sucked. And I said, yes, of course. And he said, do you swallow? I said, of course not. He said, oh, I'm looking for someone who will swallow. I said, well I hope you have a hard time finding that because people shouldn't be doing that. And, I'll give you that information in case you don't know that (#106).

In this instance the escort not only refused the client's request for this unsafe practice, he reinforced his refusal with the admonition that 'people shouldn't be doing that'. In this way the escort linked the private, person-to-person exchange with a broader notion of community social norms for safer sex. Another participant expressed similar sentiment, particular in terms of concern about young gay men not taking the risks of HIV infection seriously and feeling a duty to refuse unsafe sex with clients:

I'm going to be forty-one in another month, and it amazes me to talk to twenty-somethings who—they won't—they won't use condoms because, you know, if they get it,

it's—first of all it's an 'old-man's disease'. You know, this amazes me because I have lost so many friends along the way. And an old-man's disease, they mean 30 is old. And that just—that amazes me. And I think to myself, you know, this business about well, you know, 'I can always take drugs now and I'll be fine', that's—it's so wrong. It's so viscerally and, and basically wrong. . . . And all of these kids—and it makes me feel real old to say this—all these kids are playing with their lives. And they don't seem to care, and it bothers me. And whatever I can do, even in my own small little way of saying, 'No, I won't do this', you know, whatever I can do to counteract even the smallest part of this, you know, it's my duty, I think (#136).

Another one of the older, more experienced escorts interviewed for this project displayed both a strong commitment to practicing safety as well as creative ways of doing so:

I have two older brothers and a really great father, and it's just in my nature to always be protective, whatever. So I mean, I'm protecting of these guys [clients], I feel very strongly about safe sex. I usually take the first step to bring up the issue; if you, the sex worker, make the first thing about safe sex, then they know you're serious and responsible, and it's not just about money. It's about your will. You, for a sex worker, to make the first comment about 'it has to be safe' [are] risking losing business, and they know that. So that impresses them, and that makes them know you really are going to be safe. I mean, by the late '80s, I met so many men and didn't remember who the hell they were, calling me up and saying, 'Gee, my God, you know, when you pulled out those gloves and started using condoms or dildos, I thought you were a lunatic. But I realized when, after I left you that, you know, that you had woken me up to safe sex, and I just want to say thank you, you saved my life' (#137).

For this man, the commitment to safer sex practices had a long-term pay-off which can be seen in his longevity in the business, as well as the personal gratification of having taught clients the importance of safety in addition to the 'nuts and bolts' of safer sex. Unfortunately, some of these Internet-based escorts reported that not all clients were receptive to their efforts at teaching safety:

But at that point [after having repeatedly refused bareback sex, even for extra money], I just excused myself. I—you know, it was getting out of hand. I stopped the session. I left. I just—I didn't even follow through with it. Yeah. The guy was really drugged up. And he—it was one of these things where he wasn't going to be happy until he got what he wanted (#105).

This man's unfortunate experience with a client highlights the importance of looking at MSWs as only half of the commercial sex transaction. While the majority of the escorts in this sample practised safer sex consistently, the demands for risky sexual practices from clients may constitute a barrier to doing so.

Discussion

The findings of the present study support prior research (Browne & Minichiello, 1996; Estcourt *et al.*, 2000; Estep *et al.*, 1992; Hickson *et al.*, 1994; Joffe & Dockrell, 1995; Minichiello *et al.*, 2000; Overs, 1991; Perkins *et al.*, 1994; Pleak & Meyer-Bahlburg, 1990; Ziersch *et al.*, 2000) showing that the majority of MSWs report safer sex practices with their clients. Some of the previous studies which argued that MSWs could be considered a

vector of disease transmission to clients and the heterosexual community through bisexual clients in particular are significantly weakened by data measurement issues such as failing to distinguish between sex with paid and unpaid partners (Weber *et al.*, 2001), and sexual practices with and without condom use (Morse *et al.*, 1991). Indeed, the degree to which the majority of men interviewed for this study refused repeated requests from clients, even at the expense of losing potential income, stands in striking contrast to any argument that all male sex workers should be viewed as a threat to public health.

The fact that some Internet-based male escorts go beyond simply refusing unsafe sex and make extra efforts to enlighten and educate clients about the risks associated with this behavior indicates that MSWs should be considered a potential ally to public health education efforts in the fight against the spread of HIV and other STIs. Men can utilize the Internet for instant access to identify and eventually meet with a large number of anonymous sexual partners they might not meet otherwise, increasing their risk for HIV and other STIs (Ashton *et al.*, 2003; Bull & McFarlane, 2000; Klausner *et al.*, 2000; McFarlane *et al.*, 2000; Tashima *et al.*, 2003). A number of recent studies have found that gay and bisexual men who use the Internet to find sex partners also report a higher number of sexual partners (Benotsch *et al.*, 2002; McFarlane *et al.*, 2000), are more likely to have had sex with casual partners (Kim *et al.*, 2001; Ross *et al.*, 2000; Tikkanen & Ross, 2000, 2003) and are more likely to report unprotected sex (Benotsch *et al.*, 2002; Tikkanen & Ross, 2000, 2003). It is possible that, because clients find these male escorts through the use of the Internet, they are the very individuals most in need of education about safer sex. Seen this way, the male escorts who participated in this research are potential educators on the front lines of the battle against the spread of HIV and STIs.

It is likely that the use of the Internet to advertise sex work services is somewhat responsible for the differences between the sample presented here and previous findings drawn from samples of largely street-based MSWs. The men who participated in this study differed from past research on street-based sex workers in level of educational, income, sexual identity (Calhoun & Weaver, 1996; Morse *et al.*, 1991; Weber *et al.*, 2001) and HIV prevalence (DeMatteo *et al.*, 1999; Pfeifer & Oliver, 1997; Roy *et al.*, 2000, 2003). The findings of the present study should not be generalized to men who work on the street and, by the same reasoning, findings from street-based samples should not be generalized to Internet-based escorts, nor to other types of MSWs.

The strategies for practicing safer sex and educating clients about the importance of such should be investigated in future research, especially in regards to other venues of commercial sex (such as brothels or bar-based male sex workers). These strategies could prove useful in public health efforts to educate and support MSWs to maintain their safer sex practices with their clients. Such interventions should involve MSWs themselves in the design and outreach phases in order to ensure that the strategies are presented by peers in an appealing and accessible fashion. Existing web-based programs targeting male sex workers, such as www.hookonline.com, a service developed by and for male sex workers that provides considerable information on HIV/STIs and other health issues, as well as information on legal issues and other concerns of those engaged in commercial sex, serve as outstanding examples of the ways in which the Internet can benefit sex workers and their clients.

Furthermore, the strategies developed by many of the MSWs interviewed for this project might prove useful to other sexually active gay and bisexual men who are not engaged in commercial sex activities. The increasing popularity of the use of the Internet to facilitate casual, even anonymous, sexual interaction has recently been linked with a rise in the rate of syphilis infection among gay and bisexual men in the US and the UK (Ashton *et al.*, 2003; Klausner *et al.*, 2000). This may indicate a need to address the special characteristics of

Internet-mediated sexual interactions when designing interventions targeting risky sexual behavior among gay and bisexual men. The strategies described here (e.g. discussing safer sex in advance through e-mail or online chat, willingness to walk away from sexual encounters in which the partner is not willing to use condoms) utilized by male escorts for maintaining safety during paid encounters might translate well to use in unpaid encounters.

As noted earlier, the role of clients in seeking and engaging in unsafe sex should not be neglected in efforts to understand and stem the spread of HIV and STIs among gay and bisexual men. The information provided by these Internet-based escorts on the frequency of client requests for risky sex highlights the need for interventions that target specifically men who pay for sex. This finding echoes the results of a recent large survey of gay and bisexual men in New York City, which found that men who reported paying for sex were a group more at risk for infection or transmission of STIs than men who did not report paying or being paid for sex (Koken *et al.*, in press). While important work in this arena has been performed by researchers in Australia (Browne & Minichiello, 1996; Minichiello *et al.*, 1999, 2000) and other Western nations (for a review, see Vanwesenbeeck, 2001), little work in other countries to date has sampled clients of MSWs. Male sex workers are only half of the commercial sex transaction—the responsibility for engaging in safer sex practices should not be wholly assigned to them.

There are some issues that should be considered when evaluating the results of this study. First, only 14% of the men contacted by the research team participated in the study. Male sex workers have been noted to be a hidden population (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001), making representative sampling difficult if not impossible, especially in the US and other countries in which prostitution remains legally prohibited. This may have impacted the participation rate of the present research. Additionally, the effort required in visiting our research facility and completing a lengthy interview and questionnaire may have presented a barrier to participation, in spite of the relatively large financial incentive offered (in response to feedback by sex worker advocates, who felt that the men should be compensated for time that could have been spent with clients). Further, it is possible that escorts who do refuse unsafe sex from clients and actively try to educate them regarding safer sex and HIV were more likely to agree to participate than escorts who are less committed to safety. It is difficult to know if and how the men who did not respond to our invitation to participate may have differed from those who did. However, a review of the websites of those who did and did not respond suggests that the sample studied was fairly representative of the diversity of Internet-based male escorts with regard to advertised age, race/ethnicity and sexual services offered.

Future research on the sexual safety and education strategies of Internet-based male escorts would benefit from sampling a larger group of men. This would permit more in-depth analyses to better understand what, if any, role age, race/ethnicity and other sociodemographic factors play in commercial sex interactions. Additionally, little or no research has been performed to date on independent female or transgender escorts who advertise on the Internet; much could be gained from future research on the experiences of negotiating safety with clients across sex workers of all genders.

Acknowledgements

The Classified Project was funded by a Faculty Development Grant to the first author. The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of James Kelleher and the willingness of our participants to share with us their stories and experiences.

References

- ASHTON, M., SOPWITH, W., CLARK, P., MCKELVEY, D., LIGHTON, L. & MANDAL, D. (2003). An outbreak no longer: factors contributing to the return of syphilis in Greater Manchester. *Sexually Transmitted Infections*, 79, 291–293.
- BENOTSCH, E.G., KALICHMAN, S. & CAGE, M. (2002). Men who have met sex partners via the Internet: prevalence, predictors, and implications for HIV prevention. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 31, 177–183.
- BIMBI, D.S. & PARSONS, J.T. (in press). Barebacking among gay and bisexual male escorts. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy*.
- BROWNE, J. & MINICHELLO, V. (1996). The social and work context of commercial sex between men: a research note. *Australian and New England Journal of Sociology*, 32, 86–92.
- BROWNE, J. & MINICHELLO, V. (1995). The social meanings behind male sex work: implications for sexual interactions. *British Journal of Sociology*, 46, 598–622.
- BULL, S.S. & MCFARLANE, M. (2000). Soliciting sex on the Internet: what are the risks for sexually transmitted diseases and HIV? *Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, 27, 545–550.
- CALHOUN, T.C. & WEAVER, G. (1996). Rational decision-making among male street prostitutes. *Deviant Behavior*, 17, 209–227.
- DEMATTEO, D., MAJOR, C., BLOCK, B., COATES, R., FEARON, M., GOLDBERG, E. *et al.* (1999). Toronto street youth and HIV/AIDS: prevalence, demographics, and risks. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 25, 358–366.
- ESTCOURT, C.S., MARKS, C., ROHRSHHEIM, R., JOHNSON, A.M., DONOVAN, B. & MINDEL, A. (2000). HIV, sexually transmitted infections, and risk behaviors in male commercial sex workers in Sydney. *Sexually Transmitted Infections*, 76, 294–298.
- ESTEP, R., WALDORF, D. & MAROTTA, T. (1992). Sexual behavior of male prostitutes. In: HUBER, J. & SCHNEIDER, B. E. (Eds), *The social context of AIDS*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- GAFFNEY, J. (2003). Working together with male sex workers (MSW) in London. Paper presented at the European Network of Male Prostitution, Hamburg, Germany.
- GATTARI, P. & SPIZZICHINO, L. (1992). Behavioural patterns and HIV infection among drug-using transvestites practising prostitution in Rome. *AIDS Care*, 4, 83–88.
- HALKITIS, P.N. & PARSONS, J.T. (2003). Intentional unsafe sex (barebacking) among HIV-positive gay men who seek sexual partners on the Internet. *AIDS Care*, 15, 367–378.
- HALKITIS, P.N., PARSONS, J.T. & WILTON, L. (2003). Barebacking among gay and bisexual men in New York City: explanations for the emergency of intentional unsafe behavior. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 32, 351–357.
- HICKSON, F., WEATHERBURN, P., HOWS, J. & DAVIES, P. (1994). Selling safer sex: male masseurs and escorts in the UK. In: AGGLETON, P. (Ed.), *Foundations for the future* (pp. 197–209). London: Taylor & Francis.
- JOFFE, H. & DOCKRELL, J.E. (1995). Safer sex: lessons from the male sex industry. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 5, 333–346.
- KIM, A.A., KENT, C., MCFARLAND, W. & KLAUSNER, J.D. (2001). Cruising on the Internet highway. *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes*, 28, 89–93.
- KLAUSNER, J.D., WOLF, W., FISCHER-PONCE, L., ZOLT, I. & KATZ, M.H. (2000). Tracing a syphilis outbreak through cyberspace. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 284, 447–449.
- KOKEN, J.A., SEVERINO, J., PARSONS, J.T. & BIMBI, D.S. (in press). Exploring commercial sex encounters in an urban community sample of gay and bisexual men: A preliminary report. *Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality*.
- MANSERGH, G., MARKS, G., COLFAX, G., GUZMAN, R., RADER, M. & BUCHBINDER, S. (2002). Barebacking in a diverse sample of men who have sex with men. *AIDS*, 16, 653–659.
- MCFARLANE, M., BULL, S.S. & RIETMEIJER, C.A. (2000). The Internet as a newly emerging risk environment for sexually transmitted diseases. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 284, 443–446.
- MINICHELLO, V., MARINO, R., BROWNE, J., JAMIESON, M., PETERSON, K., REUTER, B. *et al.* (1999). A profile of the clients of male sex workers in three Australian cities. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 23, 511–518.
- MINICHELLO, V., MARINO, R., BROWNE, J., JAMIESON, M., PETERSON, K., REUTER, B. *et al.* (2000). Commercial sex between men: A prospective diary-based study. *Journal of Sex Research*, 37, 151–160.
- MORSE, E.V., SIMON, P.M., OSOFSKY, H.J., BALSON, P.M. & GAUMER, H.R. (1991). The male street prostitute: a vector for transmission of HIV infection into the heterosexual world. *Social Science and Medicine*, 32, 535–539.
- OVERS, C. (1991). To work or not to work? Questions facing HIV-positive sex workers. Australia: National AIDS Bulletin.
- PARSONS, J.T., BIMBI, D.S. & HALKITIS, P.N. (2001). Sexual compulsivity among gay/bisexual male escorts who advertise on the internet. *Journal of Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity*, 8, 113–123.
- PERKINS, R., PRESTAGE, G., SHARP, R. & LOVEJOY, F. (1994). *Sex work and sex workers in Australia*. Sydney, Australia: University of New South Wales Press.

- PFEIFER, R.W. & OLIVER, J. (1997). A study of HIV seroprevalence in a group of homeless youth in Hollywood, California. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 20, 339–342.
- PLEAK, R.R. & MEYER-BAHLBURG, H.F.L. (1990). Sexual behavior and AIDS knowledge of young male prostitutes in Manhattan. *Journal of Sex Research*, 27, 557–588.
- ROSS, M.W., TIKKANEN, R. & MANSSON, S.A. (2000). Differences between Internet samples and conventional samples of men who have sex with men: implications for research and HIV interventions. *Social Science and Medicine*, 51, 749–758.
- ROY, E., HALEY, N., LECLERC, P., CEDRAS, L., WEBER, A.E., CLAESSENS, C. *et al.* (2003). HIV incidence among street youth in Montreal, Canada. *AIDS*, 17, 1071–1075.
- ROY, E., HALEY, N., LECLERC, P., LEMIRE, N., BOIVIN, J.F., FRAPPIER, J.Y. *et al.* (2000). Prevalence of HIV infection and risk behaviours among Montreal street youth. *International Journal of STDs and AIDS*, 11, 241–247.
- SAGARIN, E. & JOLLY, R.J. (1997). Prostitution: profession and pathology. In: SCHLESINGER, L. B. & REVITCH, E. R. (Eds), *Sexual dynamics of anti-social behavior* (2nd edition) (pp. 9–30). Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- STRAUSS, A.L. & CORBIN, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: grounded theory, procedure and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- SUAREZ, T. & MILLER, J. (2001). Negotiating risks in context: a perspective on unprotected anal intercourse and barebacking among men who have sex with men—where do we go from here? *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 30, 287–300.
- TASHIMA, K.T., ALT, E.N., HARWELL, J.I., FIEBICH-PEREZ, D.K. & FLANIGAN, T.P. (2003). Internet sex-seeking leads to acute HIV infection: a report of two cases. *International Journal of STDs and AIDS*, 14, 285–286.
- TIKKANEN, R. & ROSS, M.W. (2000). Looking for sexual compatibility: experiences among Swedish men in visiting Internet gay chat-rooms. *Cyber Psychology and Behavior*, 3, 605–616.
- TIKKANEN, R. & ROSS, M.W. (2003). Technological tearoom trade: characteristics of Swedish men visiting gay Internet chat-rooms. *AIDS Education & Prevention*, 15, 122–132.
- VANWESENBECK, I. (2001). Another decade of social scientific work on sex work: a review of research 1990–2000. *Annual Review of Sex Research*, 12, 242–300.
- WEBER, A.E., CRAIB, K.J., CHAN, K., MARTINDALE, S., MILLER, M.L., SCHECHTER, M.T. *et al.* (2001). Sex trade involvement and rates of human immunodeficiency virus positivity among young gay and bisexual men. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 30, 1449–1454.
- WILLIAMS, M.L., TIMPSON, S., KLOVDAL, A., BOWEN, A.M., ROSS, M.W. & KEEL, K.B. (2003). HIV risk among a sample of drug using male sex workers. *AIDS*, 17, 1402–1404.
- ZIERSCH, A., GAFFNEY, J. & TOMLINSON, D.R. (2000). STI prevention and the male sex industry in London: evaluating a pilot peer education program. *Sexually Transmitted Infections*, 76, 447–453.