

# Including Online-Recruited Seeds: A Respondent-Driven Sample of Men who Have Sex with Men

## How do seeds and their recruitment chains differ from online-recruited seeds and offline-recruited seeds?

### What is the importance of this study?

- Initial participants ('seeds') are critical to respondent-driven sampling (RDS) as they lead to more participants joining the study. Yet, there is little information available on how seeds that were recruited through online strategies may effect RDS implementation.
- We compared online-recruited seeds with offline-recruited seeds, as well as participants recruited by online-recruited seeds with participants recruited by offline-recruited seeds.

### FACT BOX

The internet and the rise of online communities remains an underutilized tool for population health researchers.

**Respondent-driven sampling (RDS)** is a research technique using the social networks of initial participants' (who are called 'seeds') to recruit more individuals. Seeds are first recruited and selected, then are given RDS coupons to distribute within their social network to recruit eligible study participants. This leads to a recruitment chain, which is a useful tool for accessing more difficult to reach populations.

### How was this study conducted?

- We used the data from a RDS study of men who have sex with men (MSM) in Metro Vancouver, gathered from February 2012 to February 2014.
- RDS 'seeds' were either recruited from various community agency partners or through a popular online social/sexual internet app for MSM.

### What are the key study findings?

- A total of 119 seeds were used and 85 of them were recruited online. These seeds then recruited an additional 600 participants for a total sample size of 719 MSM.
- The online-recruited seeds were not able to generate as large recruitment chains as those seeds recruited more traditionally through community agencies. Three-quarters of the seeds used were recruited online; online seeds recruited less than half of the total sample. This may be a result of differences in motivations and social networks.
- Differences between online/offline recruited seeds and their recruits may reflect the changing ways that gay and bisexual men seek and integrate



sexual health knowledge. This shift is related to the rise in seeking sex in online spaces.

### What do these findings mean?

- There is value in networking apps that allow you to connect with individuals nearby for aiding RDS recruitment efforts, especially when faced with slow participation uptake by other means.
- The next step in confirming the adequacy of online RDS recruitment strategies will be to understand the degree to which online and in-person networks interact and overlap.
- These findings highlight differences between online and offline seeds, indicating that using both online and traditionally recruited seeds may provide the most diverse sample of MSM in urban areas.

### What is the BC-CfE Momentum Health Study?

Evidence from British Columbia and elsewhere has demonstrated the expansion of access to antiretroviral HIV treatment (ART) can result in population-level reductions in HIV incidence. This is the concept behind the made-in-BC Treatment as Prevention<sup>®</sup> strategy, or TasP<sup>®</sup>, which aims to expand early HIV testing and treatment to improve patients' health and curb the spread of HIV. Gay, bisexual and other men (GBM) who have sex with men (MSM) represent the most affected HIV risk group, both in BC and Canada. The BC-CfE Momentum Health Study is designed to measure changes in HIV risk behaviour, attitudes toward TasP<sup>®</sup> and the proportion of HIV-positive GBM with unsuppressed viral load over time in the Vancouver region. The study uses respondent-driven sampling (RDS) to obtain a more representative sample reflecting the diversity of the GBM community in Vancouver.

Full paper available online: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26980147>

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