

The Internet as a Valuable Tool for Promoting a New Framework for Sexual Health among Gay Men and Other Men Who Have Sex with Men

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Today, much of the contemporary knowledge about the manner in which gay men and other men who have sex with men (referred to as MSM in this commentary) construct their sexual lives exists within the context of the HIV epidemic [1]. While this may have been necessary given the extent to which HIV has impacted these communities, it has resulted in a limited understanding of the healthy expression of MSM sexuality, and has created a disease-dominated conceptualization of MSM sexual behavior. In particular, this paradigm has not fully attended to the concepts of desire, sexual pleasure, and sexual satisfaction, all of which likely affect the sexual decisions MSM make on a regular basis.

The phrase “sexual health” has been increasingly utilized over the past decade to characterize efforts to promote the overall sexual well-being of a range of

communities, and some have offered conceptualizations of this construct [2, 3]. However, to date most public health interventions for MSM have retained a focus primarily on HIV prevention without taking into account the many other aspects of MSM sexuality and sexual health. Interventionists continue to rely on disease-oriented models that are only partially effective in their goal of reducing HIV incidence, rather than taking advantage of opportunities to develop a holistic framework for promoting sexual health among MSM. In order to move towards a new era of sexual health among MSM, it is important for public health professionals and researchers to take the time to carefully articulate the range and complexity of sexuality and sexual well-being, and the manner in which it is expressed between men. Only then will it be possible to develop a sexual health framework for MSM that attends to more than an individual’s risk for HIV and sexually transmitted infection (STI) acquisition and transmission.

A sexual health framework that promotes the overall well-being of MSM while also reducing HIV incidence should include three fundamental elements.

The first element involves using an assets-based approach to research and programs that focus on resilience in the individual and the community. Growing bodies of research suggest an association between lower rates of risk behaviors (such as smoking, unprotected sex, and alcohol use) among various populations and individual and community assets [4–7]. Studies also indicate that MSM populations are capable of making positive sexual health decisions even when multiple “risk factors” are present [8].

The second element of a sexual health framework requires that any discussion of sexual health should address the full range of factors related to the sexual

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experience, including physiological (e.g., sexual function and health status), psychological (e.g., desire, pleasure, satisfaction) and political factors (e.g., freedom of sexual expression).

Lastly, the third element of a sexual health framework demands that we acknowledge and embrace sexual expression and diversity among MSM in a way that continues to reduce the social stigma often experienced by MSM as a result of their sexual orientations, desires, and behaviors.

Future research initiatives and promotion programs that use a sexual health framework will need to reach MSM in contexts that provide opportunities to implement the three elements discussed above. For years, public health interventions for MSM have been taking place in physical venues where MSM go to find sexual partners and/or social support, including gay neighborhoods, cruising spaces (e.g., public sex environments), gay bars, and bath houses [9–11]. Any contemporary sexual health promotion program, however, will also need to consider the evolving virtual spaces through which many MSM participate in both social and sexual activities. The growing number of MSM who access virtual “communities” via websites, chatrooms, and mobile phone applications, among others, provides a key opportunity for public health to rapidly engage MSM and to deliver widespread health initiatives that incorporate a sexual health approach. While it has been estimated that between 2.5 and 6.2 million MSM use virtual tools for sexual connections [12], the exact number is unknown. Producing an estimate that accounts for both physical interactions that result from a connection made via the Internet and those that occur only online (e.g., online sexual activity) remains a challenge. Nonetheless, the number of users is considerable.

According to HitWise, the largest global information company that measures Internet usage patterns, some of the most popular sexual networking sites in the US are geared toward MSM, including www.manhunt.net, www.gay.com, and www.adam4adam.com; Europe also has highly popular sites for MSM, including www.gaydar.co.uk, www.fitlads.com, www.recon.com, and www.gayromeo.com. Above and beyond MSM utilizing the Internet for meeting other men, Harris Interactive’s latest national US survey reports that gay adults are more likely to use social networks (e.g., Facebook, MySpace) and read blogs than their heterosexual counterparts [13]. The range of blogs includes those focused on entertainment (e.g., www.perezhilton.com), gay culture (e.g., www.queerty.com, www.joemygod.com), sexual networking (e.g., www.manhuntedaily.com) and gay porn (e.g., www.gaypornblog.com). In addition, for people living with HIV infection, there are popular websites such as

www.thebody.com and www.poz.com that provide a wealth of health information and resources.

This wide variety of virtual spaces for gay men provides researchers and program planners an exceptional opportunity to tap into and learn from effective formats for the delivery of messages and content that MSM find engaging. The website www.manhuntcares.com provides an example of this type of innovation, being the first site to offer a hybrid of sexual networking opportunities integrated with sexual health information and resources on HIV and STIs.

In recent years there have been several national efforts to jump-start Internet-based STI and HIV prevention interventions. In 2008 the National Coalition of STD Directors released the *National Guidelines for Internet-based STD and HIV Prevention* (National Guidelines) [14], with the explicit goal of replicating traditional face-to-face interventions using Internet technology. The National Guidelines include three modules: (1) Internet partner notification by public health advisors, (2) Internet outreach by community-based organizations, and (3) health communications. More recently, the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) released their first set of grants aimed at identifying effective Internet-based HIV and STI intervention and prevention for MSM. While moves to include online communities is appropriate, these guidelines and proposed research interventions often do not incorporate an assets-based approach to improving the sexual health of MSM, and instead primarily focus on those Internet users who may be engaging in risky sexual exchanges. Additionally, current national strategies often criticize Internet sex businesses, rather than capitalizing on potential partnerships with these corporate stakeholders.

The research on the association between MSM sexual risk behavior and Internet use is limited and conflicting. Some studies have found that men who use the Internet to find sexual partners were engaging in equal or less risky behaviors than non-Internet users [15, 16], while others have reported the opposite [12]. This suggests that traditional prevention approaches that are designed to target high-risk men may not be most suitable for Internet interventions. More appropriately, future research should revisit each component of the National Guidelines to ensure that studies incorporate the three elements of sexual health identified above in an effort to appropriately serve the needs of MSM online communities from a holistic viewpoint. Men are likely to be more responsive to public health efforts that consider their motivations and interests when going online. Notably, a recent needs assessment of men who use the Internet to seek sex with men found that these men would be highly receptive to health campaigns that are sex positive, that embrace components of sexual pleasure and satisfaction, and that have sexually explicit content [17].

In order to maximize the potential of reaching MSM who frequent the Internet, it is essential for communities and businesses to create and sustain partnerships that are collaborative in nature. Currently, there are several existing models of private/public efforts in Europe that use progressive approaches to improve sexual health among MSM utilizing Internet innovation. The European Commission funds two multinational projects which recognize the popularity of online MSM communities and capitalizes upon the power of reaching these communities (across sexual, social, blog, and community websites). One of these projects is the 2010 European MSM Internet Survey (EMIS), a partnership of researchers and gay dating sites that managed to recruit over 180,000 MSM from 31 countries for an HIV risk and prevention needs assessment. Initial results from this study, presented in the form of a community report, were made available on December 1, 2010 with plans to release the final results in Fall 2011 [18, 19]. The other project is the Everywhere Project, which uses social mediation as a means of fostering partnerships between ‘gay’ or MSM businesses and public health organizations, academic organizations, and NGOs active in HIV issues. Through their partnerships they are able to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes, including a standardized set of requirements and seal of approval awarded to businesses that are committed to being socially responsible in caring for their customers’ sexual health [20]. These are two important examples of the manner through which progressive and coordinated online research and health promotion can be achieved.

As technologies evolve and as social media become normalized in the lives of MSM, the use of consciously sex-positive strategies may facilitate our ability to promote “the best possible sex with the least harm” [21]. Additionally, considering that many of these virtual spaces contain sexually explicit content and are often accessed for purposes that are explicitly sexual in nature, a more ecological sexual health framework may provide a tool for delivering interventions and information in ways that are informative, but not perceived as judgmental or insensitive to the reality of the diverse MSM sexualities endorsed by its intended audience. In doing so, public health can emphasize the value of the Internet, and can recognize companies who promote online MSM activities as collaborators in a progressive sexual health movement, rather than as facilitators of risky sexual decision making.

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