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Venues, Patrons, and Alcohol Use Dynamics: The Creation of a High Risk Sexual Environment

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Abstract

Venue-based HIV prevention interventions, especially in sex on premise venues, can disrupt high-risk sexual networks. However, prior to intervening, it is essential to understand the person-venue dynamics that contribute to HIV risk. As such, we conducted five ethnographic observations at each of six venues where alcohol is sold and sex occurs onsite (2 each porn theaters, sex clubs, and dance clubs) frequented by gay and other men who have sex with men (G&MSM) in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. Alcohol use, sexual behavior, and person-venue dynamics differed markedly across venue types. In dance clubs, substantial alcohol consumption often preceded visits to the darkroom for sex which, at times, included unprotected anal and vaginal intercourse. Condoms, although available, were not easily accessible. HIV prevention messaging was generally non-existent. These venues are in critical need of interventions to reduce HIV transmission risk.

Keywords

bathhouse; sex-on-premise venues; SOPV; gay bars

INTRODUCTION

Sex-on-premise (SOP) venues are frequented by gay and other men who have sex with men (G&MSM) as places to meet sexual partners with less risk of anti-gay harassment or violence [1]. Studies in the U.S. have shown that approximately 40% of G&MSM in large cities have met a sex partner at an SOP venue in the past three months [2–4]. Furthermore, Grov et al [3] found that among patrons of SOP venues, 22% of their sample reported meeting half or more of their sex partners in such venues. While studies have found that few patrons of SOP venues engage in unprotected anal intercourse, patrons are more likely to be

HIV positive and have greater numbers of partners while at the venue, facilitating HIV transmission [2,5]. Given this risk, public health officials have often argued for closing these venues [6]. Others, however, have argued that these settings are ideal for venue-based HIV prevention interventions because they can reach high risk sexual networks of G&MSM [2, 7–11], potentially disrupting channels of sexual transmission [12].

Over the years, venue-based HIV prevention interventions have included distribution of HIV information, condoms and lubricants [11, 13], dissemination of HIV prevention messages through Popular Opinion Leaders (POL) [14, 15] and more recently HIV testing [8, 9, 16–18]. However, the impact of these interventions has, at times, been limited. For example, although condoms were free in all the SOP venues assessed by Woods, et al, [8] they were mostly available in the common places, with less than half the venues providing them in the closed spaces where sex often occurred. Lubricants were also available in all venues, but a third of the venues charged for the lubricant. It has also been suggested that the passive availability of condoms and HIV education posters or flyers may not be sufficient to change behavior in these socio-psychologically complex settings [3]. There were also concerns as to the effectiveness of POL in international settings [20]. This approach might also be limited to settings where verbal communication would be appropriate and the norm, which is not the case in many SOP venues [20–22]. Lastly, although studies have found that HIV testing in these venues was feasible and effective in reaching men who engage in unprotected anal intercourse who had not been tested recently and men with previously undiagnosed HIV infection [16–18], relatively small numbers of G&MSM are being tested for HIV/STIs in these venues, suggesting that those at highest risk might be least willing to be tested at these sites [12].

Through the years, a rich body of literature, both qualitative and quantitative, has developed on the physical aspects of these types of SOP venues and the sexual behavior that occurs among their patrons. However, there have been no theoretically grounded studies that systematically explore the interaction between venue and patrons in order to understand the person-venue dynamic that contribute to the creation of a high risk space. Understanding these factors is a necessary first step in developing interventions aimed at reducing HIV risk behavior in these settings [2, 3, 23–25]. To address this gap in knowledge, this study explored how venue and patron characteristics contribute to HIV risk behavior in venues where alcohol is available for purchase and sex occurs onsite, which is concerning given the association between alcohol use and HIV risk behavior [26–28]. We were particularly interested in how the venue-patron-alcohol dynamics could vary across different types of venues and how these differences could impact the design of HIV prevention interventions [29].

This study is guided by the person-environment theory proposed by Moos [30] which is based on Barker's theory of behavior setting [31–33]. Barker's theory focuses on the relationship between the structural characteristics of a setting and the en masse behavior of its occupants [34]. The essential characteristics of behavior settings are that : 1) they have standing patterns of behavior which are the overall behavior patterns of the users en mass, not as individuals, 2) they involve not only behavior but also a milieu, which can consist of natural features as well as man-made objects, and which exists regardless of the behavior

which occurs within it, 3) the physical milieu encloses the behavior, and 4) the milieu is synomorphic- the behavior and physical setting of the milieu are similar (e.g., chairs facing a speaker for listening) [30]. Behavioral settings can include retail shops, bars, schools, or places of worship. The basic tenet is that once a person enters that setting, their behavior is affected. In turn, the behaviors of all the occupants of the environment affect the environment, creating a dynamic interaction between person and environment. The study of behavior settings focuses not on the individual or the places, but on the complex relationships that exist between the individual psychological processes and the structural components of the setting, a relationship whose study is facilitated by the small size of these settings [30].

Binson and Woods [35] applied the behavior setting approach developed by Moos and colleagues [30, 36–39] to understand person-environment interactions in a bathhouse setting. The model divides the environment into four principal domains: Institutional context, Physical features, Policies and services, and Supra personal factors. Binson & Woods [35] discuss how these domains would be applicable to the bathhouse setting and the types of dimensions that would be assessed under each domain. We have added to the dimensions, however, to better apply this model to the settings being observed for this study (see Table 1).

The aim of this manuscript is to describe the physical characteristics of the venue, patron characteristics, alcohol consumption, and social dynamics present in the venues studied and how these factors contribute to the creation of a high risk sexual space.

METHODS

This study received approval from the Institutional Review Boards of the New York State Psychiatric Institute in the U.S. and the Comité Institucional de Bioética at Nexo Asociación Civil, in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Site observations were conducted at 6 venues (2 each of bars with darkrooms, sex clubs, and porn theaters) where alcohol consumption and sex occur. Five observations were conducted at each site in order to form a more comprehensive picture of the venue across different dates, patrons, and activities. All venues were accessible to the general public and the observations focused on events that were available for all patrons to witness. As such, explicit permission was not obtained from venue owners prior to conducting the observations.

Ethnographic Observations

Ethnographers were graduate students who completed study-specific training conducted by the senior anthropologist on the study team (VB) prior to entering the field. Each observation was conducted jointly by two ethnographers. The observations followed a standard guide developed for the study that included fields such as type of venue; description of the area surrounding the venue; availability of alcohol in the venue and in the immediately surrounding area; characteristics of clientele; personnel and their interactions with patrons; areas for alcohol consumption, socialization, and sexual behavior within the venue; alcohol consumption among patrons; sexual behavior in the venue; condom availability; HIV prevention materials in the venue; and dynamics of alcohol and sexual

behavior that were evident to the ethnographers. Maps were also created of each venue which provided a visual representation of the physical space where the events described in the reports occurred. The duration of the observations in the venues ranged from 3.0 to 4.25 hours at the porno theaters, 1.25 to 3 hours at the sex clubs, and 2.5 to 4.5 hours at the dance clubs.

Upon leaving the observation field, ethnographers were instructed to write a succinct report of the salient features of the observation, sharing impressions and enriching each other's notes. Within 48 hours, they had to produce a full report following a pre-established format that included specific mandatory fields (e.g., type of location, length of observation, number of people observed) as well as descriptions of the physical characteristics of the site, types of activities that were observed (sexual and non-sexual), and any interpretation the ethnographers might have of the observations, including thoughts about interventions that might decrease high risk behavior in the setting.

Data Analysis

Ethnographic reports were uploaded onto NVivo qualitative data analysis software package. An initial codebook was developed which used the main headings of the ethnographic observation guide as first and second level codes as well as inclusion and exclusion criteria for each code. Three of the investigators coded two ethnographic reports using the initial version of the codebook which resulted in the creation of additional second level codes and greater specificity of inclusion and exclusion criteria for each code. Subsequently, two investigators coded each ethnographic report independently. Discrepancies in coding were discussed until consensus was reached on final coding decisions. Each coding report that was generated was reviewed to identify modal characteristics and behaviors at each venue and venue type in order to allow for a comparison among and across the different types of venues.

RESULTS

Institutional Context

All six venues observed were located in the central area of the city of Buenos Aires and easily accessible by mass transit. All venues were listed in gay websites about Buenos Aires, which provided either the address to the venue or links to the venue's own website. Neither porn theater had a website, while the websites for the sex clubs were extensive and included a listing of upcoming events and photos of the interior, including the spaces for sexual contact among patrons. The websites for the dance clubs were also extensive, including music, listing of upcoming events, and photos of staff and the interiors of the venues. These websites also highlighted key aspects of the venues, for Dance Club A, the diversity of its patrons, which include men, women, and transgender men and women, and for Dance Club B, its "anything goes" culture.

Both porn theaters were in shopping arcades, had signs with their names, and were accessed by descending a stairway from the shopping arcade on their front door. These were single level venues. The sex clubs were entered by descending a stairway from the street level but

were not accessed through a shopping arcade. There were no signs outside the venues alerting pedestrians of the venue. In general, the sex clubs were also single level, although one had split levels at the back of the space with short flights of stairs going up and another down. The dance clubs were both multi-level stand-alone buildings with large signs outside the venues with their names.

Staffing for the venues varied greatly. The porn theaters usually had one staff member present, and at times two. When two were present, one would be at the entry booth collecting the fee while the other would tend to the bar area; otherwise, both tasks could be completed by one staff member. There were usually two to three staff members at the sex clubs, one at the ticket booth, one at the bar, and one cleaning. At Dance Club A there were eight to ten staff members, including ticket booth personnel, two to three security personnel with black t-shirts with the word “Prevention” (related to preventing violence) on them, and bartenders. It was estimated that Dance Club B had 25–30 personnel onsite per visit, including bar staff to cover 4 bars, restroom attendants, and a large contingent of security personnel wearing similar “Prevention” t-shirts.

Physical Characteristics of the Venues

Porn theaters—These venues were described as dirty and malodorous, especially the restrooms, and in a general state of disrepair. Each theater had a small bar, with a television playing, and offered limited types of beverages (alcoholic and non-alcoholic) that were listed on a board along with their prices. In both theaters, this area was connected by a door to the booth where patrons pay to enter the venue, allowing one staff member to serve as bartender and cashier. The bar area served as a rarely utilized socialization area for the theaters. Theater A had two video screening rooms (one for gay themed videos, the other for heterosexual videos), while Theater B had four (two for heterosexual, one for transgender porn, and one for gay porn). It is in the screening rooms where most patrons were found. Theater A had a large darkroom that was entered by descending a short flight of stairs from the room showing gay porn. The darkroom was completely dark, but illuminated periodically by patrons using lighters or cellphones briefly in order to see who was inside it. Theater B had three elongated darkrooms, each at the back of a screening room. Each darkroom was painted black and separated into stalls. A glass wall separated the darkroom from the theater, allowing patrons to see the films from the darkroom. This also allowed limited light to filter into the darkrooms.

Sex clubs—These venues were reported to be very clean, with an industrial aesthetic. Each had a large area with video screens for socializing and a large bar with seating. Dance music was heard throughout the venues. The bars, which adjoined the area for socializing, were used mostly for purchasing, but not consuming beverages. At the bar there was a list of the beverages available and their prices. These venues had approximately 20 individual cabins, each with a stool to sit and a small video screen playing porn videos. Some cabins allowed the patrons to see or touch the patron in the adjoining cabins. Each venue had a darkroom which was kept completely dark; only the occasional use of a cellphone or a cigarette lighter allowed for brief flashes of visibility.

Dance clubs—The interior space of these venues was dominated by multiple dance floors and bars on different levels. Both also had separate, closed-in areas with attenuated lighting that were used as darkrooms. In general, both venues were relatively clean, including the restrooms. Dance Club A had dimmed lighting with some walls painted as a nighttime sky and others mirrored, allowing patrons to view most of the areas of that floor as well as watch other patrons indirectly. There was a bar in each of the three floors of the venue and dance floors on the second and third floors. The first floor had a bar and a socializing area arranged with tables and chairs. The bar on this floor had mirrored back walls and advertisements for alcoholic beverages along with a board indicating the prices of the beverages. Also in this area there were video screens showing music videos, but with no sound. This part of the venue was bathed in a blue light. The darkroom, located on the first floor, was painted in a dark color and lit with a dark red lamp that allowed some visibility in the space. Metal benches along one wall of the space provided seating. The space was frequented by patrons, some to wait for friends or sit quietly, while other patrons would enter this space, walk through, and exit. This space was also the darkroom, where patrons would engage in sex.

Dance Club B had three floors, although the top floor was no longer in use. The venue had three dance floors and four bars, and was bathed in a warm red glow. There was a large circular bar at the entrance. On open bar nights, half of this bar was used to distribute the free beverages (mostly beer) to patrons, while the other half functioned as a for-pay bar. This was the busiest of the bars and was surrounded by a large area for socializing but patrons tended to obtain their drink and leave this area. There were two other bars on the second floor of the venue, both relatively small, one of which was in the VIP area, which also had tables and chairs. This was the only bar in which the bottles were visible and labeled. On the second floor was a space that was entered through a velvet curtain. It was an elongated space, with comfortable seating against the walls and an aisle down the center of the space. It had no direct lighting but, except for one corner, received residual lighting from the dance floor. Used in the early part of the evening as a quiet, socializing space, as the evening progressed, this was the darkroom, which was the only space used for sexual contact at the venue.

Patron Characteristics

Porn theaters—Patrons of porn theaters usually entered the venue alone. From the observations conducted outside the venue, some patrons could be seen furtively glancing around and quickly entering these venues. Except for one transgender sex worker at Theater B, all patrons were male. Patrons ranged from approximately 25 to 65 years of age, with most being in their 50s. Dress varied, ranging from informal to business wear (in Theater B, which is located in the central business district in Buenos Aires). Based on style of dress, younger patrons appeared to be of lower socioeconomic status than older patrons. In each theater, there were patrons who were sleeping in chairs in the screening rooms for long periods of time.

Sex clubs—Patrons of these venues were all men, and appeared to be between 20 and 60 years of age, although mostly 20 to 30 years old. There were no appreciable differences between the patrons of each sex club. They tended to dress informally but well, some with

sports coats. Most patrons arrived alone, although some arrived in dyads and, occasionally, in a group.

Dance clubs—There were striking differences between the patrons of the two dance clubs. Patrons of Dance Club A were between 20 and 50 years of age and predominantly working class. Younger patrons tended to arrive and congregate in groups. The demeanor of patrons, their behavior, and overheard conversations were consistent with heterosexual identity in some cases and gay identity in others. A sizable portion of the patrons displayed transgender characteristics in clothing, demeanor, gestures, and use of makeup. The few female patrons were usually part of a male-female couple. The transgender patrons coalesced in different groups based on age. Many patrons used the coat check to leave outer layers of clothing, remaining in more fashionable clothes in the venue. During the course of the evening, numerous patrons were seen shirtless, some dancing, others wandering the venue. There appeared to also be many tourists patronizing the venue.

Patrons in Dance Club B were mostly men between 20 and 25 years of age, although there were also patrons in the 30–40 range. Based on overheard conversations, public displays of affection, and sexual partnering, patrons appeared to include single men (heterosexual and gay), women (heterosexual and lesbian), heterosexual couples (seen kissing and holding hands), and transgender women (although there were less of the latter than in Dance Club A). However, given the culture of “anything goes” which forms part of the identity and branding of the venue, these categories of sexual identity or orientation, especially among the male patrons, should be considered as fluid and not fixed. Many patrons arrived in groups, although lone men were also seen arriving. Patrons dressed informally, mostly in t-shirts, jeans, and tennis shoes. Some male patrons, with muscular physiques, danced and wandered the venue shirtless. Some patrons were foreign tourists.

Alcohol and drug use

Porn theaters—Alcohol availability in the porn theaters consisted of beer, champagne, and a limited selection of hard liquor such as gin, vodka, and whiskey. Neither theater included a beverage voucher in the entry fee. There was little alcohol consumption observed at these venues, although the ethnographers noted empty beer cans in the garbage bins. Patrons observed drinking did so in the hallways of the venues or in the screening rooms. There was only one patron who appeared intoxicated during one observation. However, there were patrons in both theaters sleeping in the screening rooms. Although it was not possible to assess if this was due to substance use, one of these patrons in Theatre A spilled a can of beer while asleep. No drug use was directly observed in either of the theaters, although in Theater A the smell of marijuana was apparent.

Sex clubs—Alcohol availability in sex clubs consisted of beer, champagne, alcoholic cider, and whiskey. Neither venue included alcohol vouchers with the entry fee. Overall, there was little alcohol consumption seen at these venues. Few discarded beer cans are seen in garbage bins, although there was frequent emptying of the bins. Patrons often approached the bar to purchase a drink but consumed it in the socialization areas or while wandering through the venue. Contrary to the porn theaters, some patrons in these venues were seen

drinking beer and champagne with friends or in dyads. No drug use was directly observed in either sex club.

Dance clubs—Numerous patrons waiting to enter these venues were observed consuming alcohol and some appeared inebriated. This is reportedly not uncommon in Buenos Aires, where dance clubs open at 1:00am and patrons often engage in *la previa*, the pre-party. Both dance clubs had full bars, with a broad range of alcoholic beverages available for purchase. In Dance Club A, the entry fee included reduced price drinks. For example, depending on the entry fee you received two, three, or four drinks free; “Happy Hour” consisted of two drinks for the price of one until 2:30am. Promotional cards, which can be acquired when leaving the venue, entitled patrons to discounted entry fee and drinks. Patrons were seen consuming mixed cocktails, champagne, beer, wine, and, frequently, combinations of alcohol with energizing beverages, which was advertised as the special drink one night. Alcohol consumption was observed in all areas of the venue except the restrooms and the darkroom. However, the latter was often used to rest by patrons who are inebriated (including one vomiting). Inebriated patrons were not uncommon, and were seen speaking to themselves, stumbling, weaving as they walked, sleeping with drinks in their hands, and occasionally, vomiting. In terms of drug use, groups of young patrons were seen smoking marijuana. On another occasion, patrons were seen buying and using cocaine. Ethnographers observed patrons with signs of possible substance use (ie. stumbling, dilated pupils, sleeping in chairs), but the cause for these states could not be determined.

In Dance Club B, Fridays and Saturdays were open-bar nights, which entitled patrons to unlimited drinking during their visit. Free alcohol, from unlabeled bottles, was served at one of the bars at the venue. Patrons could also purchase drinks at the other bars in the venue, but the free bar was the most congested. Alcoholic beverages seen consumed included mixed cocktails, with gin, whiskey, rum, and vodka, as well as champagne and beer. Alcohol was consumed in all areas of the venue except the restroom. Although little alcohol consumption was seen in the darkroom, patrons visiting that area exhibited varying levels of inebriation. Overall, high levels of alcohol consumption were observed at this venue; especially on open bar nights. Throughout the venue, patrons exhibited signs of inebriation. The ethnographers noted a number of women who were inebriated and being assisted by friends or venue personnel. One apparently inebriated woman was encircled by three men who began to fondle her. The men were quickly stopped by security personnel, who escorted her to the exit. Numerous patrons in inebriated states were seen being escorted out of the venue by security. Drug use was also seen in Dance Club B, including use of marijuana, cocaine, and inhalants. One ethnographer was offered ketamine.

Sexual behavior in the venue

Porn theaters—Sexual behavior observed in the porn theaters included masturbation, oral sex, and anal intercourse. In the screening rooms, where the screen provided some illumination, sexual contact was mostly limited to masturbation, usually solitary, and performed discretely by some patrons and more openly by others. Oral sex was occasionally observed in these areas. Only one instance of attempted anal sex in the screening room was witnessed, initiated by an inebriated patron and rebuffed by the other patron. Most of the

sexual contact occurred in the darkrooms, although there were differences observed between the two theaters. In Theater A, which has one large darkroom into which no light enters, numerous instances of anal intercourse were witnessed, often when patrons flicked on cellphones or lighters for a quick burst of light. Condom use was difficult to observe directly. However, their use could be inferred by the noises accompanying the opening of a condom packet (which was clearly audible in this silent space). Bursts of light also showed discarded condoms and condom packets on the floor. On one occasion, a patron who had begun (or was about to begin) having anal sex as part of a trio, stopped and asked an ethnographer whether he had condoms and upon being told no, left the darkroom and screening room to get condoms from the front desk. He left the scene, but did not return. There was absence of conversation in this area and sexual contact was initiated by blind touch. Although individuals were observed masturbating alone in the darkroom, two patrons engaging in sex often sparked other patrons to join the dyad, some of which were rebuffed. In contrast, there was not a single occasion of anal intercourse witnessed in Theater B, where light filters into the darkrooms due to the glass panels separating them from the screening rooms. There were, however, used condoms and packets on the floor in many areas of the venue, suggesting that anal intercourse does occur onsite. Another area used for sex was the restroom, where discarded condoms and packets were observed on the floor of both stalls. Patrons in Theater A were also seen to initiate sexual contact in the screening room or darkroom and proceed to a restroom stall to continue the encounter, apparently seeking greater privacy. The only occasion observed in which the bathroom stall was used in this manner in Theater B was by the transgender sex worker with another patron.

Sex clubs—The sexual contact that occurred in the sex clubs was much less public than it was in the porn theaters. Patrons were seen spending a lot of time wandering the hallways looking to initiate sexual encounters, but not doing so. While some patrons were seen kissing and fondling in public areas, sex only occurred in the darkroom and the private cabins. Although there were no direct observations of anal intercourse, condoms and condom packets were seen in wastebaskets located in the private cabins, which suggests that it occurs in these spaces. In the darkrooms, quick flashes of light from cell phones or cigarette lighters showed occasions of oral sex and masturbation, but anal intercourse was not witnessed. The groans and comments usually associated with sex, and heard in the porn theaters, were absent in these venues.

Dance clubs—Sexual behavior in these venues was limited to the darkrooms. Observations of the dance floors, however, revealed the eroticism that emerged from the dance, through the movement of bodies and shirtlessness among some male patrons, especially those with muscular physiques. There was also kissing and fondling observed in various areas of the venues.

The Dance Club A darkroom, which was lit by a red light, was used by male and transgender patrons. Sexual contact consisted mostly of masturbation and oral sex, but occasions of anal intercourse were also witnessed. In one of these occasions, the participants proceeded from mutual masturbation to anal intercourse and back to mutual masturbation and the ethnographers observed neither the interruption of sexual activity consistent with

condom use nor a discarded condom or wrapper on the floor after the event. Similarly, there were neither condoms nor condom packets seen on the floor of the darkroom in the vicinity of any of the intercourse occasions that were witnessed.

The darkroom at Dance Club B was frequented by male, transgender, and less frequently, female patrons. Patrons entered the darkroom mostly alone but also in couples or groups. Although some patrons remained in the darkroom for long periods of time and with numerous partners, others circulated through the space for quick encounters. The darkroom filled as the night progressed, reaching its apex around 4:00 a.m., when there were multitudes circling through, making it difficult to stop and obstruct the passage. Sexual encounters occurred between patrons who met in the darkroom and also among couples who entered the darkroom to have sex and did not engage in sex with others. Sexual practices observed included men, women, and transgender patrons performing oral sex on men; vaginal intercourse; anal intercourse among men; and groups of 4–6 male patrons masturbating or one male performing oral sex on the different members of the group. Some men specifically sought female partners in the darkroom. If these encounters were not established, some proceeded to have sex with transgender patrons. But, they were seen rejecting advances from other men — on one occasion aggressively. While some male patrons engaged in sex with transgender patrons others seemed to ridicule them, and one young man, who was sexually engaged with a transgender appeared visibly uncomfortable at the possibility of being seen. On one night of observation, security personnel, who were in the darkroom to stop any violent interactions, stopped sexual encounters between men and women while allowing them between men and men and transgender patrons. While it was not possible to ascertain condom use in all the occasions of intercourse witnessed due to the number of patrons in the space and the subdued lighting, on some occasions it was apparent that condoms were not used, as there appeared to be no break in the sexual encounter to open a condom a packet and place the condom on the penis. Furthermore, although numerous occasions of intercourse were witnessed, neither used condoms nor condom packets were seen on the floor of the darkroom.

HIV prevention in the venue

Only one of the venues observed displayed any HIV prevention information-- a porn theater that had a sign above the bar saying “regardless of your sexual preference, use a condom.” Both porn theaters had condom vending machines in the restrooms, but none were functioning. Instead, condoms could be purchased from staff at the coat check or bar. However, during one visit, no condoms were available and on another, the ethnographer was sold a packet containing a condom and lubricant which was stamped for free distribution by the Ministry of Health. Only one of the two sex clubs had a condom dispenser in the restroom, which was not functioning. Condoms in these venues could be purchased from staff at the bar. In the dance clubs, condoms could be purchased at condoms dispensers. While the only dispenser in Dance Club A was functioning, only one of the two in Dance Club B was functioning and this dispenser was not seen by ethnographers until the 5th observation. In the dance clubs, condoms could also be purchased from staff at the coat check room. However, the restrooms and coat check room were far from the darkrooms

where most sexual contacts took place. On one observation of Dance Club B, patrons were given a packet with condoms and lubricant as they entered the venue.

Interpersonal Interactions

Patron-patron interactions—Interactions between patrons differed significantly across the venues. In the porn theaters, most interactions were in the context of sexual contact. On a few occasions, patrons were seen conversing, and this was done in low voice and only in dyads. The ethnographers noted that their conversing with each other appeared to keep other patrons at bay. In both theaters, the initiation of sexual contact between two patrons often resulted in other patrons approaching, attempting to integrate themselves into the situation. These interactions occurred in silence. Minimal verbal interactions were reported within the darkrooms (i.e. moans) although on a few occasions patrons attempted to engage the ethnographers verbally.

In the sex clubs, patron interactions were more varied, as some patrons came with friends. In such cases, the groups could be seen socializing and conversing in the central socialization area. In the more dimly lit areas of the venue, couples could be seen kissing and caressing. Although patrons in private booths could be heard conversing briefly, no verbal communications were heard in the darkroom, including those (i.e. moans) heard in the darkrooms at the porn theaters.

Both dance clubs, on the other hand, were primarily venues for socializing, with patrons often arriving with friends and socializing together in the venue. Groups interacted in socialization areas as well as on the dance floor. Patrons were also seen socializing in the darkroom in Dance Club A, in dyads and small groups. At times, conversations between two patrons evolved into a sexual encounter. If a patron attempted to join some ongoing sexual activity, the approach was done in silence, by moving closer to the couple and either touching them or exhibiting himself. In Dance Club B, a few patrons could be seen using the darkroom area for socializing and conversing early in the night. As the night progressed, the interactions in this space shifted from socialization to sexual encounters. Couples who entered the darkroom to engage in sexual activity together could be seen speaking with each other during the encounter. Patrons who entered the darkroom alone tended to initiate sexual encounters non-verbally, through sustained eye contact or touch. The verbal interactions that were observed were brief. Several groups, usually consisting of young men, were seen engaging in group masturbation or oral sex, usually in silence, but engaged with each other through eye contact. The non-verbal interactions that were witnessed also included numerous occasions in which men, who were seeking or engaged in sexual activity with women, forcefully pushed away men who tried to initiate sex with them.

Staff-patron interactions—Staff at porn theaters did not have much interaction with patrons except to perform their duties (i.e., sell a beverage, receive payment for entry). Occasionally, a patron was seen sitting at the bar area conversing with the staff member. When engaged, these staff varied in their disposition, some were pleasant while others were curt. In general, none were seen initiating an interaction with patrons. Similarly, interactions

between staff and patrons at the sex clubs were brief and goal directed, with little conversation between them.

At Dance Club A, security personnel checked bags at the entrance and, if questioned, spoke briefly with patrons regarding what was allowed to be brought into the venue (e.g., no backpacks). In general, bar staff were friendly with patrons, engaging in longer interactions with some that appeared known to them. With other patrons, they were friendly but more goal oriented. Security personnel were not seen intervening with patrons during any of the observations.

Interactions between personnel and patrons of Dance Club B were mostly goal directed and brief. In open bar nights, cups of beer and champagne were continually set on the bar for patrons to pick up, with no interactions with the bartenders. In this venue, however, security personnel were active throughout the evening. They observed the venue, intervened in situations of potential aggression, assisted inebriated patrons and escorted some out of the venue. When groups gather in the darkroom, security personnel approached with flashlights, possibly to deter pickpocketing. They did not stop the sexual contact except between men and women during one observation. They were not seen conversing socially with patrons, however.

DISCUSSION

Results from this study highlight clear differences in person-environment dynamics across the different types of venues. For example, attendance at dance clubs centered on socializing with friends and drinking. Since entry into these venues did not usually begin until after 1:00am, drinking with friends usually began earlier offsite- a practice called *la previa* (the pre-party). Once at the venue, the cover charge often included 3–4 drinks per paid admission. Although not specifically designed as a sex venue, the sexual energy in the venue built during the evening through substance use, the sensual beats in the music, and the removal of shirts among patrons, culminating in visits to the darkroom which were increasingly full as the night progressed, with male-female, male-male, and male-transgender partnering observed. The data revealed increased drinking throughout the night that, for some patrons, often ended with a visit to the darkroom for sex while under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

The dynamic in adult theaters and sex clubs was strikingly different. In contrast with the dance clubs, attendance at these venues was a solitary, and mostly daytime, event. Attendance at the porn theaters, in particular, appeared marked by some shame or guilt in attending as suggested by the furtive glances and quick entries into the venues exhibited by some patrons. Patrons in these venues focused on sexual gratification, and socializing with other patrons was counter to the norms of the venue and appeared to hamper sexual encounters. Little alcohol use was witnessed in these venues, possibly due to these venues being frequented during the workday, when alcohol consumption could interfere with returning to work. Furthermore, contrary to dance clubs, these venues did not facilitate alcohol consumption by including drinks in the entry fee.

Masturbation, oral sex, and anal intercourse (with and without condoms) were witnessed or inferred (i.e., discarded condoms and wrappers) at all of the venues, although patterns and differences were observed. Clearly, some venues facilitated sexual encounters, while others (especially sex clubs) appeared to inhibit them. In fact, the limited sex witnessed in the sex clubs was striking for venues whose focus is providing a space for such experiences. Instead, patrons wandered through the hallways of the venue seeking sex partners, mostly unsuccessfully. This level of selectivity towards sexual partners was not apparent in the other venues observed. We have wondered whether the recent shift of these venues from a strictly sexual space towards greater socialization, as evidenced by the bars and socialization areas, impedes quick sexual encounters in the same way that conversations impeded sexual encounters in the porn theaters.

Anal intercourse (and in Dance Club B, vaginal intercourse) appeared to occur primarily in spaces where some privacy was perceived. These spaces included darkrooms, especially if completely darkened, bathroom stalls, or individual video booths in sex clubs. The role of lighting in shaping behavior could be ascertained from these practices. Patrons engaged in anal intercourse in the darkroom at porn theater A (which was one large, completely dark room) did not do so discreetly, allowing the darkness of the space to provide the privacy. In contrast, no anal intercourse was witnessed at porn theater B, where the darkroom receives light through the glass panels that separate it from the screening room. In this venue, anal intercourse appeared to occur in other areas with greater privacy, such as the individual stalls in the restroom. Individual booths and bathroom stalls also allow patrons to exclude others from the sexual encounters. Intercourse was also witnessed at the dance clubs although both had darkrooms with subdued lighting. In these venues however, alcohol-based disinhibition might facilitate engaging in intercourse even if it could be witnessed by other patrons. During an observation of Dance Club A, one ethnographer speculated that if the lighting were lowered further, the sexual behavior would escalate, in terms of the number of patrons engaging in sex and the frequency of oral and anal intercourse.

Findings from this study clearly depict how person-environment dynamics contribute to HIV risk behavior in these settings. The behavior of patrons is clearly influenced by the characteristics of the venue (i.e., design, proportional space devoted to bars, socialization, and sexual contact) and the norms of the behavior established within it (i.e., types of communication, codes to initiate sexual contact, or the avoidance of intercourse in areas where its most easily witnessed). Alternately, we also see how the behavior of the patrons en masse shift the meaning of a space such as when sex between two patrons seems to spark others to join or initiate sex with others, transforming dimly lit socialization areas into darkrooms.

Current HIV Prevention Materials in the Venues

The absence of HIV prevention materials in these settings was striking given that these are SOP venues. Only one venue, a porn theater, displayed any HIV related materials, a poster; and free distribution of condoms was witnessed during only one observation, at a dance club. While, in general, condoms are available for purchase, these are not easily accessible to patrons, as they are sold at the bars (in the porn theaters and sex clubs) or at the coat

check (at the dance clubs) which are distant from the areas where patrons engage in sex. Condom vending machines, which are required by Argentine law, were often broken and typically located in the restrooms, a space that few patrons used for sex. The limited HIV prevention materials in the venues suggests that in most cases, owners of these venues view HIV prevention not as a community or social responsibility, but solely as a patron's individual responsibility.

Findings from this study clearly demonstrate the need for HIV prevention interventions in these venues. However, the findings also make clear that while interventions in porn theaters and sex clubs might address HIV prevention specifically, interventions in dance clubs will have to target not only HIV prevention, but equally important, alcohol abuse. There is a critical need to intervene in the dance clubs, as the large number of patrons, high level of alcohol consumption, and little evidence of condom use in the darkrooms point to a particularly high risk setting.

Possible HIV prevention programs

Differences in venue and patron characteristics, alcohol consumption, as well as the dynamics between these factors need to be considered in developing venue-based HIV-prevention interventions [24,25]. As such, a rapid assessment of these dynamics is essential prior to developing and implementing interventions because the effectiveness of an intervention may vary across venues. For example, while a Popular Opinion Leader-type program might be effective in a dance club, where conversation and socialization are part of the typical behavior in the environment, it might be less effective in sex clubs or porn theaters, where silence is predominant and conversations can detract potential sex partners. Given the complexity of these settings, especially dance clubs with their high alcohol consumption, effective interventions will probably require a combination of approaches. Below, we outline potential components of venue based interventions.

Condom accessibility needs to move beyond whether or not there are condoms available in venue, but the ease with which these can be accessed by patrons. Obstacles to the accessibility of condoms need to be minimized so that their use can be maximized. Potential facilitators to condom use in these venues may include providing them in the spaces where sexually activity occurs or providing them gratuitously to patrons upon entry into the venues. Because just having condoms and HIV education posters or flyers may not be sufficient to change behavior in these venues [4], it is essential to combine increased condom accessibility with other interventions.

Social marketing campaigns, utilizing striking posters or cocktail napkins, which are not information-based or require prolonged attention may be effective in these settings. These campaigns may aim to provoke self-reflection about risk or self-care. Campaigns in bars and dance clubs can also tap into the social aspects of the venue to emphasize social responsibilities, like the campaign of "Friends don't let friends drive drunk" was used to decrease drunk driving.

Restructuring of spaces may also limit the highest risk sex. Dark rooms are an important component of bars/dance clubs, so there will be resistance to remove them. However,

differences in sexual behavior were noted based on level of lighting, so maintaining a level of lighting which less effectively obscures the sexual behavior occurring may allow for sexual contact in these settings, but diminish intercourse.

A model for venue-based interventions can be adapted from work on aggression in bar settings. Aggression in bars has been viewed as a product of individual person factors, the context, and alcohol consumption [40–45]. In this work, the physical environment of the bar setting has been closely studied, and characteristics such as layout, smokiness, lack of adequate seating, crowding, ability to dance or play pool, and the quality of the entertainment have been associated to aggressive behavior among patrons [40, 43–45]. Insights from this work have allowed for recommendations to be made about what aspects of the physical environment to alter in order to reduce aggression in these settings [40, 46, 47]. Based on this work, Graham et al. [48] developed and tested the Safer Bars program in a randomized controlled trial. In the intervention, bar staff and owners were provided with a 3-hour training on reducing aggression in the bars and with a workbook that allowed them to assess risks of aggression in their setting as well as ways to reduce environmental risks. The results, although moderate in effect, pointed to the effectiveness of the program in reducing physical aggression in the bars. Venue based interventions have also focused on the role of bar staff in decreasing violence or drunk driving [49,50].

However, venue-based interventions clearly require the engagement of venue owners and staff and, in this study, they seemed disinterested in HIV prevention activities at the venues. Similar disinterest was seen in a study of gay venues in Spain, which found that owners of gay venues were not willing to attend the focus groups held, yet owners of venues catering to specific groups of gay men (i.e., bears or the leather community) were much more invested in providing an environment where HIV risk was reduced [51]. Similarly, a recent study in numerous European countries, found there was interest from owners of SOP venues to engage in HIV risk reduction programs, although they did express concern about the types of programs and the reactions from patrons [52]. This study highlights the need to establish relationships with venue owners and to engage them, as well as staff and patrons, in the development of HIV prevention programming in the venues.

It is also essential to recognize that these venues exist within a broader socio-political context and the policies and actions of venue owners, as well as patrons, are influenced by cultural and political discourse on HIV among MSM. Thus, reducing HIV risk in these venues also requires the active participation of organizations advocating for HIV risk reduction in these venues as well as public health departments ensuring that laws relevant to these venues, such as the availability of condoms, are enforced or broadened.

Limitations

While findings from this ethnographic study have offered important insights into the dynamics present in SOP venues where alcohol is consumed, further studies are needed to assess whether similar dynamics are observed in other SOP venues and in other cities and countries. We also did not collect quantitative data on the sexual behavior of the venue patrons which would provide valuable complementary data to this ethnographic study. While this study provides a first step in understanding the venue-patron-alcohol dynamics

that contribute to HIV risk behavior in these settings, there is a clear need for further research in this area.

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Table 1

Domains of person-environment theory for alcohol and sex venues

Institutional Context	Physical Setting	Policies and Services	Supra personal
History of the establishment Size and layout of the building Number of staff	Types of spaces <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • for sexual encounters • bar area • common vs. private areas • socialization area Atmosphere: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clean/dirty • Dark/bright Music/Art/Wall décor	Availability of alcohol <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prices/included in cover charge Rules re: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • substance use • sexual behavior • level of (un)dress HIV/STI prevention & testing Special events CBO involvement	Aggregate staff and patron demographics Patron-patron interactions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • communication patterns • sexual behavior Staff-patron interactions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limits on alcohol use • by type of staff • key staff members • sexual behavior

Table 2

Comparative characteristics of alcohol and SOP venues observed

CHARACTERISTIC	PORN THEATERS		SEX CLUBS		DANCE CLUBS	
	A	B	A	B	A	B
Duration of Visits (in hours)	3.0–4.25	3.0–3.25	2.0–3.0	1.25–2.0	2.5–3.5	2.75–4.30
Venue Characteristics						
Staff members (per obs)	1–2	1–2	2–3	2–3	8–10	25–30
Socialization areas	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bar areas	1	1	1	1	3	4
Sexual contact areas						
Private rooms	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Dark Rooms	1	3	1	1	1	1
	Large	Subdivided	Large	Large	Large	Large
Patrons						
Sex						
Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Female	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Transgender	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Predominant Age	50's	50's	<40	<40	<40	<30
Attend accompanied	No	No	At times	At times	Mostly	Mostly
Substance Use						
Drinks included with entry	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Alcohol use in venue	Minimal	Minimal	Minimal	Minimal	Substantial	Substantial
Drunkenness witnessed	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Drug use	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Sexual Behavior Witnessed						
Masturbation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Oral Sex	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Anal Intercourse	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Signs of condom use	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Unprotected anal intercourse witnessed	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes

CHARACTERISTIC	PORN THEATERS		SEX CLUBS		DANCE CLUBS	
	A	B	A	B	A	B
HIV prevention						
HIV information	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Condom availability						
Purchase from staff	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Purchase from machine	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Free distribution	No	No	No	No	No	Once