

Exploring the Role of Sex-Seeking Apps and Websites in the Social and Sexual Lives of Gay, Bisexual and other Men who Have Sex with Men

How does seeking sex online relate to sexual behaviour, as well as to community and social engagement?

What is the importance of this study?

- There has generally been increased use of the internet and social networking tools, which may influence social behaviours.
- Gay and bisexual men's community involvement has changed over time: internet apps and websites are increasingly used to seek new partners.
- An individual's social network can influence their health and sex-seeking behaviour.

FACT BOX

Social influence plays an important role in the sexual decisions of gay and bisexual men. As new sexual health interventions are developed, these trends have implications for online prevention efforts.

How was this study conducted?

- Participants in this cross-sectional study—who are gay, bisexual or other men who have sex with men (GBM)—were asked how often they had used smartphone applications or internet hook-up sites to meet other men for sex within the past six months.
- Certain variables considered included age, sexual identity, education, ethnicity, income, self-reported HIV status, and whether or not participants had a current and regular partner.
- Estimated number of gay friends and amount of social time spent engaging in gay-specific groups and events were used as variables to measure community and social connection.
- Sexual behaviour was assessed using variables such as number of participants' sex partners and HIV prevention strategies used during their sexual encounters.

What are the key study findings?

- A majority of study participants reported attending at least one gay-related event or venue within the past six months. A majority also reported attending gay bars and clubs, in addition to annual pride parade events.
- There are no differences in attending gay-specific events, reading gay news media or participating in the pride parade between men seeking sex online and those not.



- Over two-thirds of the participants reported using apps or websites to seek sex within the past six months; over half used them more than monthly.
- Online sex-seeking GBM are more likely to engage in anal sex without the use of a condom. However, they are also more likely to employ other risk-reducing behaviours such as strategic positioning and having partners with the same HIV status.

What do these findings mean?

- In-person socializing and online sex-seeking are both important social activities for GBM.
- Online sex seekers are no less likely than non-users to connect with gay communities.
- Identifying individuals who attend multiple venues could be a key strategy to reduce the transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
- Health promotion campaigns should target both online and offline networks.

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[®] strategy, or TasP[®], which aims to expand early HIV testing and treatment to improve patients' health and curb the spread of HIV. Gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (GBM) 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[®] 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 population in Vancouver.

Full paper available online: <http://www.publish.csiro.au/sh/sh16150>

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