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‘Getting it on Online’: An exploration of www.gaydar.ie as a contemporary online venue which facilitates men to locate other men for sex

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the social, political and cultural history of homosexuality in Ireland and the emergence of a popular gay social networking website called ‘Gaydar’ (www.gaydar.ie). This contemporary mode of communication has transformed the ways in which many Men who have Sex with Men¹ (MSM) now organize their social and sexual lives. The aim of this research is to investigate this online chat site as a contemporary venue in which MSM can socialise and seek casual sex partners. By distinguishing the ways and means in which MSM locate their sexual partners this paper also aims to identify some of the sexual health needs of MSM. The risk associated with this new modality of communication is of particular concern to policy makers and service providers when considering the sexual health needs of this population. Especially as Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) infection continues to be prevalent among this cohort.

Keywords: Homosexuality; Gaydar; gay social networking; Men who have Sex with Men; Human Immunodeficiency Virus; Sexually Transmitted Infection

¹ UNAIDS (2006) as cited in LGTB Health (2009) use the term ‘MSM to describe all men who are sexually active with other men, regardless of how they identify themselves’ (LGTB Health 2009: 20).

A gay male sits at his computer screen typing. The screen reads...

Hornybicork says *Hey sexy*
Gayhung says *Hi there...what u up to?*
Hornybicork says *Nothing much, chilling - you horny?*
Gayhung says *Sure - Where are you?*
Hornybicork says *City Centre. What about you?*
Gayhung says *Close by – Want to meet up?*

Introduction

In contemporary society, we live in a technologically advanced and interconnected world. Internet-based communications allow us instantaneous contact with other individuals from all over the globe. In recent years we have witnessed an unprecedented growth and escalation in the usage of Internet-based communications within the social spheres. This research investigation begins with ‘hornybicork’ and ‘gayhung’ having an online chat via the Internet. The writer begins with this scenario because it resonates with the purpose of this research. Both men are enacting a scenario carried out on many gay social networking websites which facilitate men who seek other men for sex. It can be argued that this type of social networking via the internet is not only a gay phenomenon as internet users come from a variety of backgrounds and sexual orientations with different interests, preferences and seeking different types of relationships. However, this paper will examine a gay social networking website called Gaydar (www.gaydar.ie) a popular computer-mediated website which facilitates men to seek other men for sexual encounters.

According to Davis et al. (2006) ‘access to the Internet has increased dramatically over the past decade as has its use for meeting sexual partners (e-dating), particularly among gay men’ (Davis, Hart, Bolding, Sherr and Elford, 2006: 161). For many Gaydar users, the simplicity and ability to communicate with others who have similar sexual interests offers much satisfaction and self-fulfilment. However, meeting someone online is very different to meeting someone in a public social arena. Gaydar offers standard guidelines on ‘safety’ although the emphasis is more concentrated on ‘personal safety’ rather than ‘sexual health safety’ which has led some researchers and educators to label the internet as an emerging sexual risk environment. The sexual health risks of contracting an STI and the consequences of HIV infection have

direct implications for the health and well-being of MSM and have a resounding significance on the economic and social fabric of society.

Rationale

Research of the contemporary digital lifestyles of MSM in Britain and the United States of America reported that between one quarter and one half of MSM interviewed revealed using the Internet as a means to arrange casual and anonymous sex (Benotsch, Kalichman, & Cage, 2002; Bolding, Davis, Hart, Sherr and Elford 2005). These findings suggest that the Internet is redefining interpersonal and sexual relationships among MSM and that the Internet is providing a supplemental way of meeting likeminded individuals. In light of these findings, this subject was chosen because to date there has been little research regarding the usage and the impact this contemporary mode of communication has in the Irish context. It was the intention of this research to ascertain if gay social networking websites such as Gaydar provided users with enhanced sexual prospects and if by revealing (*or concealing*) particular aspects of their sexual lives exposed the individuals to elevated sexual health risks. To achieve this, the key research objectives were:

- To carry out a review of literature outlining the socio-cultural history of homosexuality and social policy development in relation to MSM.
- To explore the ways in which MSM locate sexual partners in contemporary society.
- To conduct interviews with Gaydar users.
- To present qualitative research on MSM in the age of digital interaction.
- To identify the sexual health needs of MSM.

Chapter outline

Chapter One of this study is an introduction to Gaydar as a commonly used computer-mediated website which facilitates men to seek other men for sexual encounters. Chapter Two of this study investigates the social, political and cultural history of homosexuality in Ireland, which was shaped by international developments. This chapter also highlights the emergence of HIV and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), which significantly shaped health debate and service delivery in

relation to MSM. Traditional venues were also identified in which MSM sought casual sexual encounters and considered the emergence of Gaydar as a contemporary venue for arranging sex partners. Chapter Three discusses the methodological approach undertaken in this study and how this has shaped its findings. Chapter Four presents the findings and analysis of the qualitative data produced in this study. This highlights the ways in which Gaydar has transformed the social and sexual lives of the participants involved in this study. Finally, Chapter Five discusses the key recommendations and conclusions of the research.

Reflexive Statement

This paper was inspired by my personal experiences of gay dating from the late 1980s and early 1990s. During this time sexuality was largely restricted due to the restrictive Catholic ethos of the country and homosexuality was illegal in the eyes of the law. This was a period of great confusion and increased emotional separation from my family and friends because of my sexual orientation. I left the sexually restrictive confines of Cork and obtained work in London, which offered more than an employment opportunity as I quickly discovered a thriving gay community constituted by gay restaurants, gay bars and gay friends. One new friendship established – ‘John’ (not his real name) shared many of the same restricted adolescent feelings and experiences as I did. Both of us were Irish and new to the London gay scene; we had lots of new places to explore and experience. Reflecting on this friendship it is now clear how young and inexperienced we both were and how much there was to learn about sex and relationships. Without a positive role model with regard to intimate relationships between two men and only equipped with the basic heterosexual sexual health education, there were a lot of mistakes to make and lots of lessons to learn. Unfortunately, John seemed determined to learn all of them - *the hard way*.

In the late 1990s a new gay radio station was launched in London. This was called ‘Gaydar Radio’. This radio station quickly captured our attention. With a distinct style of contemporary dance music and gay-oriented social information, Gaydar Radio quickly became the preference of many within the gay community. Shortly after, Gaydar Radio developed an online messaging system whereby gay men could make contact with other gay men. After some experimentation with this new

technology I quickly learned to be suspicious of men who described themselves as ‘young at heart’ and found that many online encounters did not always describe themselves honestly. I quickly developed ambivalence towards this new technology and returned to the more conventional ways of meeting other men. John was more successful in his usage of Gaydar and continued to use this new technology as a venue for obtaining casual sex with other men. Nine months later John was diagnosed as HIV positive. John was never aware from whom he contracted the HIV virus.

Gaydar

According to Mowlabocus (2010) type ‘www.gaydar.co.uk into any web browser and you arrive at the gateway to the gay community’ (Mowlabocus, 2010: 95). Gaydar carries the trademark slogan ‘what you want, when you want it’ and boasts having ‘the largest selection of gay personals on the web...with thousands of members it’s even easier to hook up with guys around the corner or around the globe’ (www.gaydar.ie). Mowlabocus (2010) states that ‘in 1999 Gaydar reported a worldwide membership of 3.8 million and despite an ever-increasing number of competitor sites, Gaydar remains the number one gay dating website...it is arguably the most recognisable global brand with a raft of digital and non-digital enterprises’ (Mowlabocus, 2010: 85). According to Weeks (2007) ‘by 2005 Gaydar was the prime website for gay male cruising and became the focus of gay pick ups’ (Weeks, 2007: 160).

On registering with Gaydar a user must create an online profile and choose a username that identifies them to others users. Pseudonyms are often used to disguise a person’s real name; they can also be used to advertise the user’s geographical location or sexual qualities for example: ‘*hornybicork*’ and ‘*gayhung*’. A user’s profile often includes physical details such as hair colour, eye colour, ethnicity and sexual desires. Although it is not compulsory, users may also include digital photographs. Mowlabocus (2010) explains this process of setting up a Gaydar account as: ‘creating a user profile is reassuringly simple. By inputting relevant information into each field, or selecting from a list of values, anyone with a computer, an internet connection and five minutes can create a simple profile’ (Mowlabocus, 2010: 88).

Gaydar as a Potential Risk Environment

Chaney and Drew (2005) state ‘whereas bars, sex clubs, and cruising areas have traditionally been meeting grounds, technology has now provided a more anonymous and accessible means for MSM to engage in sexual activity (Chaney and Dew, 2005: 260). As time progressed and technology advanced the venues in which MSM sought sexual partners also shifted significantly. The surge of online activity has been described by Cooper et al (2002) as ‘the next sexual revolution’ (Cooper, Boies, Maheu and Greenfield, 2002: 519). However, with this sexual revolution emerged an increase in sexual health risks that this population faced in the age of digital integration. Research exploring the online sexual activities of MSM by Cooper et al. (1999) suggested that the Internet allows people to interact anonymously thereby increasing the risk of HIV transmission (Cooper, Scherer, Boies and Gordon, 1999). Further research by McFarlane et al. (2002) suggests that MSM who meet sexual partners through the Internet may be at elevated risk for STIs and HIV compared with those who do not (McFarlane, Bull and Rietmeijer, 2002). The results of these studies indicate significant associations between internet sex-seeking and high-risk sexual behaviours.

Internet and Addiction: The Triple A Engine

The model known as the Triple-A Engine was developed by Stanford researcher Al Cooper (Cooper, et al., 1999) to explain the acceleration with online sexual activity and why the Internet has the power to attract online users into a cycle of cyber addiction. Cooper put forward three primary features which make the Internet an attractive location for seeking sexual partners. These features were identified as ‘Accessibility,’ ‘Affordability’ and ‘Anonymity.’ Accessibility focuses on how the Internet provides online users with greater access to a wide range of other online users who are also in pursuit of sexual partners. Affordability relates to how people are able to use the Internet in a variety of locations such as Internet cafes (at a low cost). Affordability also claims that personal home computers and laptops are now more affordable to many. Anonymity supports the theory that online users have control over what information they wish to share with other online users. This also gives the online user the ability to disclose whatever information they wish. Anonymity is also said to give the online user the opportunity to communicate in a more candid and frank way than they would in a face-to-face environment.

Research Methods

The research methods employed in this study for obtaining data were one-to-one qualitative interviews with 5 participants; these interviews were carried out between December 2010 and February 2011. The investigation initially screened nine individuals. However, due to an elimination process four of these individuals were not successful and did not meet all the essential requirements. The criteria for participation required participants to be: male; self-identified as a MSM; resident of the Republic of Ireland; a registered user of Gaydar as a means to seek other MSM for obtaining sexual encounters and 18 years of age or above. The writer required individuals to be 18 years or above because Irish law states that you must be 17 years or above to consent to sexual intercourse. This age of consent is the same for homosexual and heterosexual individuals. Also, because Gaydar is accessible worldwide and ages of consent differ between various countries, this website requires individuals to be 18 years or above.

Qualitative interviews were selected in order to understand the behaviour, beliefs and attitudes of the participants who had experience of Gaydar and the digital age. It was believed that qualitative interview research methods would provide the most benefit to the investigation as this would enable each of the participants to give their personal narratives and opinions. Narrative analysis was encouraged from each participant as a means to reveal the social world in which the men live and also allow us an insight into the digital gay subculture. These narratives were the individual experiences of the participants and were raised spontaneously by the participants rather than in response to questions. Purposive sampling methods were also employed to ensure that different perspectives were sufficiently represented. This included a varied age group of participants, a combination of sexually active gay and bisexual individuals and a mixture of both HIV positive and HIV negative individuals.

Challenges and Barriers

This research investigation was not without challenges and barriers. Firstly, this research study depended on self-reported measures of a personal nature such as the sexual behaviours of the participants. Because of the sensitive nature of the research topic, the accuracy of the information becomes an important issue as participants may have been unwilling to fully disclose the regularity and types of sexual activity they

engaged in relating to their online activity. Secondly, this research sought to highlight the online experiences of MSM currently living in Ireland. Because this study represented a small sample group of individuals it was acknowledged that this investigation should not be generalized to represent a precise reflection of all individuals who use Gaydar.

The Importance of Ethics

Ethical issues were also considered regarding the HIV status of the participants, particularly as two of them disclosed their HIV positive status. Ethical issues were considered involving: privacy, confidentiality, stigma and the safety of vulnerable individuals. However, these two participants expressed an enthusiasm to contribute in to research and hoped their narratives would provide some reassurance and support for other individuals who may be in a similar situation. These aspirations can be described as ‘didactic pathographies’. According to Hunsaker Hawkins (1999), didactic pathographies ‘are motivated by the explicit wish to help others. Often they blend practical information with a personal account of the experience of illness...the experience can serve as a mirror or a model (whether positive or negative) for prospective readers’ (Hawkins, 1999: 128).

Summary of Findings

The personal narratives of the participants provided the research with their broad experiences. Recurrent themes emerged from the main theories, ideas, concepts, sexual liberation, equality policies and sexual health risk taking behaviour. These narratives were the individual experiences of the participants and were raised spontaneously by them rather than in reply to structured questions. The results from the investigation revealed that all five participants are Irish born and currently living in the Munster area. The maximum age was 54 and the minimum age was 23 years old. Four participants resided in an urban environment and identified their sexuality as gay. One participant resided in a rural environment and identified his sexuality as bisexual. It was noticeable that comfort levels and disclosure of sexual identity to others were unique to each individual. Multiple mechanisms were displayed in different environments to avoid negative reactions or discrimination on the basis of their sexuality. Social separation leading to increased Gaydar usage was also common for the each of the participants. However, this was most evident from the

participant residing in a rural environment. For this participant the Internet offered the only means to establish sexual contact with like-minded individuals. All five participants revealed that they were not presently in a relationship. Three participants disclosed a HIV negative status. Two participants disclosed a HIV positive status. One of these participants reported being diagnosed HIV positive over ten years ago and one participant reported being diagnosed HIV positive two years ago.

A salient finding which resonates with this research is that all five Participants revealed that they are currently an active user of Gaydar and that this venue was the prime location in which these individuals sought sexual encounters with MSM due to its 'Accessibility,' 'Affordability' and 'Anonymity'. Another salient finding revealed that each participant disclosed contracting one or more STIs as a consequence of arranging casual sex via the Internet prior to the investigation. The common STIs contracted by all participants included: Chlamydia, Gonorrhoea and Pubic Lice, one participant reported Syphilis and one participant associated his HIV positive diagnosis to an online sexual partner.

Recommendations

This research was concluded in March 2011 and lead to the following recommendations. The personal narratives of each participant identified in the primary research findings confirmed that the means and venues in which some MSM choose their sexual partners has significantly changed in recent years as a result of technological advances. The social isolation experienced by some individuals consequently places them at increased sexual health risks because they feel excluded from (or exclude themselves) from sexual health services. This sense of living an invisible existence increases health risks for this population. For this reason it is proposed that more social outlets for MSM be created in rural environments.

It also was also noted that the Internet may also provide an effective means of reaching out to an online population. This tool would be of great use for sexual health organisations and service providers who employ Internet based site-specific outreach work. This would be of particular benefit to those who may not have access to many other services. Complementing Internet based site-specific outreach work would include Gaydar providing sexual health information on the website's home page. This

information would be available for online users to access of their own volition via an embedded link. Providing easier access to sexual health information would create greater awareness of STIs and HIV within this cohort. This focus, together with efforts to promote testing for STIs and HIV, is suggested to reduce infection through online education and prevention measures. Finally, it is recommended that online HIV awareness would benefit HIV positive individuals in terms of accessing support services and would challenge the ever present stigma and discrimination associated with HIV.

Conclusion

This research study represents a small sample of individuals. It is acknowledged that much remains unanswered and there are many issues that go beyond the capacity of this study. To date the online sexual experiences and behaviours of MSM has received very little attention in the Irish context. For this reason it is contended that future research with a larger sample of participants is required to fully understand the sexual health risks that this population encounter in their online lives. However, this paper did identify online chat sites such as Gaydar as a contemporary venue where men can socialise and establish sexual contacts with other men. This study also highlights that this online venue has the ability to increase sexual partners and consequently elevate sexual health risks for this group. Based on the findings the writer believes that future health promotion and HIV prevention efforts must take into account the reality of online sexual activity. This research paper concludes with the perspective that a better understanding of this online phenomenon can lead to more effective STI awareness and HIV prevention efforts among this population. By targeting the online contemporary venues in which some individuals may currently locate their sexual partners will provide both a useful location for effective sexual health promotion and will reduce STI and HIV infection into the future.

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