

Background

- Increasing numbers of men who have sex with men (MSM) in Kenya have access to the internet via smartphones and desktop computers.
- Emerging evidence from the Respondent Driven Sampling phase of the TRANSFORM study (see THPEC209) indicates that 71% of men MSM in Nairobi and 60% of men in Johannesburg had socialised online with other MSM in the past month.
- Online social and sexual media sites provide a new means of engaging MSM in Kenya and South Africa for HIV prevention and sexual health interventions.
- Little is currently known about how men are connecting online, how they are using different online platforms to facilitate varied forms of social and sexual contact, and what challenges they experience in using such platforms.
- Whilst many community based organisations do have presence in online social and sexual networking sites, they often are insufficiently resourced to provide online support services or health promotion activities.

Study aim

This study sought to understand the challenges and opportunities that online platforms present for HIV health promotion with MSM in Kenya and South Africa.



Method

- Between June 2016 and July 2017, in-depth interviews were carried out with 60 MSM (aged 19-56), recruited via purposive sampling including 30 from Nairobi and 30 from Johannesburg.
- Semi-structured interviews examined if and how men used social media (including generic and gay-specific sites/apps) for online interaction with other MSM, including the mechanisms, benefits and challenges of use.
- Criteria for inclusion in the in-depth interviews included:
 - male gender identity or assigned male gender at birth;
 - 18 years of age or older;
 - resident of/within 50km of Nairobi County;
 - and reporting a history of consensual oral or anal intercourse with a man at least once in the last 12 months.

Results

- Thirteen men were living with diagnosed HIV and 31 had not tested within the previous 6 months.
- The majority (n=54) of participants across the age spectrum used social media on a regular basis to engage with other MSM, most frequently Facebook and WhatsApp groups.

How are men connecting?

- Men in both countries would commonly connect by 'liking' pictures of desirable men that had been posted online (thus indicating a same sex attraction) or would be added to local MSM WhatsApp group by friends or sexual partners
- Both Facebook and WhatsApp were used for sexual facilitation purposes in a manner less common in high-income settings, allowing for the exchange of sexual material, access to sex workers or clients, and the organisation of one-on-one/group sex.



Advantages on online connectivity

- Although not risk free, social media platforms afforded a safer environment in which to meet other MSM compared to physical bars or cruising grounds (especially in Kenya).
- Initial online interaction often helped to build confidence in accessing MSM safe spaces in person (e.g. gay bars or community-based services) and enabled risk-management conversations ahead of meeting face-to-face.

How are men trying to keep themselves safe?

- Careful management of online identities was required so as not to inadvertently disclose sexual orientation or lose control of identifying images, such as profile photos. This was particularly of concern for men in Kenya.
- Fear of blackmail was a significant feature of many interviews; either by the men they arranged to meet online (who might turn out to be disingenuous) or by others who might entrap them in an online MSM specific space based on their profile photo or other pictures they might send.

Conclusion

- Social and sexual media spaces provide an opportunity for MSM in Kenya and South Africa to meet, make friends and facilitate sex.
- There is significant scope for the delivery of HIV prevention and care interventions for MSM in these countries via social media, such as promotion of HIV testing options, PrEP education and demand-creation interventions, and other HIV education.
- Techniques for ensuring safe connections in social media environments should be developed, similar to those that have previously been produced to ensure safety in physical 'cruising' environments.
- Peer-led services are ideally placed to make use of social media to engage with men who might not have previously connected with MSM specific interventions.

"Most of the clients I get I get online. Facebook, WhatsApp, Grindr. Then you just give them, the clients, the directions, they come to your place."

"There are those gay groups where you post your picture and say, 'Please like me' and you get like 50 messages in your inbox and like 20 friend requests in a day."

"I was always lonely. In the house I would feel empty so the only way I could find somebody to keep me company was via the internet. You just post and people respond."

"You know on social media you must be very careful because there are blackmailers there [...] They should have their picture on any platform, their real picture, otherwise I won't go and meet them."