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The Use of the Internet to Meet Sexual Partners: A Comparison of Non-Heterosexually-Identified Men with Heterosexually-Identified Men and Women

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Abstract

In 2008, we conducted online interviews with 65 self-identified adult heterosexual men and women and gay/bisexual men to explore perceptions and experiences with meeting people online. Reasons for meeting people online, desired partner characteristics, and the process of connecting for sex paralleled those observed in real-life; but the Internet allowed people to identify more partners and specific partner characteristics. “Background checks” of online partners, even though often believed to be false, increased familiarity and trust leading to reduced perceived need for condom use. Participants said online condom use negotiation was easier, but usually occurred in face-to-face contexts in practice. (99)

More than 60% of American adults use the Internet on a typical day (Pew Internet & Life Foundation, 2012). A popular activity involves the use of the Internet for erotic reasons (Ross, Rosser, McCurdy, & Feldman, 2007). For example, millions of U.S. adults report regular use of Internet pornography websites (Edelman, 2009; Ropelato, 2007). The Internet is also utilized to find romantic or sexual partners (Benotsch, Kalichman, & Cage, 2002; Grov, Agyemang, Ventuneac, & Breslow, 2013; Couch & Liamputtong, 2008; Doring, 2009; McFarlane, Bull, & Rietmeijer, 2000; McKirnan, Houston, & Tolou-Shams, 2007; Sautter, Tippet, & Morgan, 2010). Some suggest that because the Internet can accommodate a variety of sexual expressions, as well as allow anonymity for the user, it provides an ideal environment to explore sexuality (Albright, 2008; Doring, 2009; Grov, Gillespie, Royce, & Lever, 2011; Ross, 2005). The Internet makes many activities more efficient and may also permit the more efficient searching for sexual partners with particular interests. The Internet may also afford the opportunity to find multiple sexual partners for individuals who are interested in doing so. The use of the Internet in a sexualized context also appears to be associated with greater sexual risk. In multiple studies with diverse

populations, researchers have documented that persons who seek sexual partners via the Internet report more total sexual partners, more unprotected sex acts, higher rates of alcohol and other substance use in conjunction with sexual activity, and more sexually-transmitted infections (Benotsch, Martin, Espil, Nettles, Seal, & Pinkerton, 2011; Bolding Davis, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2006; Bull & McFarlane, 2000; Garofalo, Herrick, Mustanski, & Donenberg, 2007; Horvath, Bowen, & Williams, 2006; McFarlane, Bull, & Rietmeijer, 2002; McKirnan et al., 2007).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Meeting Partners Online

Most research examining the use of the Internet to find sexual partners or form relationships has used quantitative methodology. A handful of qualitative studies have been published, with several documenting reasons why people seek partners online and the advantages of using the Internet to find partners. Grov and colleagues (2008) noted that MSM who use the Internet to find sexual partners report benefits such as the ease of finding sexual partners, more personal safety, and the ability to avoid negative interpersonal contact in social settings such as bars or clubs. As part of a larger quantitative study, Ross and colleagues (2007) asked a few open-ended questions of MSM recruited from gay.com chat rooms. Questions focused on why men use the Internet to seek partners and the advantages afforded. Their most prevalent themes included (1) the ease of finding partners through use of the Internet; and (2) the reduced anxiety for some individuals associated with asking direct sexual questions online versus face to face. Additional themes included the safety permitted by anonymity, the excitement and ability to experiment, and the ability to get to know people better without pressure. In a study conducted with MSM in the United Kingdom, participants indicated that an advantage of using the Internet to find partners is that it enables men to find partners with similar sexual safety preferences and, in particular, permitted serosorting – the risk-reduction strategy of only having sex with partners of the same HIV status (Davis, Hart, Bolding, Sherr, & Elford, 2006). Grov and colleagues (2008) similarly noted that some MSM are able to use the Internet as part of a harm reduction strategy, for example, finding sexual satisfaction through cybersex rather than in-person meetings which might confer risk (see also, Doring, 2009). Ross (2005) also highlighted some advantages to using the Internet for sexual use as opposed to finding partners using more conventional methods. The most relevant of those advantages being accelerated intimacy through trust building and closeness, without any of the social cues that may interrupt this process, and being able to link individuals up by certain sexual fetishes and desires.

Although past research has given attention to the advantages perceived by individuals who use the Internet to meet sexual or romantic partners, there is little research on the perceived disadvantages associated with Internet sex seeking. Ross and colleagues (2007) noted that the reasons for Internet use often appear contradictory. For this reason, disadvantages are noted less than “antagonistic advantages” which refers to experiencing two sides of a construct positively (Davidovich, Kemp, bjo de Vaate, & Haufe, 2005; in Ross et al., 2007). For example, some individuals use the Internet to avoid direct human contact whereas others use the Internet to meet people and explore social contact (Ross et al., 2007).

Not all individuals who use the Internet do away with conventional methods of meeting sexual partners. Using the Internet versus real life to find sexual partners can depend on many factors. For one, the Internet is used when sex is perceived as “urgent,” or when experiencing depression or low confidence (Ross et al., 2007). Participants preferred meeting individuals in real life (without using the Internet) when alcohol and drugs were used, and when the intention was to meet a partner to form a relationship with, or have something “more than sex” (Ross et al., 2007).

Heterosexual Men and Women and the Internet

Much of the current literature on the use of the Internet for sexual reasons has focused on MSM (Albright, 2008; Benotsch et al., 2011; Bolding, Davis, Sherr, Hart, & Elford, 2004; McKirnan et al., 2007; Weatherburn, Hickson, & Reid, 2003). In contrast, relatively little research- especially qualitative research- has focused on heterosexual individuals. This is potentially due to the large burden that HIV infection has on MSM populations, and the potential for MSM to use the Internet more actively to find sex than heterosexual men and women (Rietmeijer, Bull, & McFarlane, 2001). For MSM who experience stigmatization associated with their behavior, the Internet may serve as a safe place to seek partners while avoiding the potential social (e.g., discrimination) and physical (e.g., being the victim of a hate crime) dangers of seeking sexual partners at bar venues or community events (c.f., McKenna & Bargh, 1998). This may be particularly true among MSM who live in rural or other areas particularly unaccepting of same sex relationships (Williams, Bowen & Horvath, 2005).

In one of the small number of studies examining broader populations, Daneback Mansson, and Ross (2007) utilized a sample that was largely heterosexual, and found that 35% of men and 40% of women reported having sex with a partner that was initially met online. Older women (ages 35-65) were significantly more likely to report having sex with someone they met initially online than younger women; there were no significant age differences among men (Danebeck et al., 2007). Additionally, there were no differences in sexual orientation among women when examining their likelihood of engaging in sex with a partner initially met online. Among men, gay and bisexual men were significantly more likely to engage in sex with a partner initially met online than were heterosexual men. In an online study of over 15,000 people, Lever and colleagues (2008) found that gay men, lesbian women, and bisexual individuals were more than likely than heterosexual respondents to have exchanged correspondence, met others offline, and had sex with someone met through personal ads. Further, these authors found that women were more likely than men to have established a serious relationship as a result of meeting someone through personals. In a qualitative examination of mostly heterosexual adults who utilized sex-oriented contact websites, Sevcikova and Daneback (2011) found that participants often had extensive online conversations prior to meeting in person and frequently negotiated the context of the encounter that was to occur once the individuals met. In this way, participants noted that online negotiation could result in safer sex because it reduced disinhibition during the real life encounter.

The purpose of this descriptive study was to use qualitative methods to document and compare the experiences and perceptions of gay and bisexual men, heterosexual men, and heterosexual women who use the Internet to seek romance or sex. As described earlier, most research in this area has focused on MSM or gay- or bisexually-identified men. Much less research has addressed how heterosexual men and women use technological mediums to find sexual partners. Furthermore, this literature places little focus on how heterosexual men and women discuss safer sex when using the Internet to find sexual partners. This descriptive study also elicited participant's perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of sex seeking on the Internet, examined differences in the types of sexual behaviors engaged with partners met online, and explored safer sex behavior and discussion with partners met on the Internet. Finally, we compared the online sexual scripts (i.e., cognitive schema characterizing how to behave in sexual situations) identified in our study to those identified in studies of real-world environments (e.g., Masters, Casey, Wells, & Morrison, 2013; Seal, Smith, Coley, Perry, & Gamez, 2008). This descriptive study was the initial phase of a larger funded project to develop and pilot an online HIV risk reduction intervention for gay and bisexually-identified men, as well as heterosexual men and women. As such, we did not recruit women who identified as lesbian or bisexual for this study.

Interviews were conducted in real time (synchronous) via instant messaging (IM). Interviews conducted entirely online have a number of advantages, including the anonymity of the participants and the ability to easily reach individuals in diverse geographic regions or who are socially isolated (Davis, Bolding, Hard, Sherr, & Elford, 2004). Considerable prior research indicates that increased anonymity is associated with greater disclosure of private or stigmatized behaviors and that computer-based assessments can be an important tool for data collection in this regard (Des Jarlais, Paone, Milliken, Turner, Miller, Gribble et al., 1999; Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). Conducting chat-based interviews also eliminates the need for transcription services (Davis et al., 2004) and is an ecologically valid method for interviewing members of an online community, most of whom use IM regularly (Adams & Neville, 2009). An additional advantage is that both participant and interviewer have complete copies of the text interaction, which can be beneficial if the interviewer develops technical difficulties (Kazmer & Xie, 2008).

There are also disadvantages of online interviewing. Interview quality is influenced by factors not present in face-to-face interviews such as computer literacy, typing speed, technological difficulties (e.g., computer crashes), and limited nonverbal communication (Davis et al., 2004). To reduce these concerns, standard qualitative interviewing procedures were adapted for use online as recommended by others conducting online qualitative research (Davis et al., 2004; Kazmer & Xie, 2008; Opdenakker, 2006). For example, interviewers adopted many of the stylistic conventions used in online IM-based communication such as the use of familiar acronyms (e.g., "LOL" for "laughing out loud") and use of emoticons (e.g., ☺) to signify affective responses (Davis et al., 2004; Kazmer & Xie, 2008). Several researchers have concluded that sensitively conducted Internet-based qualitative methods can yield rich data with validity comparable to other interviewing formats (Ayling & Mewse, 2009; Kazmer & Xie, 2008; Opdenakker, 2006; Strickland, Moloney, Dietrich, Myerburg, Cotsonis, & Johnson, 2003; Underhill & Olmsted, 2003).

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of 35 self-identified heterosexual men, 14 self-identified heterosexual women, and 16 self-identified gay (n=12) or bisexual (n=4) men. The original goal was to recruit 15 participants per subgroup, a sample size that facilitates the attainment of saturation and allow for between-group comparison (Morse, 1994). More heterosexual men were recruited due to the P.I.'s intent to make this group a priority population for the subsequent piloting of an online HIV prevention intervention. The mean age of participants was 30.8 years ($SD = 10.4$, range = 18 to 59; median = 27 years). Overall, 76% of participants identified as White, 9% as Asian American, 6.5% as African American, 6.5% as Latino/a, and 2% as multiracial. There were no significant between-group differences with respect to age or race/ethnicity.

Procedures

In 2008, we recruited a sample of individuals who used the Internet to find sexual or romantic partners 2008 through online chat rooms. Chat rooms where participants were recruited were generally linked to a specific geographic site (state or major city) and were provided by AOL (75%), gay.com (20%), MySpace (3%) and Yahoo (2%). Overall, participants recruited represented 21 U.S. states and the District of Columbia.

Participants were recruited individually by instant messaging persons in the chat room or by making an announcement in the general chat area of the chat room. We screened participants to insure that they were at least 18 years of age and had used the Internet to seek a sexual or romantic partner. Participants were informed that the interview would take 60-90 minutes to complete, was anonymous, and would include questions regarding sexual behavior and motivations for using the Internet to seek sexual partners. They also were informed that they would receive \$40 compensation after completing the interview, which would be paid through a PayPal account. If the person did not have a PayPal account, assistance was provided to guide the person through the acquisition of an account. No participants refused payment. Prior to the interview, all participants completed an online informed consent process which required them to click a button indicating that they understood the information and agreed to participate (Rosser, Gurak, Horvath, Oakes, Konstan, & Danilenko, 2009). Study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the University of Colorado Denver and the Medical College of Wisconsin.

The transcript of the online qualitative interview was de-identified to remove participant screen names and other potentially identifying information and saved as a Word document for later analysis. The data reported in this article were collected in response to a series of questions about meeting partners online, the advantages and disadvantages of meeting partners online relative to meeting them in person, sexual activity with partners met online, and safer sex behavior and discussion with sexual partners met on the Internet. Interviewers were instructed to use probes to collect detailed information about these experiences.

Interviewer Training

The interviews were conducted by a diverse research team experienced in the administration of qualitative interviews related to sexual behavior and well-versed in online chat environments. All interviewers received extensive training on the interview protocol prior to conducting the fieldwork. Training included several mock online interviews to insure interviewer comfort and familiarity with the online interviewing process. The lead author, a senior researcher experienced with qualitative methodology, monitored interviews to ensure protocol adherence. The interview team met regularly to discuss field issues and barriers to protocol implementation. All interviews with gay or bisexual men were conducted by a gay male interviewer. All interviews with women were conducted by female interviewers. Heterosexual men were interviewed by both male and female staff.

Data Analyses

Interviews were analyzed for emergent themes related to four main analytic questions: (1) reasons for using Internet chat rooms to meet potential partners; (2) advantages and disadvantages of using Internet chat rooms to meet people; (3) sexual and non-sexual activities with partners met online; and (4) safer sex behavior and discussion with partner met online. Table 1 provides a summary of key themes. We initially examined the transcripts to identify primary coding categories as well as the range of themes present within each category. Identified coding categories and themes were organized into a formal codebook, and illustrative quotes relevant to these themes were extracted from the transcripts. Next, transcripts were content coded. The coding team discussed new themes that did not appear to fit into the original codebook and modifications were made when deemed appropriate. When suggested by associations, overlap, or diversions in the data, thematic categories were refined, merged, or subdivided. Decision trails were noted and documented to assure that interpretations were supported by the data (Hall & Stevens 1991; Sandelowski, 1986; Sharts-Hopko, 2002).

Results

Reasons for Use of Internet Chat Rooms to Meet People

Participants offered a variety of reasons for their use of Internet chat rooms to meet people. About half (49%) of participants said they used chat rooms to meet people for friendship. Other common reasons included using the Internet to find romance and chemistry (38%) or sexual encounters or relationships (e.g., one-night stands, ongoing physical/sexual relationship; 29%). Participants also mentioned using the Internet to seek companionship (e.g., someone to hang out with, speak on phone/in person with; 28%) or seek a relationship beyond just sex (26%). Over two-fifths (44%) of gay/bisexual men said they used the Internet to seek sex, whereas fewer heterosexual men (26%) or women (21%) reported this use of the Internet. In contrast, a higher percentage of heterosexual women (50%) said that they sought romance online than was reported by gay/bisexual men (38%) or heterosexual men (34%). There were also differences across the groups in their expectations of meeting partners online. Over a third of heterosexual women (36%) indicated that they had low or no expectation of meeting partners when searching online compared to heterosexual men (26%) or gay/bisexual men (6%).

Whether seeking sexual or non-sexual partners on the Internet, the desired characteristics of potential partners included individuals who (1) had “*positive personality characteristics*” (e.g., interesting, good personality, reliability, niceness, open-mindedness, honesty, and truthfulness; 32%); (2) were similar in demographics (e.g., age, location, sexual orientation; 27%), (3) were easy to chat with (26%), (4) had similar interests (26%), (5) were physically attractive (23%), and (6) had a positive mental and physical health orientation (14%). Truth and honesty were mentioned by a higher proportion of heterosexual women (43%) and men (37%) than gay/bisexual men (6%). Similarly, a higher percentage of heterosexual women (36%) mentioned ability to easily talk with a partner than the percentage of gay/bisexual men (25%) or heterosexual men (17%) mentioning this theme.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Meeting People through Internet Chat Rooms

Slightly over one-fourth of participants (28%) stated that there was no difference between seeking partners out through Internet chat rooms versus in person. Among participants explicitly listing specific advantages to meeting people on the Internet (n=47), 79% said that an advantage of seeking partners online was being able to do “*background check*” research via chat room profiles and content, Facebook, and other Internet sources. Said one gay man, “If you get as far as the whole name, you can google them, etc., to find out more about them.” (GM18) This allowed participants to “*weed out individuals*” that were deemed unsuitable partners. Another gay man said that he could observe potential partners in the general chat area and get a sense of their personality: “You can kinda observe what guys say and find out if they may be interesting to you and worth trying to strike up a conversation with...kinda like spying on them without them knowing.” (GM02) A heterosexual man said meeting potential partners online allowed him to “easily filter out the gold diggers, the religious types, the overly too close to family types, and the non-sexual types.” (HM19) One heterosexual woman posited that “You know exactly what you’re getting ahead of time.” (HF02) Finally, nearly two-thirds of gay/bisexual men (63%) mentioned that the Internet gave them many more partner options, while only slightly over a quarter of heterosexual men and women (29% each) mentioned this advantage.

Another commonly mentioned advantage was increased comfort and ease with communication openness (70%): People feel free to talk about things to others online that they wouldn't talk about to people they've known for 10 years.” (HM13) Said another heterosexual man, “In 10 years since my divorce, I have used online as my sole source of dating. In real person, generally the female is less likely to talk to you as frankly as they do online.” (HM08) Similar sentiments were expressed by a heterosexual woman who said “sometimes it's easier to say things online you wouldn't be able to in person. I wouldn't walk up to someone on the street and just say ‘you're hot’ or things like that...You can get to know each other online a little better first.” (HF55) Another heterosexual woman stated “I live in a rural area and it can be hard to meet people by going out, so this way, you can find out more about them in a little less awkward way.” (HF10) Some participants attributed the ease of online communication to “the comfort of hiding behind a mask or fake pix or behind a computer.” (HM29) In turn, this reduced their fear of rejection as it occurs anonymously, as well their confidence in their ability to reject a potential partner easily and quickly: “It's much easier to end an instant message than it is to end a date.” (GM23)

This openness of conversation extended to people seeking online partners for sex: “The conversations tend to be truer as to what each person wants out of the relationship...just sex, friends, fuck buddy.” (GM10) Yet, most women and many gay/bisexual men, but not heterosexual men, said they were turned off by potential partners who were just seeking sex. One woman stated that she expected to be treated “with respect. Don't ask me my bra size 5 seconds after he says ‘hi.’...That's usually when I shut them down, or I give them the ‘I'm TOTALLY not interested’ speech.” (HF54) However, some women acknowledged that expectations for partners met online versus in real-life are the same: “Sex...mostly both of us are looking for the same thing. However, I usually know [more] about these guys [met online] when I meet them than if I just met them in a bar or club.” (HF05)

Yet, in direct contradiction to the stated capacity that meeting potential partners on the Internet allowed people to do a “*background check*,” the majority of participants (54%) indicated that a primary disadvantage of seeking partners online was the limited ability to evaluate others. Said one person, there is “almost no honesty online. That is why I stopped looking for women online.” (HM02) Another participant stated, “The biggest disadvantage is meeting Dr. Jeckyll online and Mr. Hyde in person.” (HM09) Said a heterosexual woman, “You don't really know who you are talking to. A picture can be fake. You could be talking to a psycho for all you know.” (HF55) Men mostly mentioned being disappointed with partners who they felt misrepresented their physical attractiveness, whereas safety concerns were predominantly mentioned by women. A higher proportion of women also commented that they often could not tell online if a potential partner was “*married or in a relationship*.” (HF06) One woman described an experience she had meeting a person she had met online: “I met a guy online, and we talked for quite a while. So we went out to eat and then we went to his house to hang out, and his girlfriend that I didn't know he had showed up, and was ready to fight because I was there.” (HF10) In all, about one-third of respondents (32%) reported negative encounters with people they met online.

Additional complaints about meeting people through Internet chat rooms were increased possibility that the person did not live nearby (17%); inability to know a person's background (9%); and difficulty with expressing or perceiving emotion and personality online (5%): “You miss the facial honesty and the observation for lies.” (HM26) Similarly, a gay man said “You really can't show emotion, so you don't know what their personality is just by talking to them online.” (GM01) Another gay man observed, “You can't read the body language that goes along with having a conversation with someone in person. Sometimes it's hard to get an actual feel of a person without seeing them, their mannerisms, their tones in speaking, hard to tell about their real personality.” (GM18)

As a result of their negative experiences, about a third of participants (34%) reported cynicism about meeting a person in real-life because there is so much “falsification online. Few people I have met have represented themselves online as they are in person.” (HM13) Said another heterosexual man, “It feels more exciting because there is the element of mystery in not knowing the person in 3-D yet.” But he added that it can lead to disappointment “if the person does not meet my expectations in real-life.” (HM35)

Sexual and non-sexual activities with partners met online

Participants described a range of activities (sexual and non-sexual) that they engaged in with people who they met through Internet chat rooms. Commonality with scripts often observed in the progression of developing a relationship with potential partners met face-to-face was evident. The most common non-sexual activity that individuals did was to meet for drinks (60%), followed by going on a casual date (54%), then entering into a formal dating relationship (e.g., long-term relationship, moved near person, engagement, marriage; 52%). One participant indicated that his last “*long relationship was with someone [he] met online... started chatting ... hit it off and ended up going out and stayed together almost 4 years*” (GM02). Participants also discussed becoming friends (46%) and going on activity dates (e.g., camping, white water rafting, bowling; 32%) with individuals that they had met online.

Only four participants (6%) said they did not have sex with people met online. Among the remaining 61 participants (94%), individuals reported a range of sexual experiences with individuals who they met online, including oral (57%), vaginal (66%), and/or anal (30%) sex. Said one participant: “*Hooked up with a few... sometimes it's sex, sometimes it's just making out or anything in between.*” (HW11) Other participants mentioned one night stands/friends with benefits (52%), low risk sexual acts (e.g., kissing, cuddling, foreplay; 34%), and swinging/non-monogamous acts (e.g., multiple partners, three ways; 25%). Kinky sexual acts (e.g., videotaping sex, bondage) were less commonly mentioned (8%).

Safe Sex Behavior and Discussion with People Met Online

Among the 61 participants who reported sex with people met online, 57% said they expected to use condoms during sexual intercourse (“*No glove, no love*”; GM05), and about two-thirds of participants (65%) reported past condom use when having sex with someone they met online. About two-thirds of heterosexual men (69%) and gay/bisexual men (63%) reported having ever used a condom with someone met online, whereas 57% of heterosexual women reported this behavior. However, nearly half (46%) of the participants who had sex with people met online also indicated that they had unprotected sexual intercourse with one or more of these individuals. Further, few participants (12%) said they would refuse sex without a condom. Other participants (20%) said they only used a condom if asked by their partner.

Participants mentioned several barriers to condom use. The most common barrier was lust and passion (39%): “[I] did not expect to go that far so we did not discuss condom use. We had intercourse in back of a van. She was very passionate and the age difference excited me. She asked me [if I had condoms] but then my cock went inside her. The lust swept us away.” (HM04) Respondents also said that it was common for people to advertise online their desire for engaging in risky sexual behaviors (e.g., talking about having/wanting unprotected sex, desiring to give/receive HIV; 32%) or their personal preferences for not using condoms (18%). One heterosexual woman commented that it is easier to negotiate condom use in real-life: “*Like if you pick someone up in a bar just for sex, you don't know them. But because you have talked to [someone] online for a while, it seems like you know them. I feel that I know them and don't need to use a condom.*” (HF06)

Respondents also reported non-condom safer sex strategies. Nearly half of participants (48%) reported sexual delay tactics, such as delaying sex with a partner, not having sex the first night (s)he meets a new partner, and/or waiting until feeling comfortable to have sex. Other participants reported abstinence from sex if any risk was perceived (e.g., cannot trust person, person desires bareback sex; 31%), abstaining from behaviors perceived to be risky (e.g., anal intercourse; 25%), minimizing the exchange of bodily fluids (12%), and/or being discriminate in their partner selection (11%). One participant said he would only “use a condom if I suspect the person is lying or don't think this date will turn into a relationship...generally it depends on how long you have known them.” (HM08)

A higher percentage of gay/bisexual men reported a variety of sexual delay strategies than heterosexual men or women. One-fourth of gay/bisexual men (25%) said they avoided sex on the first night compared to 14% of heterosexual women and men. A higher percentage of gay/bisexual men also reported waiting to get to know one's partner before having sex (31%) than heterosexual men (17%) or women (7%). Finally, nearly two-thirds of gay/bisexual men (63%) said they would abstain from sex until in a steady relationship with their partner, whereas this strategy was reported by less than half of heterosexual women (43%) and men (29%). In contrast, a slightly higher proportion of heterosexual women (21%) and men (17%) indicated they would require their partner to be checked for STDs prior to sex than was reported by gay/bisexual men (13%).

Although a large number of participants endorsed safer sex practices, nearly half of participants (46%) indicated that often there was a lack of discussion about safer sex. Paradoxically, while many participants said it was easier to negotiate safer sex online versus in-person, most participants (80%) indicated that people are reluctant to discuss safer sex online and this type of communication is not common. One heterosexual woman said it was easier to negotiate condom use or safer sex in real-life “because it's kind of awkward if you talk about it when you're not about to actually do it.” (HF04) Some respondents (20%) felt that it was more common for heterosexual women or gay men to discuss condom use than it was for heterosexual men. They also said references to safer sex were often limited to vague references displayed on a profile (e.g., “*only sex safe*”) or safer sex is hinted but not talked about explicitly.

Other barriers to safer sex discussion included perceived invulnerability (“I think everyone knows it's [HIV/STDS] out there...but nobody talks about it...they think it won't happen to them”; 52%), being more interested in sex than safety (“*just trying to get laid*”; 38%), delaying communication regarding sex until meeting in person and getting to know the other person (20%), greater concern about pregnancy than about HIV or other STIs (16%), assuming potential partners are “clean” (“People who are scared of disease tend to be unwilling to talk about it openly they will hint at it or talk around it, never about it”; 15%), and a lack of knowledge about how STIs are spread (11%). Some participants (18%) also indicated that people are dishonest about their sexual health and practices when they do discuss safer sex online (e.g., lie about HIV/STI status; report they will use a condom online, but do not follow through in person).

Discussion

We used online qualitative methods to document and compare the experiences and perceptions of gay- and bisexually-identified men, heterosexually-identified men, and heterosexually-identified women who use the Internet to seek romance or sex. As mentioned earlier, most research in this area has focused on MSM or gay- or bisexually-identified men. Much less research has addressed how heterosexually-identified men and women use technological mediums to find sexual partners. Furthermore, this literature places little focus on how heterosexual men and women discuss safer sex when using the Internet to find sexual partners. The present study documented and compared these groups on their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of seeking partners on the Internet, examined differences in the types of sexual behaviors engaged with partners met online, and explored how safer sex is discussed and practiced with partners met online. The present analyses also compared how the scripts identified in this study for meeting partners compared with those identified in real-world environments.

Although it has been suggested that using the Internet has changed the traditional face-to-face dating and/or sexual hook-up script, our data indicated that the basic motivational reasons people seek partners on the Internet and the characteristics desired in a potential partners mirrored those described for meeting potential partners in face-to-face interactions (e.g., Masters et al., 2013; Seal et al., 2008). Further, as described below, our data suggest that the sequential script process of meeting potential partners, getting to know them, making a decision to meet someone face-to-face and perhaps have sex, to developing a longer-term relationship is not fundamentally different from those identified in these real-life studies (e.g., Masters et al., 2013; Seal et al., 2008). However, the Internet does provide a modality for people to identify a larger number of potential partners more rapidly thus accelerating this process (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008). Indeed, over a third (37%) of all respondents explicitly acknowledged that it was easier to gain access to a greater number of potential partners online. Online partner seeking also allowed people to more precisely delineate specific partner characteristics, such as HIV serostatus or a desire to engage in certain types of sexual behaviors.

Our data further revealed paradoxes in people's reasons for using the Internet to meet partners, as well as in the advantages and disadvantages they offered associated with this technology. As found in other studies (e.g., Couch & Liamputtong, 2008; Grov et al., 2008; 2013; Ross et al., 2007) participants talked about being able to do "background checks" on potential online partners, they simultaneously indicated that the information they received was typically false. While some participants expressed awareness of this contradiction, most participants expressed this contradiction without making connection between their stated advantage and disadvantage. Similarly, the process of moving from meeting a potential partner to having sex with that person mirrored face-to-face sexual contexts of one-night stands and sex within longer-term relationships. Despite their distrust of people's honesty when corresponding online, participants reported that "*getting to know*" a person online increased partner familiarity and trust, thus, reducing the perceived necessity of using a condom. It was also paradoxical that while most participants said it was easier to negotiate condom use online, few engaged in this behavior. Rather, condom use and other safer sex

practices were typically negotiated in face-to-face contexts and driven by perceived partner risks well-described in previous literature (e.g., Apostolopoulos, Sönmez, & Massengale, 2013; Benotsch et al., 2011; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003).

There were differences in the proportion of participants who mentioned particular themes across the three study groups. A higher percentage of gay/bisexual men compared to heterosexual men and women mentioned that online partner seeking increased their options and that they held expectations about their ability to meet partners online. A greater proportion of gay/bisexual men also overtly stated that they used the Internet to seek sex compared to heterosexual participants. However, a greater percentage of gay/bisexual men than heterosexual men or women reported using a range of strategies to delay sexual intercourse with a new partner met online. In contrast, a greater percentage of heterosexual men and women indicated that they would want their partner to get an STD check before having sex. A greater proportion of heterosexual women, compared to the two men's groups, stated they used the Internet to find romance or conversation with potential partners. A higher proportion of heterosexual women, and to a lesser extent heterosexual men, said they were seeking honesty and truthfulness in potential partners, a trait only one gay/bisexual man mentioned.

These differences across groups may reflect differences in the social context for gay and bisexual men versus heterosexual men and women. For example, participants are likely aware of the higher HIV prevalence in gay and bisexual men relative to the other two groups which may have engendered the delay strategies reported by this group. In addition, gay and bisexual participants were likely subject to greater degrees of minority stress due to prejudice and discrimination relative to the heterosexual participants (Meyer, 2003). Gay and bisexual participants in environments less accepting of same-sex relationships may be particularly likely to utilize the anonymity of the Internet to make social and sexual connections (Döring, 2009; Hidalgo et al., 2013; Jamil et al., 2009; Williams, Bowen & Horvath, 2005).

Additional research is needed to disentangle differences between people who regularly seek partners online versus those who regularly seek partners in real-life contexts. For example, while research indicates people who seek partners online, versus those who do not, engage in more sexual risk behavior (Adams & Neville, 2009; Benotsch et al., 2011; Bolding et al., 2006; Bull & McFarlane, 2000; Garofalo et al., 2007; Horvath et al., 2007; McFarlane et al., 2002; McKirnan et al., 2007), it is unclear whether this finding is an artifact of the comparison group or a real difference. Perhaps a more revealing comparison would be among those who regularly seek sexual partners online versus those who regularly seek partners in real-life sexual environments (e.g., bath houses, swing clubs, sexual cruising bars).

Limitations of our study included assessment of a convenience sample comprised of people who were willing to do an online interview about sexual behavior. Our sample also lacked racial and ethnic diversity. Further, we did not recruit women who identified as lesbian or bisexual given the broader project goals of developing and piloting an on-line HIV risk reduction intervention for gay and bisexually-identified men, as well as heterosexual men

and women. Similarly, our small sample size did not permit examination of age trends within subgroups nor interactions between age and the subgroups. Other limitations included the extent to which participants fully disclosed their attitudes and behaviors with regard to the study content. Further, data were collected in 2008 and did not explore the influence of recent advances in technology-mediated sexuality (e.g., mobile platforms, sexting; Benotsch, Snipes, Martin, & Bull, 2013; Landovitz et al., 2013; Temple, Paul, van den Berg, Le, McElhany, & Temple, 2012).

Nonetheless, our data suggested that the fundamental processes of meeting potential partners, developing a relationship with them, meeting them in person, and having sex with them do not differ much across online versus traditional face-to-face modalities (e.g., Masters et al., 2013; Seal et al., 2008). What have changed are the breadth and quickness of access to potential partners, as well as the ability to rapidly and anonymously terminate contact with partners deemed unsuitable or undesirable.

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Table 1

Summary of Key Themes

Question of Interest	Key Themes
Reasons for Use of Internet Chat Rooms to Meet People	To meet people for friendship (49%) To find romance and chemistry (38%) To meet people for sexual encounters or relationships (29%) To find companionship (28%) To seek long-term relationship (26%)
Desired Characteristics of Potential Internet Partners	Positive personality characteristics (32%) Similar demographic characteristics (27%) Easy to chat with (26%) Similar interests (26%) Physical attractiveness (23%) Positive mental and physical health orientation (14%)
Advantages of Meeting People through Internet Chat Rooms (among people reporting an advantage)	No differences between meeting partners online vs real-life (28%) Capacity to do background check on potential partners (79%) Increased comfort and ease with communication openness (70%)
Disadvantages of Meeting People through Internet Chat Rooms (among people reporting a disadvantage)	Limited capacity to evaluate potential partner (54%) Increased likelihood person did not live nearby (17%) Inability to learn person's background (9%) Difficult to express/perceive emotion/personality online (5%)
Non-Sexual Activities with Partners Met Online	Meet for drink (60%) Go on casual date (54%) Enter into a formal dating relationship (52%) Became friends (46%) Go on activity dates (e.g., camping, rafting) (32%)
Sexual Activities with Partners Met Online (among participants reporting behavior)	Had oral, anal, and/or vaginal intercourse (94%) Oral intercourse (57%) Vaginal intercourse (66%) Anal intercourse (30%) Had a one night stand (52%) Non-penetrative sexual behavior (34%) Swinging/multiple partners (25%) Kinky sexual behavior (e.g., bondage) (8%)
Safer Sex Behavior with Partners Met Online	Used a condom during intercourse (67%) Did not use a condom during intercourse (46%) Refuse intercourse without a condom (12%) Only use a condom for intercourse if partner asks (20%)
Barriers to Condom Use with Partners Met Online	Lust/passion (39%) Purposely seek partners who will have intercourse without a condom (32%) Personal preferences to not use a condom (18%)
Non-Condom Safer Sex Strategies with Partners Met Online	Sexual delay tactics (48%) Avoid sex with partners with a perceived risk (31%) Abstain from sexual behaviors perceived as risky (25%) Minimize exchange of bodily fluids (12%) Being discriminant in partner selection (11%)
Safer Sex Discussion with Partners Met Online	People are reluctant to discuss safer sex online (80%) No need due to perceived invulnerability to HIV (52%) Rarely or never happens (46%) More interested in having sex than being safe (38%) Easier for heterosexual women and gay men to discuss safer sex online than heterosexual men (20%) Delaying safer sex discussion until meeting in person or getting to know person better (20%) People are dishonest when discussing sexual health and practices (18%) Greater concern about pregnancy prevention than HIV/STIs (16%) Assume partners are clean (15%) Lack of knowledge about HIV/STIs (11%)