

Patterns of Online and Offline Connectedness among Gay, Bisexual and Other Men who have Sex with Men

How do patterns of online and offline connectedness relate to beliefs and behaviours around HIV prevention among gay and bi men in Metro Vancouver?

What is the importance of this study?

- Studies suggest that there are important differences between gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (gbMSM) who are more connected online compared with those who have lower rates connections online. Our study found those who are mainly connected online (versus having in-person connections) tend to be younger, are less likely to identify as gay and exhibit lower community attachment.
- Internet technologies such as mobile apps and websites have become important social and sex-seeking venues for gbMSM.
- Links exist between online sex seeking and number of sexual partners, patterns of HIV risk management and engagement in condomless anal sex.

BACKGROUND

The nature and level of community connectedness among gbMSM may reflect underlying cultural values among this group. Further, these may play a role in shaping their sexual behaviour.

How was this study conducted?

- Participants were asked about:
 - Their social behaviours, including use of online apps and websites for social and sex-seeking purposes.
 - Collectivist attitudes towards the gay community (i.e. “being part of the gay/bisexual/queer community is an important reflection of who I am”).
 - Behaviour related to HIV prevention and awareness of Treatment as Prevention® (TasP®), as well as perceptions of treatment optimism and of stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS.

What are the key study findings?

- In general, participants reported high levels of connectedness. For example, 82.7% read gay news media, 79.7% patronized gay bars or clubs and 82.6% had a Facebook account.
- The study identified three main “classes”
 - “Socialites” (38.8%) had relatively high in-person and internet-based connectedness.
 - “Traditionalists” (25.8%) had moderate in-person connectedness and low internet-based connectedness.
 - “Techies” (35.4%) had low in-person connectedness but high internet-based connectedness.



- Socialites were more likely than Traditionalists and Techies to have higher collectivism scores, meaning having a feeling of connection to the community of gay, bisexual and queer men. They were also more likely to have an annual income greater than or equal to \$30,000.
- Traditionalists were older, less likely to be single, had lower HIV/AIDS stigma scores, had fewer sexual partners and were less likely to have ever tested for HIV compared to Socialites.
- Compared to Traditionalists, Techies had lower collectivism and were more likely to be younger, single, to have ever been tested for HIV, to ask for their partner's HIV status, to engage in condomless anal sex and to have more sexual partners in the past six months.

What do these findings mean?

- There are important similarities and differences in the ways gbMSM in Vancouver, Canada, connect to their communities.
- Patterns of connectedness are associated with HIV/STI (sexually transmitted infection) testing behaviour.
- There may be important social considerations when promoting HIV prevention strategies. Cultural values held by individuals in different settings may influence the particular prevention strategies used by gbMSM.

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 (gbMSM) 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 gbMSM 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 gbMSM population in Vancouver.

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