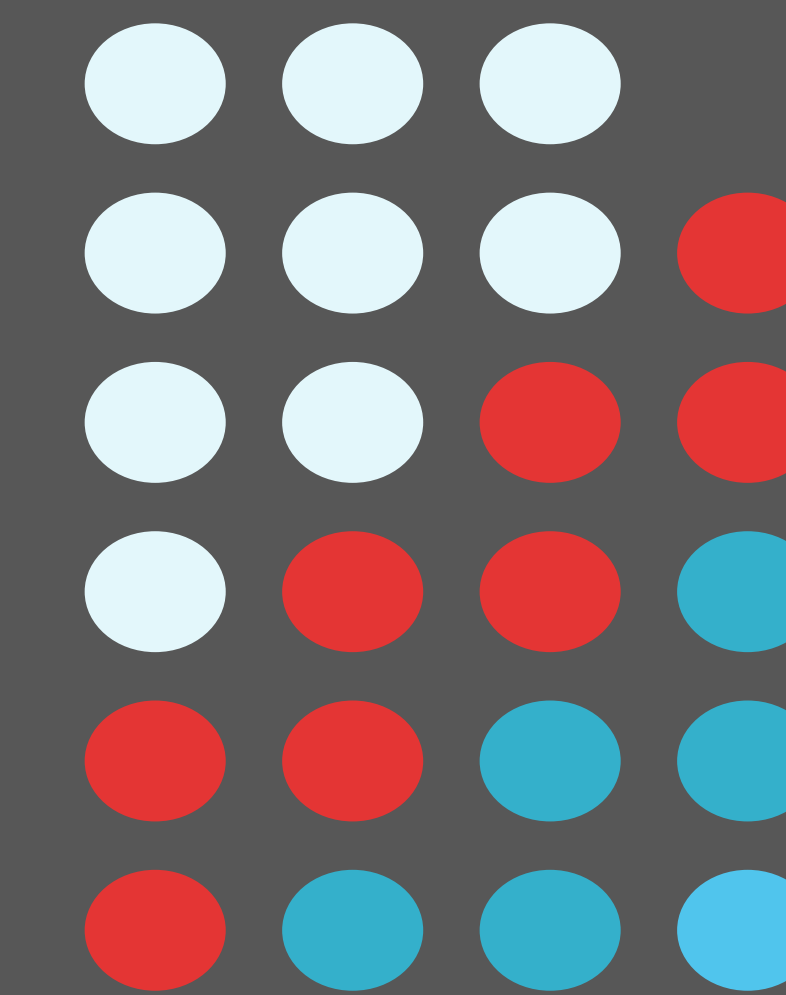


Influences of Mobile Apps on Sexual Health: Findings from Focus Groups with Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) in New York City

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Background

In the United States, men who have sex with men (MSM) are disproportionately at greater risk for HIV transmission than other men. Although MSM represent a relatively small subset of the US population, accounting for approximately 2%, they comprised the majority of all new HIV infections annually from 2006 to 2009 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2011) and accounted for 61% of all new US HIV infections in 2009.

The HIV epidemic is pervasive in New York City (NYC). With the largest population of MSM in the US, approximately 5% of all sexually active men in NYC are MSM and accounted for nearly 43% of all new HIV diagnoses in 2009 (New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYCDOHMH), 2012). Nationally, while the largest share of newly diagnosed MSM under age 30 is Caucasian, almost 80% of newly diagnosed YMSM in NYC are African American or Hispanic (NYCDOHMH, 2012).

The literature indicates that the Internet has become an increasingly popular method for MSM to communicate with and to meet sex partners (Bull, McFarlane, & Rietmeijer, 2001; Garofalo, Herrick, & Mustanski, 2007). A meta-analysis of the literature on MSM and Internet use conducted by Liao et al. concluded that approximately 35-45% of MSM use the Internet to search for sexual partners (2006). In fact, is estimated that up to 85% of MSM report some recent Internet use for the purpose of meeting other men (Rosser et al., 2011).

American adults, especially those ages 18-29 are particularly tech savvy. On average, 93% of adults own a cell phone, 65% of which are smartphones (phones that use Internet and GPS technology to communicate beyond standard dial-up) (Duggan & Brenner, 2012). These advances in technology have created new outlets for MSM to meet sexual partners. In 2009, several location-based mobile apps, also known as Geosocial Networking Applications, geared toward gay and bisexual men were launched. These mobile apps employ the GPS capabilities of smartphones to facilitate connections with other users based on their current location. These enable users to use their smartphones or tablets to scan for nearby men, chat with them, and meet, sometimes for sexual encounters.

Thus, these new media capabilities have potentially generated quicker and easier modes for MSM to meet potential partners based on shared interests, attraction, and physical proximity (Rice et al., 2012). For example, *Grindr*, a social networking site and smartphone application used by MSM currently has more than 4 million users in 192 nations (PR Newswire, 2012), merely four years after its launch.

The recent and growing use of mobile-based social networking applications (apps) has most likely increased the convenience of sex seeking among MSM. Unfortunately, literature that explores the use of these mobile-based tools is lacking. The emerging, published data are largely quantitative in nature, focusing on HIV/STI-related behavior and/or health outcomes. This poster explores qualitative data collected as part of *Project iMash* (Influences of Mobile Apps on Sexual Health) on the use of mobile-based apps to seek sexual partners, specifically highlighting MSM's experiences, thoughts and perceptions of this evolving technology.

Methods

Using a semi-structured interview format, four 90-minute focus groups were conducted in late 2013/early 2014 in New York City with a convenience sample of MSM (n=20) recruited through the Internet, mobile apps and social media venues. Specifically exploring the phenomenological experiences, behaviors and perspectives of participants with the use of the Internet and mobile app-based technology, focus group questions explored areas of inquiry such as the process of searching for a sex partner, experiences with specific apps for sex-seeking, most frequently used apps, and the potential for app-based health interventions in New York City. Data were categorized, coded and analyzed using a systematic and phenomenological approach to establish interrater reliability of thematic content.

Results

Four themes emerged based on focus group discussions: 1) Perceptions and Practices of App Use; 2) Technology's Effect on Community Engagement; 3) Developing Trust and Safety; and 4) Virtual Sexual Scripting. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Perceptions and Practices of App Use data showed that the motivations for MSM's use of mobile apps varied. Among these were hook-ups, finding a date, finding a friend and connecting professionally:

I prefer to meet face to face in the street, like at work or at school, but if worse comes to worse, you know, the hook-up apps are there. To me it's like a last resort.

-Derek, 43, African American, Jersey City, NJ

Most participants reported that the emergence of technology was the easiest and preferred method for meeting other men. However, older MSM, when compared to younger MSM, favored more traditional face-to-face interaction:

I don't want to over generalize, but I think for younger guys who've grown up on the computer, they don't have any conversation skills in person, because let's say we meet and have a drink, and they're panicky and they're typing the whole time because they can't look you in the face and have a conversation. Whereas with older guys it's not so much the case. So for me, you know, I go online because it's the only way to really meet men, but then it also frustrates me.

-Chet, 56, White, Bushwick, Brooklyn



Sample Text/Images
Used in Online
Recruitment



Results (continued)

Most participants agreed that developing a method for earning trust prior to meeting a potential partner in person was important. Several of the methods mentioned included exchanging photos, phone conversations, and extended conversations on the mobile app:

Conversation—just a little bit of background. If a person is not willing to share their name—even a fake one—or if they're not willing to share their face picture, I won't go over there because—um... You don't know what you're walking into. And if my body turns up and they just have my phone, you know—I want them to be able to be caught.

-Arthur, 27, White, Woodside, Queens

In Virtual Sexual Scripting, when initiating a conversation with men on apps, participants noted important profile characteristics which included photos, preferences or "isms," HIV/STI status, sexual positioning and level of interest in the conversation:

Using the app may allow more people with more interest, which it does, to come together. So if I'm interested in unsafe sex, I put 'uninhibited' on my profile. Somebody who is interested in that is going to hit me up, so it cuts through everything else.

-Wesley, 31, African American, High Bridge, Bronx

Discussion

By examining the antecedents—feelings, thoughts, beliefs and environments—of the participants' sex seeking behaviors synchronously with the existing knowledge of community, organizational and policy based influences of health outcomes on New York City MSM this study sought to create a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon of sex seeking via evolving technology.

Exploring these influences of sexual health is likely to aid in planning and implementation of more effective programming among MSM who use these technologies, to increase the understanding of the MSM culture and practices on mobile-based apps and to promote health equity among this often underserved population.

These narrative data indicate that there is more research needed to understand the reasons why men use these apps and potential implications for HIV/STI mobile-based prevention programming.

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