

Cruising and connecting online

Findings and implications of the first survey of gay
chat site users in Sydney and Melbourne

Martin Holt, Dean Murphy and Patrick Rawstorne

m.holt@unsw.edu.au

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Background

- ▶ Around 50% of gay men in Sydney and Melbourne use the Internet to find sex partners
- ▶ Enormous popularity of gay chat sites (GCS)
- ▶ GCS have been seen (by some) as encouraging risky behaviour among gay men, and (by others) as spaces that support gay identities and social relationships
- ▶ To date, little research on how GCS were used and perceived by Australian gay men

The survey

- ▶ 450 men recruited in February 2003
 - ▶ 130 at Midsumma Carnival in Melbourne
 - ▶ 320 at Mardi Gras Fair Day in Sydney
- ▶ Eligible if they had ‘ever used a gay chat site’
- ▶ Completed a short, anonymous questionnaire
 - ▶ Items on GCS use, demographics, sexual behaviour and attitudes to GCS

Characteristics of GCS users

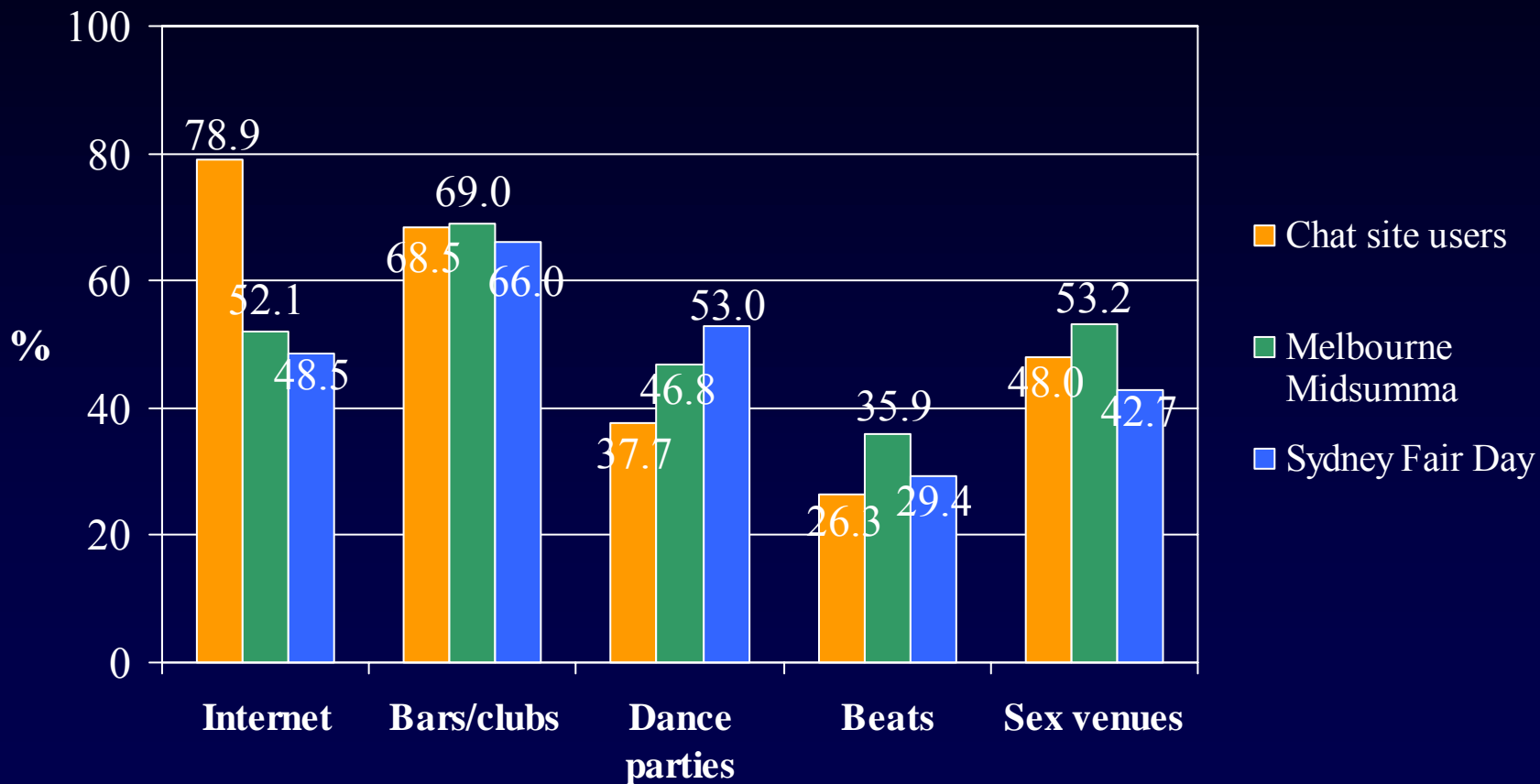
▶ *Similarities (to community samples)*

- Sexual identity
- No. of gay friends
- Time spent with gay men
- Median age (34 years)

▶ *Differences*

- Age distribution
- Current relationships with men
- HIV status
- Time since last test
- Where sex partners are sought
- UAI-C

Where men look for sex partners



Unprotected anal intercourse with casual partners (UAI-C)

	Chat site users	Melbourne GCPS	Sydney GCPS
Any UAI-C in previous 6 months	36.3%	20.5%	22.9%

Note: these figures are based on full samples and not just those with casual partners

UAI-C by HIV status

	Untested/ unknown status	HIV-negative	HIV-positive
No UAI-C in previous 6 months	37 (74.5%)	204 (66.9%)	12 (26.7%)
Any UAI-C in previous 6 months	12 (25.5%)	101 (33.1%)	33 (73.3%)

$\chi^2=30.86$, $df=2$, $p<0.001$

Implications of UAI-C rates

- ▶ Chat site users report higher rates of UAI-C than men in the Periodic Surveys
- ▶ May reflect culture of risk-taking by Internet users and departure from safe sex practices
- ▶ However, patterning of UAI-C by HIV status suggests a deliberate strategy informed by HIV status
- ▶ May therefore reflect culture of seeking seroconcordant partners online

Sex-seeking through chat sites

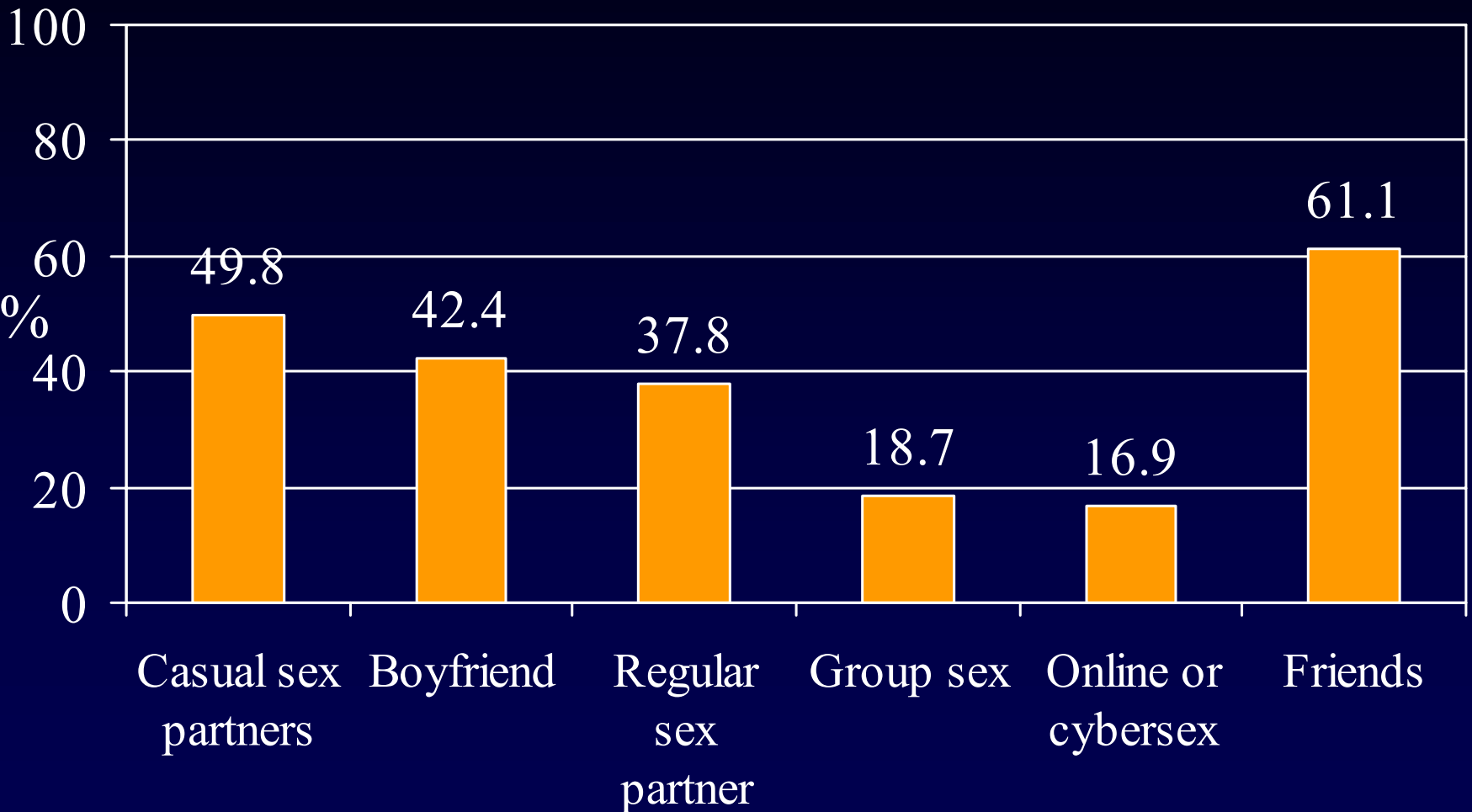
▶ *History*

- 41% first tried sex-seeking on GCS because friends were using GCS/talking about it
- 52% said they had met a sex partner within a month of first using GCS
- Nearly a quarter (23%) had not met any sex partners through GCS

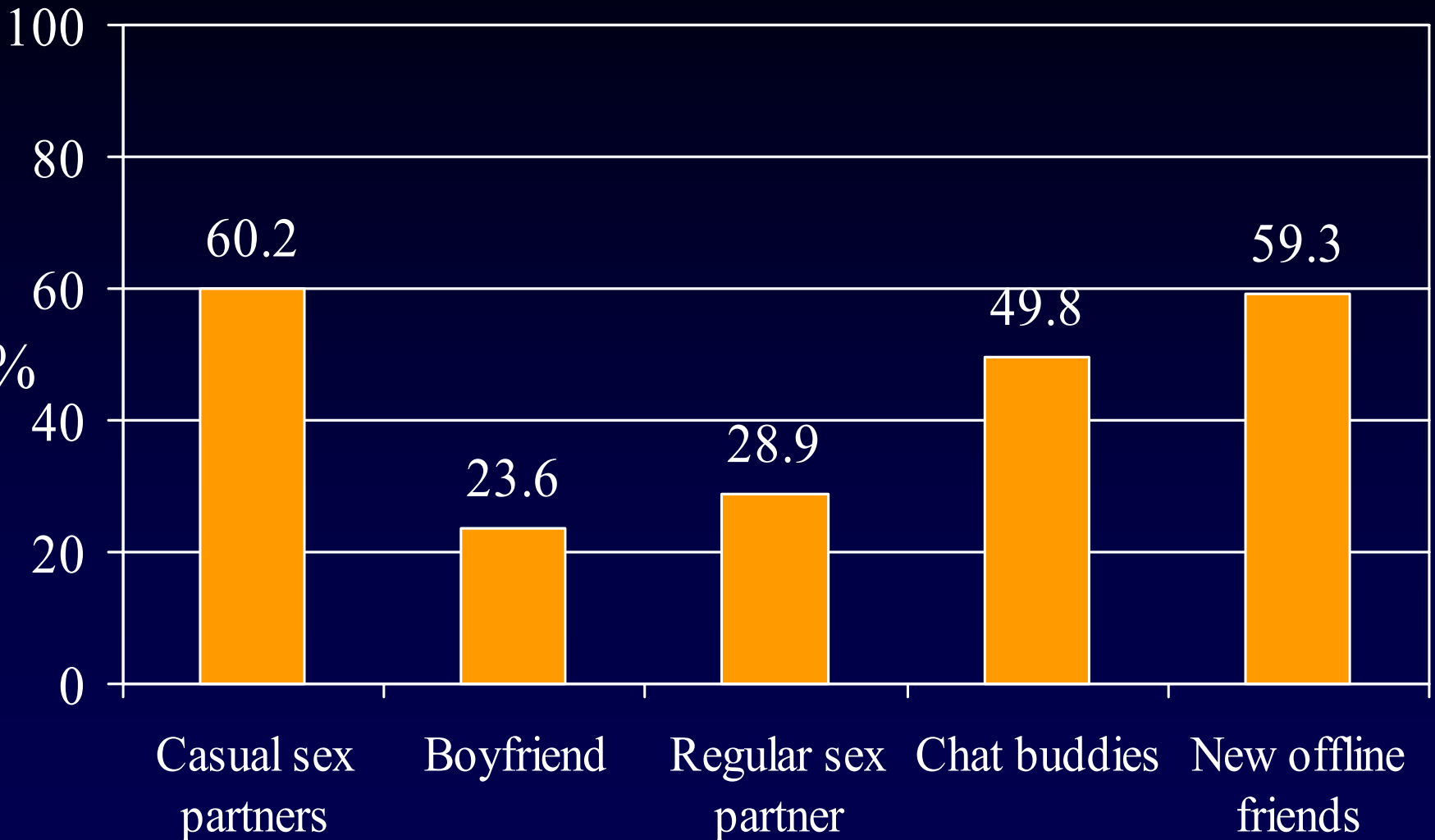
▶ *Current usage*

- 79% currently used GCS to find sex partners, and over half of these men cruised online at least once a week
- 21% were not currently using GCS for sex-seeking

What men are seeking on GCS



Who men have met through GCS



Factor analysis

- ▶ Analysed 26 questionnaire items on participants' attitudes to different aspects of GCS use
- ▶ 3 conceptually coherent factors identified, using 18 items, 28.6% of the variance

Patterns of GCS use

- ▶ *Satisfaction/Confidence* (9 items)
 - positive experiences of GCS, inc. more and better sex, finding out more about sex partners, easier negotiation, and confidence in using GCS
- ▶ *Concern* (6 items)
 - concerns about posting personal information and pics online and risks of meeting men through GCS, disappointing online experiences
- ▶ *Disclosure* (3 items)
 - norms of disclosing HIV status before meeting men, expecting others to do the same, and looking for seroconcordant partners online

Selected correlates of Satisfaction/Confidence

- ▶ Greater Satisfaction/Confidence in GCS related to:
 - having ever met casual or regular partners online
 - meeting more men through GCS
 - having had any UAI-C in previous 6 months
 - having more friends who used GCS for sex-seeking
 - using GCS more frequently for sex-seeking

Selected correlates of Concern

- ▶ Greater Concern with GCS related to:
 - not meeting casual or regular partners online
 - meeting fewer partners through GCS
 - having fewer friends who used GCS for sex-seeking
 - using GCS less frequently for sex-seeking
 - using fewer features of GCS

Selected correlates of Disclosure

- ▶ Greater Disclosure scores associated with:
 - Looking for or meeting a boyfriend through GCS
 - Looking for friends through GCS
 - Chatting/emailing extensively before meeting men through GCS
 - Having more friends who use GCS for sex-seeking

Discussion

- ▶ GCS as sexual *and* social environments – virtual bars rather than bathhouses
- ▶ Chat sites and risk (reduction)?
- ▶ Some questions for further research...
 - ▶ how is HIV status disclosed or implied online?
 - ▶ do chat sites facilitate partner sorting by status?
 - ▶ how do online relationships compare to offline ones?
 - ▶ could encouraging ‘online competence’ and ‘safe surfing’ aid in negotiation and satisfaction with GCS?