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Sheldon Fields, Florida International University

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Internet Chat Rooms: Connecting With a New Generation of Young Men of Color at Risk for HIV Infection Who Have Sex With Other Men

Sheldon D. Fields, PhD, APRN, BC, FNP, AACRN, FNAP, FAANP
Mitchell J. Wharton, MSN, CRNP, CNS
Anita I. Marrero, MS Ed
Avril Little, BA
Kraig Pannell, BA
John H. Morgan, MSW

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of gay-related Internet chat rooms by young men who have sex with other men of color (YMSMC) in a specific catchment area. Participants were 104 YMSMC age 18 to 24 (M = 21.56) who were encountered in two gay-related Internet chat rooms during April 2005. Participants were mainly African American (53.7%, n = 56), HIV-negative (57.6%, n = 60), and online looking for some type of sexual encounter (80.7%, n = 84). The results of this study support the need to develop specific culturally appropriate HIV prevention Internet outreach protocols targeting YMSMC at risk for HIV infection. Lessons learned while conducting this study and recommendations are also discussed.

Key words: Internet outreach, chat room, young MSM of color, HIV/AIDS

We are now in the third decade of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, with no cure. Until we have a cure, we must continue to rely on prevention measures. At the heart of prevention is the need to continue to provide education about the dangers of HIV/AIDS, including the fact that it is preventable. One key way of doing this is by developing and delivering targeted and culturally appropriate outreach messages to the sub-populations of individuals that we know are the most at risk for acquiring HIV/AIDS. To do this, the types of outreach, measures, and techniques used have had to evolve, just as the pandemic itself has evolved. The increasing use of Internet chat rooms to solicit sexual partners, for example, by men who have sex with other men (MSM), who are definitely at risk for acquiring HIV/AIDS, is one such evolution that has presented new challenges in conducting HIV/AIDS prevention outreach (Hospers, Kok, Harterink, & de Zwart, 2005; McFarlane, Bull, & Rietmeijer, 2000).

Men accounted for 73% of the 41,312 cases of AIDS reported among adults in 2004 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2005a). Non-White men or men of color in general had higher case rates of AIDS when compared with White men. Black men had the highest case rate at 99.4/100,000 followed by Hispanic men at 37.9/100,000, then by American Indian/Alaskan men at 21.9/100,000. Sheldon D. Fields, PhD, APRN, BC, FNP, AACRN, FNAP, FAANP, is an assistant professor and Mitchell J. Wharton, MSN, CRNP, CNS, is a doctoral student both at the University of Rochester School of Nursing, Rochester, NY. Anita I. Marrero, MS Ed, is a program coordinator, Avril Little, BA, is a program associate, Kraig Pannell, BA, is a program director, and John H. Morgan, MSW, is the executive director all at the Men of Color Health Awareness Project, Inc, Rochester, NY.
13.5/100,000 (CDC, 2005a). The case rate for Asian/Pacific Islander men was 7.5/100,000, which was not that much lower than the case rate for White men at 12.3/100,000 (CDC, 2005a). The primary mode of HIV transmission among men has been MSM, whether gay- or nongay-identified. Among men, the MSM subgroup has had the highest rates of HIV/AIDS since the beginning of the pandemic, historically accounting for over 60% of all male cases (CDC, 2005a).

Furthermore, among all MSM, it is MSM of color who are currently disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS, with those aged 15 to 24 being especially at high risk because the overall HIV/AIDS case rate among those aged 15 to 19 and 20 to 24 has continued to increase (CDC, 2005a). Young MSM aged 13 to 24 in 2000 accounted for 49% (827) of the 1,688 AIDS cases in this age group (CDC, 2002). Young Black gay and bisexual men continue to be at unusually high risk for HIV/AIDS. In 2000, 65% of the HIV diagnoses among young people aged 13 to 24 were among Blacks (CDC, 2002). Valleroy et al. (2000) studied 3,492 15- to 22-year-old MSM over 5 years and reported that young Black MSM had a higher HIV prevalence rate (14.1%) than White MSM (3.3%), Hispanic MSM (6.9%), or Asian MSM (3%). More recently, in the summer of 2005, the CDC released a study that reported an HIV prevalence rate of 48% among Black MSM (17% among Hispanic MSM) in five urban areas tested (CDC, 2005a). This study also reported that a significant number of those who tested positive for HIV were unaware of their infection, with 64% of the HIV-positive Black MSM and 18% of HIV-positive Hispanic MSM being unaware of their infections (CDC, 2005b).

The trend of disproportionately high rates of HIV has been attributed in large part to the unique cultural issues MSM of color face regarding their race/ethnicity as well as their sexual orientation (Williams, Wyatt, Resell, & Asuan-O’Brien, 2004). MSM of color are often confronted with homophobia within the Black community (especially from the Black church) and racism, along with sexual objectification within the larger White gay community. This can leave MSM of color isolated with few social supports to draw on. Hence, there are several reasons why the population of young MSM of color (YMSMC) needs to be a priority for HIV prevention research (Johnson et al., 2005).

Venues traditionally used by MSM to meet sex partners, such as bars, clubs, bathhouses, and friends, have been augmented by the quick and efficient use of the Internet (Elford, Bolding, Davis, Sherr, & Hart, 2004; Reitmeijer, Bull, & McFarlane, 2001; Waldo, McFarland, Katz, MacKellar, & Valleroy, 2000). Internet venues that include chat rooms, bulletin boards, and virtual communities offer MSM an alternative means of meeting sex partners (Cooper, Galbreath, & Becker, 2004; Kim, Kent, McFarland, & Klausner, 2001). The use of these Internet venues, especially chat rooms, has emerged as an environment of potential risk for acquiring or transmitting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV. Several studies have documented the transmission of STI and HIV by MSM who use the Internet to solicit sex partners (Bolding, Davis, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2005; Rietmeijer, Bull, McFarlane, Patnaik, & Douglas, 2003; Webster et al., 2003; Taylor, Ayalem, Smith, Bemis, Kenney, & Kerndt, 2004; Wong, Chaw, Kent, & Klausner, 2005). Drug use and risky sexual practices such as unprotected insertive anal sex (“barebacking”) has also been reported among MSM who use the Internet to find sex partners (Elford, 2006; Elford, Bolding, & Sherr, 2001; Mansergh et al., 2002). These venues provide a level of anonymity not found in other traditional meeting venues for young MSM who may be attempting to hide their sexuality from parents or peers. Also, the ability to hook up with not only local MSM but MSM in other locations is also greatly enhanced by the use of these Internet chat rooms.

Because of the risk of HIV related to soliciting sex partners from the Internet, this venue has to be targeted with intervention methods aimed at educating the increasing number of MSM who are now using Internet chat rooms for this purpose. The need to develop online outreach strategies is clear. Because of the disproportionately higher rates of HIV/AIDS among YMSMC and the fact that there is a paucity of intervention research focused specifically on this subpopulation in regard to Internet chat rooms, this current study seeks to begin to fill that void. These Internet-based outreach strategies would ideally also be designed in a culturally relevant manner to most effectively engage these young men without resorting to stereotypes.
The overall purpose of this initial pilot study was to explore the use of gay-related Internet-based chat rooms among YMSMC in a specific geographic catchment area in the Northeast. The specific aims were to (a) identify local Internet chat rooms being used by YMSMC aged 18 to 24, (b) assess the online profiles posted by YMSMC aged 18 to 24 for potentially STI- and HIV-related high-risk behaviors, (c) explore the demographic and sexual characteristics of the YMSMC aged 18 to 24 in the identified Internet chat rooms, and (d) explore the development of an STI/HIV-prevention Internet chat room outreach protocol to target YMSMC aged 18 to 24. The focus of this article is on the first three aims.

This exploratory descriptive pilot study is part of a larger study called Project YEAH (Youth Empowerment Around HIV) that is currently being conducted by the team made up of the coauthors of this article. Project YEAH seeks to engage HIV-seropositive, YMSMC and their partners. This 5-year (2004-2009) demonstration project (Health Resources and Services Administration Grant # H97HA03788) will result in the development and implementation of outreach, care, and HIV prevention programs for YMSMC ages 13 to 24. This current Internet outreach study was undertaken as an initial step in meeting one of the larger study primary goals, which is to establish an effective outreach program to engage YMSMC.

The authors sought to identify Web sites that would be appropriate for this type of observation and data determination. The process of identifying local chat rooms used by YMSMC began with an Internet search on the Google search engine (www.google.com) using the search terms, “black gay chat room.” The authors also used information garnered from YMSMC who participate in a youth drop-in center that is part of the larger Project YEAH initiative regarding their use of chat rooms. The participants in this group reported primarily using two specific chat rooms most frequently.

Using the Google search results and the information from the participants in the drop-in center, the authors investigated the two most frequently identified chat room Web sites in their area. A final decision to include the two sites for observation was based on the sites meeting the following criteria: (a) attract or target MSM (gay- and nongay-identified), (b) had a chat room on its site dedicated to the city in the Northeast that is the target of Project YEAH, (c) offered access to those 18 years or older, and (d) did not require an access fee or membership fee to use the site. The two chat rooms chosen for this study met all of the above criteria. Chat room number one used a text-based e-mail format, and chat room number two used a real-time interactive format.

Data Determination

The Research Services Review Board of the University of Rochester approved the study. All observations took place in April 2005. Observation sessions were 4 hours long. Each chat room was observed for 7 straight days (Sunday to Saturday). The observer was required to log in to both chat rooms using a screen name and password. For the purposes of the study, the observer logged in as “Yeah Blue,” a name chosen because it is neither male nor female and related to Project YEAH. The observer offered no further personal information in the profiles and did not participate in the conversations occurring in the real-time interactive chat room that was being observed.

One person performed the observation. This allowed for consistency over the week and familiarity with the participants in the chat rooms. The authors also wanted to impose minimal disruption in the chat rooms.

Methods

Study Design and Setting

This exploratory descriptive study was conducted using a modified participant observation approach. Traditional participant observation usually combines detailed observation in a social setting with in-depth interviews. The authors’ method focused exclusively on observation of Internet chat rooms frequented by MSM. This was done as a means to limit any potential bias in the social interactions of the chat rooms that might have occurred by acknowledging the authors’ presence as researchers. The observer asked no questions while in the chat room and did not determine any data that was not readily available in the participants’ online profile.
rooms being observed. Once logged in to a chat room, the profiles of everyone else logged in were accessible. Each chat room profile template consisted of different data fields, so to determine the same types of data between the two sites, the authors limited data determination to the following demographic variables: (a) age, (b) race, (c) HIV status, (d) sexual roles, and (e) “out” about being MSM; these were available in some form on both sites. Other variables such as drug use, the use of safer sex, and relationship status were available on one of the sites but not the other.

Sample

The authors concentrated on profiles of those men in the chat rooms meeting the following inclusion criteria, (a) 18 to 24 years old, (b) non-White (self-identified man of color). This provided a convenience sample of 104 YMSMC in the chat rooms during observation.

Data Analysis

All data points were coded and prepared for computer analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (version 12.0 for Windows; SPSS Inc., Chicago). The variables were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentage, mean, median, mode, standard deviation, range, and frequency distribution).

Results

Participant Demographics

During the week of observation, more than 700 MSM were encountered in the two chat rooms. All participants were self-identified males, and none identified as transgender. More than 200 men were between the ages of 18 and 24, with 104 of those also being men of color. Hence, this analysis is based on 104 YMSMC identified in the two chat rooms (n = 34 in chat room one; n = 70 in chat room two). The YMSMC ranged in age from 18 to 24 years (M = 21.56). In terms of race, most of the participants were African American (53.8%; n = 56), followed by those who identified as Latino (15.3%; n = 16), mixed/multiracial (11.5%; n = 12), and Asian (9.6%; n = 10). (See Table 1 for complete list.)

Sexual Roles and HIV Status

Most of the online participants stated in their profile that in terms of sexual roles, they preferred to be versatile (38.4%; n = 40), which means that they were both anally receptive and anally insertive. A slightly smaller number of the YMSMC stated a preference for being bottoms (anally receptive) (27.8%; n = 29), followed by a smaller number of participants who stated a preference for being tops (anally insertive) (17.3%; n = 18). Some of the participants also indicated that they preferred oral sex.
only (see Table 1). In terms of HIV status, most of the participants stated in their profile that they were HIV-negative (57.6%; \( n = 60 \)) as opposed to only 2 (1.9%) who stated being HIV-positive. A large number of participants did not provide any information about their HIV status in their online profiles (see Table 1).

**MSM Identity and Reason for Being Online**

Just as many participants stated being totally “out” about being MSM (20.1%; \( n = 21 \)) as being totally closed about being MSM (20.1%; \( n = 21 \)). A smaller number reported being out in regard to their MSM status to some in their lives (12.5%; \( n = 13 \)), and a large number of participants did not answer the question in their profiles (see Table 1). In terms of what the YMSMC stated they were online in the Internet chat rooms looking for, the vast majority (80.7%; \( n = 84 \)) stated that they were looking for some type of sexual encounter (one-on-one, group sex, fetish sex, or one-time encounters). A smaller number of participants indicated that they were online looking for friendship (15.3%; \( n = 16 \)), (see Table 1).

**Other Results Unique to Chat Room One and Two**

The online profile template for chat room one (\( n = 34 \)), which was text- and e-mail–based, offered participants the opportunity to answer a question related to their use of safe sex practices. The majority of the 34 participants in this chat room indicated that they practiced safe sex only (85.2%; \( n = 29 \)) as compared with 3 participants (8.8%) who answered “anything goes,” which indicates that they would engage in sex without the use of condoms or other protective devices.

The online profile template for chat room number two (\( n = 70 \)) actually offered the participants the opportunity to respond to a host of other personal questions that chat room one did not. Of note is that they asked about relationship status and use of drugs. In terms of relationship status, most of the participants in chat room two were single (81.4%; \( n = 57 \)) followed by those in open relationships (7.1%; \( n = 5 \)). In terms of drug use, almost half of the participants indicated recreational use of drugs (42.8%; \( n = 30 \)) and 23 (32.8%) indicated that they did not use drugs. The specific types of drugs were not asked about.

**Discussion**

Several results of this study are consistent with past research done on MSM who use the Internet to find sex partners. One such result is that the overwhelming majority of YMSMC in this study indicated that they were online primarily looking for some type of sexual encounter. Several studies done on MSM who use the Internet have reported similar results (Hospers et al., 2005; Bull, McFarlane, Lloyd, & Rietmeijer, 2004; Kim et al., 2001; Bull & McFarlane, 2000). This is concerning, because Elford et al. (2004) reported that the MSM in their study who were recruited online were more likely to have multiple sexual partners or to not have been tested for HIV. Thus, the study results suggest that YMSMC who use the Internet increasingly run the risk of engaging in sex with someone who is in fact HIV-positive as an outcome of their having multiple sexual partners with undetermined HIV status.

The 69 YMSMC in this study who indicated that they were either sexually bottoms or versatile constitute a significantly high number of participants who would be willing to participate in anally receptive sex. This result is similar to Taylor et al. (2004), who reported that MSM who used the Internet to find sex partners were more likely to report having anal insertive sex with anonymous partners. This is an important result, because the type of sex one is willing to engage in goes hand in hand with the risk of acquiring HIV. Having anally receptive sex increases the risk of transmission of HIV as well as other STIs.

Only 2 (1.9%) of the 104 YMSMC in this study indicated in their online profile that they were HIV-seropositive. With national HIV/AIDS prevalence rates among YMSMC ranging from 20% to 50% (CDC, 2003; CDC, 2002) this result is concerning. It could be in fact because of differences in the rates of HIV/AIDS locally among YMSMC, or it could simply imply that a significant number of YMSMC are not being truthful in terms of their disclosure of their true HIV status. It could also indicate that a large number of YMSMC simply do not know their HIV.
status. This is underscored by the 40.3% (n = 42) of the YMSMC in this study who did not provide any answer to the questions regarding their HIV status. The notion of YMSMC not knowing their HIV status is supported in the current literature (CDC, 2005). Not knowing the HIV status of potential sex partners that YMSMC meet online in an Internet chat room exposes them to a significant risk of acquiring HIV infection.

A positive result of this current study was the high number of YMSMC who indicated that they only participated in safe sex encounters and the number of YMSMC who indicated that their MSM status is known by some if not most people in their lives. This result is supported by a related study on very young gay and bisexual men by Waldo et al. (2000). The investigators reported that self-acceptance of being MSM (gay or bisexual) was related to less sexual risk taking among very young MSM and that greater safer sex self-efficacy was linked to less HIV sexual risk taking. Thus, the two positive results among the YMSMC in the current study provide information in terms of target behavioral outcomes that might be incorporated into a protocol developed for Internet outreach specifically targeting YMSMC.

Purpose of Internet Outreach

Project YEAH is seeking to promote general health awareness while also introducing HIV prevention messages that are specifically developed and targeted to YMSMC. The goals are to (a) increase the overall HIV/AIDS knowledge and awareness levels among YMSMC, (b) promote HIV testing and early treatment of YMSMC infected with HIV, and (c) purposefully outreach to the surrounding YMSMC college population in its local catchment area. The goals as stated above are all supported by the results in this current study and by other studies in this area as well. The results of this study suggest a population of YMSMC in the authors’ area that are using the Internet to seek out sex partners. Hence, there is an impetus to develop Internet outreach strategies to target this population. Such outreach protocols could potentially include education on the transmission of HIV/AIDS and promotion of HIV testing and early treatment. Also, being that Project YEAH is located in a area with a large number of local colleges and universities, specific Internet-based outreach to the college-aged YMSMC population that is in the area can also be performed. The development of such Internet-based prevention interventions is supported by the call for such endeavors in the research literature as well (Rietmeijer et al., 2003).

Lessons Learned

This initial exploratory research also allowed the research team the opportunity to learn some valuable lessons about Internet outreach, chat rooms, YMSMC in the area, topics important to YMSMC, and what may be needed to conduct effective Internet outreach that specifically targets YMSMC. Some of the lessons include (a) that confidentiality and anonymity are important to the YMSMC online, (b) Internet outreach is no less stressful or time-consuming for outreach staff, (c) safety and guidelines for outreach staff are important to have established because frequent sexual solicitation of the outreach worker monitoring the chat rooms occurred, and (d) the investment in high quality computer equipment along with a high-speed Internet connection is required to conduct Internet chat room outreach.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study and the lessons learned, the authors offer the following recommendations for those seeking to conduct Internet outreach activities with YMSMC: It is recommended that any community-based HIV prevention organization working with YMSMC seriously investigate the feasibility of developing an Internet outreach program if they are to truly serve this highly at-risk subpopulation of MSM. It is also recommended that any such organization start by investigating, as the authors did, what is happening online in their local area with YMSMC and what specific chat rooms in that area are the ones most frequently used. This level of local analysis of who is chatting and just what they are chatting about may prove to be very useful in designing specifically tailored Internet outreach protocols that address local and regional needs identified.
Some time should be invested in learning and getting up to speed with Internet language use in a given area to become familiar with local terms. YMSMC are savvy at spotting outreach workers who are not using the latest terminology, and this may lead to the interactions appearing less real to the target population. Last, establish a solid training and support structure with a focus on safety for outreach workers who will actually be conducting this type of outreach. They will need to know how to handle being solicited for sexual encounters as well as requests for personal information.

Study Limitations

This study has some limitations that must be considered. The study used a convenience sample that was not necessarily representative of all YMSMC. The study was conducted using only two chat rooms in the northeastern area of the country, and there are many other chat rooms used by YMSMC. The modified participant observation technique did not allow for interaction, which might have influenced the dynamics of the chat rooms. Also, the study did not develop a mechanism to verify that every participant encountered online was at least 18 years of age. The information regarding age in the profiles was not questioned and could have actually included minors under 18. As such, the results of this study cannot necessarily be generalized to other populations of YMSMC using Internet chat rooms.

Conclusion

This initial study provides a foundation for the research team to begin to develop online Internet chat room HIV prevention outreach protocols and materials that could prove to be effective in targeting YMSMC, who continue to be at an increased risk for acquiring HIV/AIDS. Additional studies need to be performed on the characteristics and risk factors of YMSMC who use Internet chat rooms to find sex partners. Last, studies that specifically test the feasibility, validity, and reliability of culturally appropriate Internet outreach protocols developed to target YMSMC who use Internet chat rooms need to be conducted.

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References


