

# Your picture is your bait

## Use and meaning of cyberspace amongst Perth gay men

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### Funding

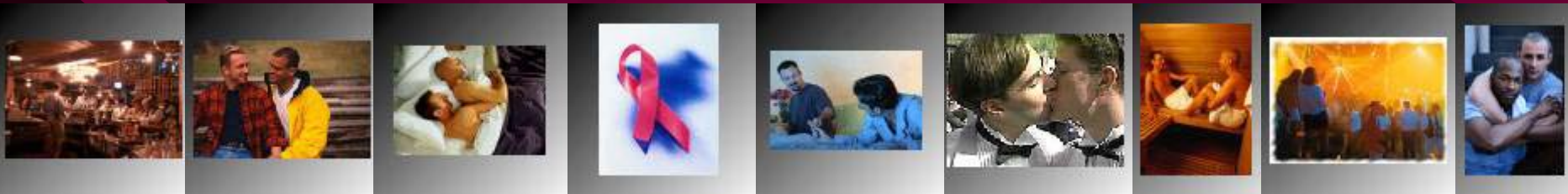
Sexual Health Program, Health Department of WA

### In Kind Support

Western Australian AIDS Council

National Centre in HIV Social Research

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# Research in Perth

- Periodic Surveys: quantitative studies were concerned with identifying *what* trends in HIV related risk behaviour were occurring amongst Perth gay men.
- 2002 study (Hull et al, 2003)
  - 48% have used Internet to find sexual partner, 12% often
  - Further analysis: little or no relationship between internet use and use of other venues and spaces.
- Qualitative study is aimed at explaining and describing the meanings, an insight into the *why*.

## Qualitative Interviews with 25 Gay Men

Recruitment: Gay Press, Community groups and snowball. Not directly from Internet environments.

NGI MSM were not recruited

Interviewer identified as being from WA AIDS Council / Curtin University



## Qualitative Interviews with 25 Gay Men

Age	No.
Under 20	3
20 - 30	4
31 to 40	6
41 to 50	5
51 to 60	4
61 +	2



## Qualitative Interviews with 25 Gay Men

- Focusing on only one aspect of the study – use and meaning of Internet chat rooms.
  - Review the meanings gay men had for the various Internet environments,
  - How these are used and change during interaction on or via the Internet, and
  - Raise some possible implications for the role of health promotion.

## Qualitative Interviews with 25 Gay Men

- All of the sample (n=25) spoke about the capacity of the Internet to facilitate the meeting other men.
- 2/3 of the sample (n=17) spoke about having used it for this purpose.
- Discussions about Internet tended to focus on the use of chat rooms, particularly those targeted towards gay men in the Perth metropolitan area.
- The uses included a range of relationship, casual, or esoteric sex seeking goals

# How gay men in Perth described the Internet

Internet as..

1. a **variety of venues** with different purposes that act as **alternatives** to other more traditional venues;
2. a **socialisation tool** for information, induction and building networks or friendships;
3. a method of **control** over presentation of self and interaction through anonymity and discretion;
4. an experience of **safety** generated through the online interaction prior to any meeting; and
5. a source of novelty experiences, **entertainment** and escape.

## Internet as a variety of venues with different purposes that act as alternatives to other more traditional venues

- Selective as to which internet venue the men would access depending on their goals and preferences
- Internet was consistently seen as an alternative to the difficulties experienced in other more traditional gay venues and sexual spaces.
- Way of meeting a broader range of new people.
- stronger sense of anonymity than the gay bar / night club environment,
- Internet felt safer than a beat and more convenient than the sauna.

## Internet as a variety of venues with different purposes that act as alternatives to other more traditional venues

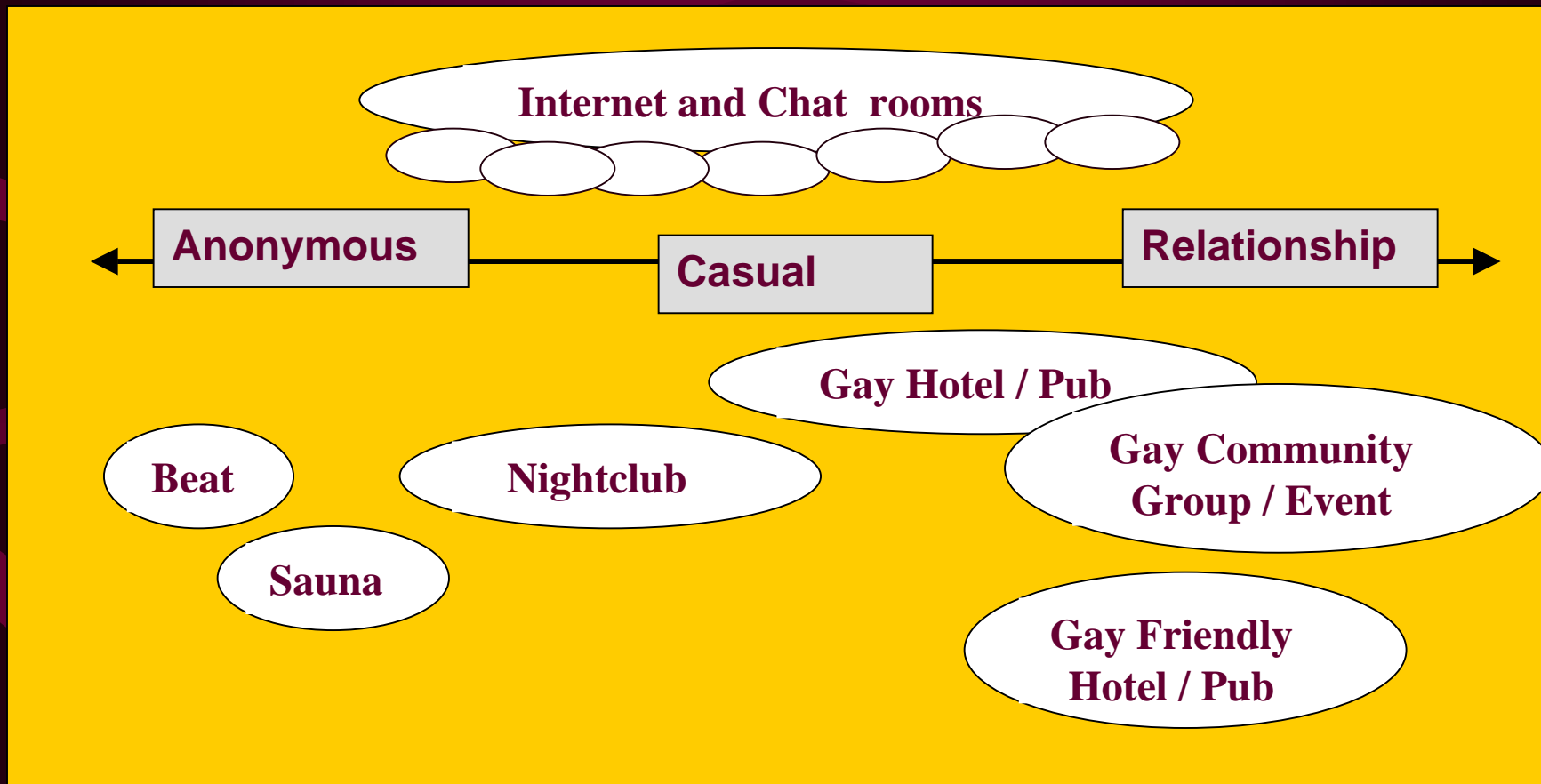
- Selective

*I might not pick up the social cues - or understand what you are getting at {at a nightclub}... ... its more clear cut on the net. (EDWARD, 42, HIV negative)*

- seen as a way to avoid the difficulties experienced in other more traditional gay venues and sexual spaces.

- Internet felt safer than a beat and more convenient than the sauna.

# Internet as a variety of venues with different purposes that act as alternatives to other more traditional venues



# Internet as a **socialisation** tool for information, induction and building networks or friendships

- For men exploring their sexuality the Internet was described as a space to gain information, learn about being gay, and possibly to build a network of friends.
- covertly interact to acquire the knowledge, norms, attitudes, and language of the gay community on the Internet.
- For some - initial step in the socialisation process
- Depending on confidence, this could result in face to face meetings.
- For others, the Internet did not meet their needs, and would initiate contact with community groups found on the Internet.

## Internet as a socialisation tool for information, induction and building networks

- For... in the

*It is just a way of getting to know a bit of the gay scene or the terminology that they use. And I learnt most of that through the, or from the Internet. You know, like things like, what's a top, what's a bottom and different preferences like age groups and what types of men prefer different types of men... ...and trying to work out for myself where I stood and what I liked and what my preferences were. (JACOB, 32, HIV negative)*

Inter

## Internet as a method of **control** over presentation of self and interaction through anonymity and discretion

- Control
  - to decide when and to whom they interacted and how much of themselves they presented or disclosed.
  - to disconnect at any time
- Freedom from identities being challenged or embarrassed through face to face rejection.
- Easier than other environments to give and take rejection.

## Internet as a method of **control** over presentation of self and interaction through anonymity and discretion

- Control

- to decide who is accepted and

*There is not the embarrassment or the chance of being rebuked. They can rebut you but it's not face to face. They can rebut you, but they don't know who that have rebutted. (RICHARD,50 ,HIV-)*

- ... make  
rejection

## Internet as a method of **control** over presentation of self and interaction through anonymity and discretion

- Other environments - gay men spoke about having to negotiate identity and interaction with limited clues.
- Internet - less risk of misinterpretation as
  - much is negotiated first without the need to identify themselves, and the men
  - can be very specific about who and what they are looking for.
- Although the Internet provides an opportunity for men to disclose HIV status without identifying themselves, and to search out other men of the same HIV status, this was rare amongst the men's experiences.

## Internet as a method of **control** over presentation of self and interaction through anonymity and discretion

- Other  
ide

*...the reason we tell them to read our profile is because on our profile we have got the stipulation of exactly what we are after, who we are and what we are, what we like to do.....So your picture is your bait and your profile is your burly and then you just wait for the rod to do the work and see what you are going to hook.  
(STEVEN,44,HIV-)*

- Hi  
men of  
experiences.

negotiate

close

out other

men's

# Internet as an experience of safety generated through the online interaction prior to any meeting

With control came an impression of safety.

- Men felt they could..
  - vet most dangerous types or situations,
  - build rapport, and
  - establish expectations while chatting on-line.
- Described a more staged approach of initial assessment and interaction prior to face to face.
- Different to the men's experiences in gay bars or at sexual spaces such as beats or saunas.

## Internet as an experience of **safety** generated through the online interaction prior to any meeting

- Rationalising of the risk.
  - meet in safe or neutral space such as a café.
  - meeting in own home - own turf or their partner would be with them.
  - Meeting in others home - could leave whenever they wanted, or decide at the last moment not to go in at all
- Most men's experiences reinforced their beliefs and assumptions about the Internet and the specific on-line spaces in which they chose to interact with other men.

## Internet as an experience of safety generated through the online interaction prior to any

- *We don't go out on a freezing cold night to dirty old toilets or get picked up by the police or arrested by the police..... ..or getting your head bashed in. You can do it in the safety of your own home. That security... Yeah I think it is a thing of comfort in your own environment. (RICHARD,50+,HIV-)*

- *... and associated with the specific on-line spaces in which they chose to interact with other men.*

## Internet as a source of novelty experiences, **entertainment** and escape

- novelty, game or chase within an emotionally safer environment.
- escaping from day to day life to an environment where there was a wide range of men with whom they could chat and if inclined, meet for casual sex or relationship.

## Internet as a source of novelty experiences, **entertainment** and escape

- novelty experiences

*It's the chase, it's the anonymity of 'gay.com', and when they turn up the match of what they actually look like. I think for me it's the whole novelty from the moment you click on, if they {chat to} me then there must be something that interests them. (EDWARD,42,HIV negative)*

# Interaction in Cyberspace

- Internet environments involve their own etiquette, norms and assumptions which may vary across sites.
- Men who use the Internet are experiencing stronger feelings of anonymity, control, safety and convenience than other spaces.

# Interaction in Cyberspace

- There are behaviours and interactions occurring via the Internet that may increase the HIV transmission risk, such as untested assumptions,
- However, there are others that may be protective against HIV risk, such as the establishment of groundrules and expectations prior to meeting face to face.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

- Men are likely to be engaging in risk and behaviour assessments differently in the Internet environments to how they would in other environments.
- To respond to the Internet as a sexual health risk in and of itself, would be misleading.
- It is the assumptions, choices and actions taking place within and via the Internet that is of interest.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

- Effective HIV prevention has been grounded in the culture and perspectives of the different communities using those spaces.
- We need to approach the Internet in a similar, innovative and community grounded approach that has been utilised in bars, beats and saunas throughout the epidemic.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

- We need to engage with participants in ways that are consistent with how the Internet is used, both risk and protective factors, and what it means to participants to be part of the environment.

# Acknowledgements



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