

The Advantages and Limitations of Seeking Sex Online: A Comparison of Reasons Given for Online and Offline Sexual Liaisons by Men Who Have Sex With Men

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The Internet has developed as a major site for sexual activity, both cybersex and for making contacts for sex in real life (IRL). As part of a major study of HIV-risk behavior on the Internet and IRL, we obtained online responses from 1,017 Latino men who have sex with men (MSM) in the United States. Open-ended questions solicited responses regarding whether respondents preferred to meet sexual partners first IRL (48.4%), on the Internet (31.6%), or “it depends” (20%), and “why?”. Data were analyzed by theme, with themes grouped into overarching domains. Data indicate that for those preferring the Internet, themes represented were ease of Internet use, its advantages for people who were shy, and its anonymity, safety, the excitement and opportunity for experimentation of Internet contact, ability to avoid interpersonal contact, and control of visuals and the environment. Reasons for preferring meeting IRL included some of the same themes but with an emphasis on the importance of a “real presence” and the possibility to build a relationship. Where “it depends,” key themes were contextual: mood, time, setting, alcohol and drug use, sexual needs and urgency, and relationship intentions. Antagonistic advantages were often noted for cybersex and IRL. These data suggest that motivations for making Internet sexual contact in MSM are complex, depend on the context and nature of the relationship sought, and that the Internet has allowed the development of a class of sexual contacts located between IRL and fantasy.

The Internet has become a new norm in Western countries, with over 70 million people in the United States logging in on a typical day at the end of 2004 (Pew Foundation, 2005). A significant part of that activity appears to include sexually related Internet use. At least for men who use the Internet to seek sex with other Men (MISM), Ross, Tikkanen and Månsson (2000) characterized the Internet as an “erotic oasis,” which contains many features of traditional areas of homosocial and homosexual contact while

adding some new ones. Researchers have argued that the Internet is the site of the next sexual revolution and driven by the “triple A engine”: accessibility (convenient and simple), affordability (cheap, wide supply of sites), and anonymity (the belief that one’s identity is concealed online; Cooper & Griffin-Shelley, 2002). For MISM, Ross and Kauth (2002) extended this engine to men who have sex with men (MSM), acceptability (its common and normative use), and approximation (the opportunity to experiment with sexual behaviors and relationships in cyberspace rather than IRL) as the “quin A engine.” To date, most descriptions of the motivations and experiences of MISM regarding the Internet have been based on the popular press, anecdote, and deduction. Deduction, however, is not always accurate: Ross et al. (2000) noted that it was assumed that Internet-using MSM samples would simply reproduce existing samples of urban gay men, whereas their data showed that Internet-using MSM were more likely to be younger, outside of major cities, more bisexual, and less connected with the urban gay subculture.

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A clear distinction needs to be made between *cybersex* (“carrying on via computer proxy sexual activity through rich description with accompanying sexual arousal, often to orgasm”; Ross & Kauth, 2002) and using the Internet to meet sexual partners IRL, although often the former may morph into the latter. Often, discussion of Internet sexual behavior does not make this distinction, perhaps because the distinction may be blurred by cybersex morphing into partner contact. Ross, Rosser, and Stanton (2004) noted that there were significantly different demographic profiles for pattern of making contact and subsequent communication and public health risk associated with use of the Internet for cybersex versus meeting partners IRL as well as different attitudes and beliefs with these two approaches to meeting sexual partners.

Motivations underlying online sexual exploration and expression were explored by McKenna, Green, and Smith (2001) in heterosexual men and women. They carried out both in-depth interviews online and constructed a scale from their data. McKenna et al. reported that the major dimensions include offline safety concerns, the ability to have frequent and convenient sex, the importance of their online sexuality to their identity, and increased acceptance of their sexuality and increased self-esteem.

Ross (2005) has reviewed the literature surrounding the Internet and sexuality and noted that there are a number of advantages and attractions of the Internet for sexual use and exploration over meeting partners conventionally. First, whereas the body is the domain of sexuality, on the Internet the user can experiment with a surrogate body (by using “virtual” own and others’ bodies, which may or may not approximate reality) without being considered “being” what he is “doing.” Second, use of text allows for the development of a novella of romance, linking fantasies, desires, and sexuality in a mutually developed script. Third, the Internet allows behavior that does not transgress sexual boundaries touted by many moral and political conservatives as “appropriate” because, at least for cybersex, the participants are not actually doing it, thus they avoid both being caught doing it and the stigma associated with some behaviors. Further, the deconstruction and reconstruction of the giver’s information allows the receiver to interpret the information with his or her own frame of reference, and in some ways it is closer to fulfillment of desire than “real” sex. Fourth, intimacy can be accelerated by building trust and closeness and by removing the social cues and conventions that slow the development of intimacy IRL. Fifth, the Internet is an expandable market providing a global sexual space in place of a local sexual scene (although most physical contacts occur locally), particularly linking people with specific preferences, desires, or paraphilias with those of like interests with great rapidity. Sixth, the Internet allows for cybersex (a new niche in sexuality between fantasy and IRL sex) in which two (or more) individuals build a mutually constructed sexual scenario. It can also allow for exploration and acculturation into sexual subcultures that otherwise would have to await a physical visit or introduction from an insider. Far from being a passive medium, the Internet is an active partner in the creation of new

niches and subcultures in sexual and social ecosystems. Although Ross (2005) has outlined the theoretical reasons that Internet sexuality may be important, there are few data to indicate what the users of the Internet see as the major dimensions of its attractiveness.

Exploration (and validation) of the attraction of the Internet for sexual purposes through the use of a sample of MSM would provide an indication of the significance of the medium sexually from the perspective of the user. This would allow triangulation of theoretical and observational data with interview data of sexual Internet users. Further, it would allow exploration of the collection of data via the Internet for qualitative analysis and comparison with conventionally acquired qualitative data.

There are a number of advantages of online interviews, such as reduced need for travel, lack of transcription costs, advantages of scale, and the ability to include geographically and socially isolated people (Mann & Stewart, 2002). There are also differences and potential disadvantages. Davis, Bolding, Hart, Sherr, and Elford (2004) have described the strengths and weaknesses of conducting synchronous online interviews for qualitative research. They note that in such interviews, the technical limitations (and some of the social conventions) of Internet computer-mediated communication may introduce ambiguity into online dialogue. Longer time and fewer words, and the fact that the exchange was limited by reading, reflection, and the typing skills of respondents were noted, and it may be that respondents are also attending to other screens simultaneously. They suggest that lack of nonverbal reinforcement may also influence this. Davis et al. also noted idiosyncrasies of computer-mediated communication, such as use of emoticons, mixed prose-style and textual abbreviations, and staccato or pointed dialogue. They noted that online interviews emerge as a form of “textual performance,” which might be considered a distinctive social practice and not simply a textual equivalent of in-person interviews. Some of these disadvantages, they suggest, might be overcome by asynchronous online interviewing in which there is more time for reflection and elaboration.

As part of one of the first generation of studies of MSM in the United States, we sought inductive data to explore the range, types of relationships, and the reasons that MSM use and prefer the Internet for sexual purposes. This study aimed to identify from the explanations of Latino MSM the relative advantages and disadvantages of meeting men for sex first on the Internet versus first IRL and the situations on which choice of the medium may depend. A subsidiary aim was to investigate the appropriateness of online data from open-ended questions for qualitative analysis.

Method

As part of a larger study of HIV-risk behavior among Latino MSM, we studied the demographic and Internet characteristics of 1,026 Latino MSM. A full description of the methods appears elsewhere (see, e.g., Ross et al., 2004; Ross,

Rosser, Stanton, & Konstan, 2004). To summarize, in November–December 2002, over a 47-day period, we posted 47,495,771 nonindependent banner advertisements for a University-based study of sex and the Internet for Latino MSM on www.gay.com, the largest gay-themed Web site in the United States. Banner advertisements were placed on three type of sites within www.gay.com: chatrooms (where participants can textually interact, meet online partners, including negotiating sex), personals (where participants can advertise for personal and sexual contacts), and run of service (a broad category where advertisements are randomly placed throughout the Web site). This yielded 33,024 clicks onto our Web site and 1,742 enrollees; 1,026 completed surveys which were deemed “unique completers” (see Ross, Rosser, Stanton, & Konstan, 2004, for an analysis of differences between dropouts compared with those who completed the study). All study materials were prepared in English, then forward and back translated into Spanish. All Subjects had to choose to answer in either English or Spanish (only 16% chose to complete the study in Spanish). Subjects were given four options for \$20 compensation, traditional money (requiring name and addresses), e-money (solely requiring an e-mail address), donation to a named charity, or the option to decline compensation. The study was approved by the relevant university committee for the protection of human subjects and all respondents provided informed consent.

Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed with SPSS (Version 11.5, 2003, SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). We examined responses to the question, “If you want to meet a man physically for sex, which do you prefer?” The response options checked were “On the Internet” ($n = 321, 31.6\%$), “In real life”, ($n = 492, 48.4\%$), and “It depends” or “No preference” ($n = 204, 20\%$). For each of the first three responses, respondents were then asked, “You indicated that you prefer to meet men physically for sex on the Internet [in real life]. Why?”, and, for the “It depends” response, “You indicated that if you want to meet a man physically for sex, whether you meet him first via the Internet or in real life ‘depends’... Why? On what?”. A box was provided for open-ended comment. Open-ended comments were provided on the Internet response by 98.7% who preferred to make sexual contact on the Internet, by 97.6% of those who preferred to make contact IRL, and by 82.8% of those who indicated that “it depends”. All responses are transcribed here verbatim, including spelling and punctuation errors. Responses in Spanish are given in the original and in translation.

A small number of responses (2.8%) were blank, and three contained uninterpretable material (“11111,” “ugoll,” “dgdgfsfg”). Fewer than half of the total responses contained one-line answers, and of the one-line responses, only 6.7% were only one word (e.g., “easier”). On two occasions, the response suggested that the wrong box had been checked: “No.” “Check my answer. That is not right.”

We used theme analysis for these data after data collection was complete (Spradley, 1979). A theme is a pattern of

thought that connects domains and something that people within the target area will accept as valid. A domain is considered to be a symbolic category that contains related words. In many cases, the themes of a content area such as burnout and reward may not be explicitly expressed and hence must be uncovered by the actions and descriptive language and rules of the target group. After identified domains, possible unidentified domains, descriptive examples and other data were noted, the existing domains were compared and contrasted in order to find the themes and organizing domains.

The qualitative analysis was conducted by Michael W. Ross who analyzed the open-ended responses and coded them for conceptual ideas that emerged from the data. A random selection of data was examined independently for cross-validation by Sheryl McCurdy. The codes were then categorized into themes, and those most expressive of the themes are displayed verbatim in Tables 2–4. Three tables, “Reasons for Meeting Men for Sex on the Internet,” “Reasons for Meeting Men in Real Life,” and “Why It Depends” contain the themes specific to these domains.

Results

Results are presented in Tables 1–4. Table 1 provides a summary of the demographics and demonstrates that the sample appeared to be broadly representative of Latino population distribution in the United States and with regard to ethnicity and race. Tables 2–4 illustrate examples of the responses to the open-ended question, grouped into themes and with these overarching themes that contain a number of related dimensions.

The qualitative data in Tables 2–4 give an indication of the types of open-ended responses provided on the Internet. First, the great majority of respondents, when asked for an open-ended response, gave one (almost all in the categories asking for reasons for preferring Internet [Table 2] or in real life meeting [Table 3], and over four fifths for the more conditional “depends” category [Table 4]). Although these were respondents who volunteered for, and were being recompensed for, participation, these data indicate that relatively complex, multiple responses are common and that most respondents will provide at least a phrase explaining their motivations. Few responses distinguish cybersex or IRL encounters in any given utterance, but this is unsurprising given that the questions related to where men preferred to first meet other men before having IRL sex.

The condensed nature of these responses is typical of computer-mediated communication compared with more formal letters, some e-mail, and the spoken material usually transcribed from individual or focus group interviews. It is more like instant messaging (IMing) and similar to those described by Davis et al. (2004). It is apparent that the responses have loose construction and often casual use of capitalization, abbreviation, punctuation, and spelling, suggesting that the medium of the Internet has evolved as its own linguistic medium for the transmission of condensed and

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Internet Sample as Compared With Hispanics Living in the United States (U.S. Census, 2000)

	Internet ^a		U.S. Census Hispanic Population ^b	
	N	%	N ^c	%
Region of Residence				
Northeast	125	12.4	5,254,087	14.8
Midwest	171	17.0	3,124,532	8.8
South	328	32.7	11,586,696	32.8
West	379	37.7	15,340,503	43.4
Puerto Rico + Military ^c	23			
Latino Ethnicity				
Mexican	570	55.9	21,607,506	62.6
Puerto Rican	146	14.3	3,465,784	10.1
Cuban	47	4.6	1,236,511	3.6
Other	253	24.8	8,164,639	28.4
Central American				4.8
South American				3.8
Dominican				2.2
Spaniard				0.3
All other Hispanic				17.3
Race				
One Race	733	89.1	33,081	93.7
White	347	42.5	16,907	47.9
American Indian	30	3.7	407	1.2
Asian American	7	.9	120	.3
Black or African American	17	2.1	710	2.0
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	2	.2	45	.1
Other	330	40.4	14,891	42.2
Biracial or multiracial	83	10.2	2,224	6.3

^aN = 1,026. ^bN = 35,300,000. ^cU.S. personnel overseas.

terse, but succinct, ideas. Analysis of the themes emerging from Internet open-ended questions does require a different analytical approach compared with other texts or from transcripts from verbal material, given that verbal interaction requires immediate give and take with an interviewer rather than static words on a page as in this study. The Internet response and IMing texts do provide researchers with new opportunities to analyze communication, as Davis et al. (2004) have noted. The wealth of ideas and the relatively easy collection of open-ended Internet material is limited by the fact that it was not (in this case) open to probing and clarification and was limited by the space available. These data illustrate the conflated, staccato nature of most of the material.

Reasons for Meeting on the Internet

The data in Table 2 illustrate the reasons given for meeting men first for sex on the Internet. As is apparent from this Table, several reasons were often mentioned in the one open-ended response. The selected quotes often illustrate more than one theme. The themes most commonly represented were the ease of the Internet and its advantages for people who were shy. Other themes that emerged were anonymity and safety, excitement and experimentation, avoidance of interpersonal contact, getting to know people better, control of visuals, and environment.

Ease was characterized by the speed, the advantage of searching from home, and the virtual certainty of finding a sexual partner in a short time. The advantage of the Internet for shy people was also frequently expressed in terms of breaking down the inhibitions and barriers to approaching someone in person. Interaction is easier because of the indirect contact, more perceived honesty, and the fact that it is easier to ask direct questions without the fear that rejection will be a problem (for self and others) as it is in real life. The Internet was seen both as making it easier to get the "truth," and easier to lie. The relative lack of pressure on the Internet, in part related to the lower time pressure and lack of pressure from being face to face, was also noted as an advantage.

Other ways the Internet was seen as important were its attraction for people who were experimenting or coming out, who needed to be discreet, who were married or bisexual, or who were in a relationship. The advantages of the Internet were seen as its anonymity, its focus on sex, and the excitement and adventure of the medium. The function of the Internet in providing access to a huge variety and its role as a filter or screen to select out the most appropriate sexual partners was frequently emphasized. Being able to assess the looks and preview partners is also an advantage of Internet partner selection as a specific subset of screening. Where a Web camera is available, it also enables a check to determine whether the posted pictures are accurate and recent.

Table 2. *Reasons Given by MISM for Preferring to Meet Men First for Sex on the Internet**Theme: Relative anonymity and safety**Coming out and discretion*

Seems to be more discreet. I'm not totally out and easier and more discreet to meet guys this way. Do not have to go to the gay bars or bookstores to find sex. Its easier to say what you want, you get straight to the point, and I'm still in the closet so people don't see me looking for men
 I was not out yet, so I didn't feel comfortable unless I knew for sure the person was gay. But since I have had a boyfriend that I met online, and am currently with now going on 9 months. I would be ok meeting someone now in person.
 I am still in the closet. (as many other people who do not want to 'risk' coming out)
 I am not openly gya to all my friends more discreet
 It can be covert.

Secrecy

I'm not looking for a relationship with a man. I'm bisexual and have a girlfriend, I just like to have sex with a guy every once in a while. Where I'm from, the internet is by far the best and practically the only way to hook up with guys discrete
 Cause I am married and bisexual and prefer the anonymity
 I'm married, so going to bars and clubs is out.

Anonymity

It's more anonymous and I don't have to guess about things
 It's very anonymous and there's no commitment. You can just shut down the computer if the guy isn't what you want
 I enjoy the anonymous, meaningless, casual sex found via the internet.
 no strings fun, can't track you or boyfriend

Safety

Safer, a chance to talk in a neutral environment
 Less pressure, makes running easier if it gets weird.
 safer in the way you can at least get toknow the person before having any personal contact, and easier to break off the encounter if not interested.
 I can chat for a while and get a sense of him to see if he's dangerous or not. If I feel threatened or anything seems strange, I can simply exit the chat.
 because u feel a sense of safty behind the computer
 Easier. Men in chat rooms are generally looking for sex, cruising parks, arcades, etc. has become more dangerous.

*Theme: Excitement and experimentation**Excitement*

luv the anticipation
 Because its more exciting and the trill of it makes me want him more
 Like the adventure
 It's exciting.

Experimentation and variety

I am questioning my sexuality, the internet is the easiest medium for me to experiment and be discrete
 More variety and faster hook up
 Ease and variety
 The internet is like a different world and u can be whatever or whoever u want to be

Focus on sex

Because you know that men online are usually only looking for sex. Especially the guys on gay.com, you don't expect anything else. Sometimes I go on there looking for men to date, but I end up meeting a guy for sex only.
 Most men that are on the internet are simply out for sex, plain and simple, guys in bars are usually looking for a relationship
 No strings ... guys looking are not into game playing just getting off

*Theme: Ease and selection**Ease*

I feel that it's easier to get honest and direct answers to questions over the internet. I think people are more prone to be frank about who they are and what they want
 Its easier to talk to someone....the internet chat rooms is simple to get laid
 It's also faster and more convenient if all I'm looking for is a "quickie".
 it's always a guarantee I will meet a guy
 If it is just for sex, it takes less time.
 Casual sex from the internet is more discreet and "easier" than any other venue. It's the perfect sex club of the new millennium. Men know what they want, and usually get it. No strings fun is a major selling point, "get it up, get it in, get o
 The amount of work involved seems more desirable than having to get ready to 'go out' and meet someone.

Interaction easier

More honest, direct answers
 Easier to talk openly
 Easier to state what want in anonymous setting

(continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Breaks inhibitions

Rejection easier

It's easier to cut someone off if I'm not interested in them.

if he doesn't like me I don't care too much, it's easier to find another one

I tend to be shy, so if they've already seen my picture and are still interested, then I feel there's less of a chance of rejection.

if I meet a man in person and I don't like him it might be hard to "reject" him so using the internet is easier because your not actually there to reject them

No threat if you are turned down

While online we can discuss what we are looking for, rather than making it uncomfortable in person when not finding agreement. It spares embarrassment or disappointment.

Lack of pressure

Because it's easier to get a sense of what he likes sexually...no pressure to have sociable conversation or be observed by others in the club
less stress, easier to chat with

Because it allows a safe, zero pressure environment to get to know someone.

Easier to get to know someone usually in that manner, without there being pressure

give me the chance to talk over things without the pressure of a face to face encounter

Less pressure!

Get more, easier information on the Internet

I find it's easier to talk on the internet than in person, that way I'm more daring and I take time trying to find out about the other person

It is a "safe" way to find out what his ideas are without feeling intimidated to ask things in person.

Because if the person is looking and I meet him we can see each other, ask and respond much more quickly. The transaction of exchanging data is much more effective

Filtering

It's much easier this way ... you get to chat with much more people this way and you quickly "filter" the ones which are not "fit" with you

You can first screen their profile, pic and stats (physical characteristics). In person, you just kinda stuck with who you get and if you physically don't like them, you can't just click a button and make them go away. You have to be nice and p

So I can try to get to know some things first, before I waste my time

Safer. I can screen out the ugly or undesirable ones. Also if they're too pushy, or jerks, I don't have to keep talking with them. just close the window and find another person.

Because then I can see whether or not he likes to communicate find out more stuff about him from other users on the net

Staging of contact

it is easier for me to get to know them 1st online ... then on the phone..then in person...

Good way to break the ice and talk about things before you actually meet in person. Allows you to say what you want and what you feel without having to look at them.

Like to talk to them and find out more about them before i meet them

I don't like meeting face to face first

to find out as much as possible about him before actually meeting him

Negotiation

Easier to talk about what you want

Know their wants, your wants

People you can be more open and sexually explicit when you are online. You can tell people your fantasy, what you like etc. and you don't feel ashamed or embarrassed like when you tell them in person.

Truth

This is so one can establish certain truths about him. The reality of the situation is this: on the internet, protected in the realm of anonymity, one is with greater freedom to ask questions one would not feel they could in "real life". This

Easier way to communicate, feel more relaxed, open ... easier to ask the right questions and usually get a more accurate answer

it's the easiest ... requires the least effort ... easier to lie

It is easier to not follow through with meeting him (ie giving him false info) if I am uncomfortable with any aspect of the situation that has taken place or could arise.

Because it is easier to ask lots of questions

I feel that sometimes the disconnect you get from the Internet allows a guy to be more open and honest (most of the time) than when you meet in person.

Theme: Avoidance of interpersonal contact

Shyness

I am very shy and I find it easier to chat online than meet in person

i guess because the internet breaks inhibitions one might have about some thing or some one.

Less nerve-racking

I am not the kind of person to go up to someone in a club, I just can't, but if someone else did then I would be willing.

You don't have the pressure of having to start a conversation. You aren't as much intimidated to talk to them as in real life sometimes u feel intimidated to go up to the person u find attractive and say, Hi.

"The eyes"

Because it's easier to talk without looking someone in the eyes. At least when you meet the person the conversation will flow easier.

Not having to look the person in the eyes

I don't have to be shy because hes not looking mein the eye

because I feel that on the net people can be real without the pressure of seeing you eye to eye.

Table 2. (Continued)

Theme: Getting to know people better

Depth and personality

The level of anonymity on the internet provides a space to probe deeper into their personality, to get them to reveal things about themselves they wouldn't normally first reveal face to face
Because you can get a better understanding of their personality, what they want sexually, although you can't always get a good description of their physical characteristics
because I can get to know him first without knowing what he's like physically. In person, the first thing that you notice is the physical. Also it's easier to know someone on the internet.
A man's grasp of the English language is important to me. Meeting online allows me the opportunity to sample his skills.
Buffer for potential psychos ... they can at least read and write... eloquence goes a long way, and in chatting you can prolong the meet/intercourse ratio, and get to know them better.

TO SEE WHAT KIND OF PERSONALITY HE MAY HAVE, IF AT LEAST HE CAN CARRY ON A CONVERSATION THROUGH QUESTIONS YOU CAN HAVE A CLUE OF WHAT HE IS LIKE.

Intimacy

Get to know people better
You meet the person (the mind) not the body. It's easier to get to know each other.
Because I feel you get to know a man a little better, usually it's a little more personal, than at a club
Because you get to know him first, and you are more in contact with his feelings, and you can tell whether he is being honest or not.

Theme: Control of visuals

Looks

That way you can deal with the person before and you can see pictures and etc.
Anonymous, exciting can exchange a pic first exciting
So I can preview what he looks like
see what they look like
Because I don't have to see him face to face and I like to get hopes up
ease of conversation, chance to possibly see what he looks like before meeting.

BECAUSE IT'S EASIER, SINCE YOU CAN SEE THE PERSON VIA PICTURES OR A CAMERA AND KNOW WHAT HE WANTS AND IS LOOKING FOR!!

always request a pic, to include a genital shot

Special statuses

EASIER TO TELL PEOPLE ABOUT HIV STATUS ON THE NET

Because I am a little too old to be going out cruising.
Because I'm overweight.
Cause I don't consider myself goodlooking enough to meet men in person
I'm not old enough to go to bars, and there are no places to meet young guys. On the internet it is easier to talk to guys and most of the time they are also looking for sex.

Theme: Environment

Better than bars

Less hassle ... no cost ... just have him come over ... or u go to his place ... bars are filled with smoke ... im not a big drinker ... and they cost too much ... cover and drinks ... bars tend to be hit or miss ... and too click like
It is easier than having to go to a bar/club
I don't like to drink (and it's expensive). The Internet is just way quicker
Less harassing, can take more time to talk, get to know each other a little, "convenience", no smoke as in the bars ... cheaper ...
am not into the club and bar scene
there are many aspects: It's easier and I don't have to leave my house to a bar and spend money, no alcohol,, I don't smoke, you can exchange nude photos by e-mail, until you talk on the phone at the same time see the information on the street

Home comforts

Because you don't have to throw yourself out in the real world. You can sit in the comfort of your home and discuss what you like to do and what you like to have done to you
Because it is less drama. You don't have to leave home to contact someone, and it is faster. Also, it will be understood that the other person is looking also.
It is much less work ... I can sign on from home and he can come to me.
Convenience. The comfort of being at home in bed on a laptop; not having to spend the money and the energy going out to the bars or adult bookstore.

Geographical considerations

Easier ... not many places around here to meet men

TO SEE IF HE IS IN THE AREA I AM IN

Now that I live in the Midwest, there are not as many facilities for meeting gay men in real life. Therefore, I use the internet.
In this area where there is a lot of tension about gay people it is better to be very discrete

IN LOS ANGELES IT'S HARD TO MEET PEOPLE. ON THE INTERNET IT SEEMS WALLS COME DOWN.

Note. $n = 317$. All spelling, grammar, punctuation, truncations and capitalizations are as typed onto the questionnaire. MISM = men who use the Internet to seek sex with other men.

Table 3. *Reasons Given by MISMs for Preferring to Meet Men First in Real Life**Theme: The “real presence”**Seeing the real person*

I like to know what he looks like in the present, not from some old picture.
 I get to see the real thing, and decide whether I like him or not
 You see the real person there in flesh and blood. It's not a guessing game, is he posting his real picture or is he hiding behind a net identity?
 In real life you see what you get. In the flesh.
 Less confusion and miscommunication
 I can better judge since the use of all senses is greater
 so i can see his hygiene, smell, acts, proportions
 smell and behaviors are part of attraction
 because i dunno if he's butt ugly
 Because there are no surprises.
 I can get a “sense” about the man. I can usually tell if they are sincere or just horny

Chemistry and attraction

Get a first hand account of what the person looks like ... if I could be able to “get off” with them.
 Just to see if the pic he sent is really him, and to see if there is chemistry
 Not having to lie about physical appearances, know upfront what you are getting into. Know first hand if there is a physical attraction.
 Because you can actually see them in person and tell if you guys are attracted to each other. the internet is all pictures(some fake)
 I can tell more about a person. I can tell if there is any chemistry.
 First impressions are important, one can see for themselves what the other person actually looks and sounds like, what their demeanor is, can better determine if there is a “chemistry”
 There's a chemistry and there are gestures and a certain look in a person's eyes when they first meet someone that says very much about their reaction to you. On the internet, it's all rehearsed and there's no hint as to how they will react t

Excitement

it makes it more real and more exciting to actually see the person in person
 Seeing is believing ... more fun to fantasize when they're right in front of you.
 Chase is more exciting.
 I like the hunt, and the things involved in the hunt
 I want to see him so that I can become hot for him.

“The Eyes”

you can see exactly what he's on about, his mannerisms, eyes, judge honesty
 Because I like to know who I'm dealing with, by looking into the person's eye and by listening to his tone of voice and mannerisms.
 I would like to get to know the person well before doing anything with him. I don't feel I truly know people unless I've talked to them while looking them in the eyes.
 It's mainly a combination of two things. First, I eye contact is very important for me, it tells me a lot about the person. Then. The looks. I feel more comfortable just ignoring someone I met because I don't feel attracted to him than worki

Body language

To have a connection that is impossible over the internet- one rooted in body language, eye contact and activated senses.
 Because it's much more of an intimate sentiment. You get to know the person and their reactions to the conversation at hand. You can read a lot of body language.
 Easier to talk and get to know. Know what direction your going. Face to face interaction. Body language communication.

*Theme: Building relationship**Companionship and relationship*

Yes! I'm beyond sex. I really want a companion.
 because I understand that the internet allows for “auickies” and not for a meaningful LTR
 real life tends to lead to real relationships
 I prefer meeting a man the old fashioned way to see if it may lead to something more than sex

Depth and personality

You can see what the person is really like both physically and mentally. You get a sense of their personality and how they interact with you.
 Because attraction is about interaction to me not just stats. and a picture
 There are certain aspects of personality that can't be measured just from an impersonal internet interaction. There is a lot more to a personal interaction between two human beings than an internet communication can ever offer.
 because there a greater possibility to accept or reject whomever if we don't like each other without realizing or knowing the other's feelings (?)

Staging of contact

I would want to know the person before ever having sex with them. I have only had sex with people I have dated, no matter how I met them.
 I think that regardless of what you meet a man for, it is nice to get to know the person even just a little before you have physical relations.
 I prefer to get to know them in person first
 I like to know people that I'm going to have sex with as people before I know them as sex partners.
 I prefer to meet the man in real life so that I can see if he is physically fit, handsome, clean (good personal hygiene). I also think it is good to go out with someone in a non-sexual manner before engaging in sexual activity.
 Its easier you can see how they r and maybe u could date first

Table 3. (Continued)*Saves time*

To get it on and leave not form a relationship. I can "size" him up and decide if I want to do it. to assess his physical attributes first hand rather than arranging something and being disappointed later so we can just get to it, I don't want to chat I just want sex it's easier takes away the time of having to talk over the internet and then setting up a time going "cruising" is quicker Less time, and probably greater probability for real sex. People that go on line to look for sex that's what they're looking for. people in clubs or bars can just be there by happenstance. It's easier to get to know someone in person. The conversation flows a little easier and there's no mystery of what the person is actually like because he's right in front of you. Also, you can tell the guy you're not interested right away.

Safety

I get to see in person what the guy looks like so I'm sure I'm attracted to him. I also feel a little safer meeting him in a gay or gay friendly environment. To do a psychopath-check... this way I see who i'm going home with. As well, i can inquiry some of my friendswho are in the club for some advice about the person i'm taking home. I find it gross to meet people online and then have sex with them, because you don't really know them. That is also a very unsafe practice. However, sometimes the urge and need to have sex is so great, that i have done it before.

Truth

I'll know better if he's a liar if I meet him in person It's easier to determine what kind of a personality he has. Also easier to see if we are mutually attracted to each other. Harder to lie about who and what you're about when you meet a person face to face. they can't lie about their appearance Because you don't get these false images in your head and they can't lie about their hight, body type Etc ... you get to know someone better in person and you can tell if they're lying better than you can online, also men online lie more and can be wierdos experience has showed me most if not all men lie on the internet concerning themselves

Dislike Internet

Meeting someone in a bar doesn't feel as shady as meeting someone over the internet. It seems less immoral. It feels almost like you're "dating" for a quick microsecond. Because it seems "dirty and un natural to meet someone on the internet Because if you meet someone for the first time in real life, you know what they look like and what they are into and you know them more as a person. It is sick to just meet someone online to have sex with, though i have done it before. Over Due to the fact I do not want to use the internet as a crutch for meeting people. Also it helps with getting to know a person better ... text is very very deceptive rather than a person's eyes voice and actions which can be quite truthful It feel more natural and not as pathetic. because meeting on the internet feels pathetic, like a social loser

Physical contact/romance

I like a little romance from time to time I am a romantic, just seems better when you have sex when you meet a guy in person. Feels better physically and mentally. Human contact is more real because i can see him ... i can kiss him ... touch him ... Because I do like to have some sort of a facade of interaction/getting to know one another before getting into the sack. It creates an illusion of intimacy that is more enjoyable. Because of the touching

No technology barriers

We don't have the barrier of the computer screen. We can start being honest from the get go Because its better in person than behind a keyboard Obvious reasons, see them, hear them, get to really know them as opposed to typing witty messages back and forth I get to see the person for who they really are, and not have to worry about them being some facade in the cyber world. I much prefer to actually know a person before I have sex with them. I don't think you can actually "know" a person whom you've only spoken to via the internet. the number one reason is the male individual is in front of you. he is not hiding behind some computer screen ...

Note. $n = 480$. All spelling, grammar, punctuation, truncations and capitalizations are as typed onto the questionnaire. MISM = men who use the Internet to seek sex with other men.

Related to screening was safety, with a number of respondents indicating that they felt safer behind the computer, that it gave them time to assess the risk, and that it was much safer than many more traditional cruising venues. Further, it was seen as easier to get information on the Internet without being embarrassed by sharing fantasies or sexually explicit interests as might be the case in face-to-face interactions. This

was followed by a specific set of negotiations, in which desires and expectations were bargained over. Respondents who preferred the Internet saw it as a convenient way to stage an interaction following screening: first screen, then make Internet contact, followed by phone contact, then by meeting. Some saw the Internet as allowing the development of a greater degree of intimacy by emphasizing the person and

Table 4. *Meeting Men on the Internet or in Real Life Depends on What and Why?**Mood*

The situation and my mood

It depends on my mood and how I feel. Sometimes an internet guy is good, other times it's better to meet a guy in person.

How i feel that day either because I'm sad or hate my body.

Depends on my mood, if I want sex via the internet I'll look for it, if not I'll go out to a club.

My mood at the time, how shy i am at the time as well

How horny I am at the time and if anything bad has happened lately. By bad I mean a bad meeting with someone- ie. They lied, I didn't enjoy myself, etc. I tend to be more cautious after a bad experience.

It depends on my confidence level and how I feel about my body. It also depends on my level of horniness

Time

How much time i have to connect; time of day (eg noon = internet, midnight = bar); whether i want to go drinking or not; whether my boyfriend is home.

depends on the situation, Si quiero sexo enseguida lo que pasé mas rapido [If I want to have sex right away, whatever happens the fastest]

Depends on the time I have. I have a partner and don't have much time alone.

On the time that I have to look for someone to have sex with

his location and timing

Where one is/situation

It depends on where I am at and how horny I am at the moment.

It depends on how sexually aroused i am, in what city i am in and how i am feeling about myself that day.

IT depends on whether I am near a computer when I want to meet a man for sex.

depends if i am traveling or i am exceptionally horny

I have a favorite outdoor cruising spot in town, but if it is dark or the weather is bad, I resort to the internet.

Depends on where he happens to be and where I happen to be.

It depends on the circumstances where I am located (city, town, vacation) and how I am feeling. Sometimes I just don't feel like going to meet someone in person, in fact, there is so much less drama online. Complete sentences matter, words

Drink/drugs

It just depends on the particular situation. In real life it's usually when I feel horny, or have been drinking or gotten high. On the internet, I'm more selective about who I actually meet. I'm usually sober so I'm more able to decide whet

depends on what mood im in ... if i just want sex it really doesnt matter ... but there are times i want to have sex with spmeone whom is nore at my level as far as intellect/looks are concerned then im a bit more picky ... drugs/alcohol play a role

Sex versus relationship

Depends on if I feel like going out or not. Also, if you want to meet someone just for casual sex, it's easier to go online for that. For something ore serious, you would meet in real life.

If it's just quick sex, it doesn't matter, it it's more casual, meet people etc. I like the internet better

It depends on if i just want a quick fuck or if i feel like i want to make a friend

Most likely, internet meetings are quick sexual hookups. I would never consider such a meeting as one which would evolve into a serious relationship.

Although, I am open to the possibility of it happening.

Because when I just feel like sex, I'd preferably meet someone online, then if I feel more than just sex, I'd meet someone in real life. In other words, I take guys I meet in real life way more seriously and guys online as nothing but sex, no

Depends on if I'm meeting him to date, or just for sex. Internet is like ordering out for sex. Real life means I have to be more selective and courteous, since I'm already seeing the person and readingbody language.

Yes, it depends on what you are looking for at that time. If you need a friends or just a quick FUCK

Looks and realism

If he's not super hot, I'd rather meet him on the computer so I know his personality first and that turns me on more...if he's cute.. I wanna meet him in person.. preferably at a club so we can hook it up and have fun dancing and flirtin

Because in the chatroom (internet) they can lie more easily about their physical appearance, but once the guy is cool and I trust that he's handsome besides being a nice guy, well, I'd do it via the internet first

It depends on whether or not I have seen his picture before we met.

How convincing he is – how many pics he has, whether he can take them sponsateously at my request so that I can tell whether or not he's real. I rarely have sex with someone immediately after I meet them in real life.

Convenience

pictures, communication style, availability, close proximity to my home, time of day/night, horniness

Distance

Depends on whether or not it is convenient to go out and look casually for a date, or if you can jump on the internet for a local chat room and meet someone that way.

Sometimes I have no car and want the man to come to me

Sociability

Depends if I feel like going out, I'll look for him in person, but if I don't want to go out, I'll look for it on the internet

The circumstances at the time. Sometimes you feel like being social and going to a bar, sometimes less social and just sit at home.

Sometimes I feel like going out and sometimes I feel like having someone come over.

Sexual needs and urgency

Depends on if I already want sex, because if it's not urgent, I'll wait to meet them in person, but if it's urgent, it's better for me to go to the internet

Depends on who he is and my craving for sex and if i want something serious which is usually rare.

Table 4. (Continued)

how horny i am and how attracted i am to another man
 How long it has been since I last had casual sex
 Depending on my mood, his looks, what he's into, what I'm looking for, what he's looking for. I love to service men (tongue baths), I'm very oral. On other occasions I enjoy being serviced.

Need for anonymity

if i want to be anonymous, I'll go online
 on how fast I want to have sex, on the internet it's faster and let's you be anonymous
 on mood, discretion needed
 It depends on how "out" I would have to be or where the location happens to be.

Note. $n = 169$. All spelling, grammar, punctuation, truncations and capitalizations are as typed onto the questionnaire.

personality rather than the body first. The depth of interaction and the chance to get to find out about a contact's personality and other interests are a particular attraction of the Internet, where conversation and probing without the embarrassment of face-to-face interaction is more acceptable. Avoidance of one central issue of face-to-face interaction was noted: not having to meet someone's eyes!

Considerations of place were also frequently mentioned, particularly the juxtaposition of home and bars. The advantages of not having to go to bars because of smoke, alcohol, expense, preparation, and travel time were frequently mentioned as were the advantages of being able to cruise from the safety and comfort of home, during odd times of the day, or under adverse weather conditions when bars or other cruising places were not an option. Geographical considerations were also mentioned, especially in regard to places that had no or distant gay venues, where it was dangerous to cruise, where "attitude" was a barrier in face-to-face venues, or in rural areas. Finally, there were special statuses relating to age, HIV infection, or looks, where men who had difficulty IRL found it easier to make contacts. The ability to metamorphose into someone else was also mentioned as an advantage of the Internet: One could be whoever one wanted to be, at least until a face-to-face meeting occurred.

Reasons for Meeting IRL

Reasons for preferring to meet men IRL were both similar and different from those given for the Internet. The two main themes are a "real presence" and the building of a relationship.

Of particular interest are the concepts that are almost identical to those for Internet meeting that but express the opposite view: safety, truth, saving time, depth and personality, staging of contact, and "the eyes." Here, the same concept that is used as a reason for meeting on the Internet is also used as a reason for preferring to meet IRL. The importance of "the eyes" may relate to the suggestion of David (1996) that eye contact and communication is a central part of men meeting in Mexico and in Central America, and, as such, it would be emphasized in this Latino sample.

Real life meetings, these data indicate, have the advantage of an accurate view of the whole person and allow a judgment through the use of all of the senses, including smell, behav-

ioral assessment, and mannerisms. This allows an assessment of one of the next most frequently used categories, chemistry and attraction. Respondents argued that it was much more difficult to judge physical attraction ("chemistry") on the Internet and that there was no substitute for real life to make this judgment.

Some respondents who prefer meeting first in real life argue that issues of safety and truth are better judged by them in person. These include the ability to make a better judgment in person and making a better judgment on whether the contact is telling the truth (or was telling the truth about their appearance). Here, "the eyes" are important in making assessments rather than being a barrier to frank communication, as with Internet-initiated contacts, suggesting that what may be a barrier for one person may be a facilitator to another. This is a similar finding to that of Ross, Rosser, and Stanton (2004), who noted that it is important to distinguish between those who use the Internet for cybersex and those who use it to find partners for physical sex. Time saving was another example of the same theme appearing for both Internet and IRL preferences. Here, some respondents saw IRL meeting as saving time because the assessment of the sexual suitability of the contact is easier in person, given both the degree of deception found on the Internet and the ability to avoid chat and get down to the sex as soon as possible. Furthermore, there is an expressed dislike of the Internet technology, with the barrier of the electronics and keyboard seen as limiting and "hiding" the real person.

Those preferring to meet IRL also emphasized the importance of body language as a medium for communication, in addition to the verbal and, similar to the additional depth and appreciation of the personality that was given as a reason for meeting first via Internet. Likewise, the excitement of "the hunt" was also given as a reason for wanting to meet IRL. Or it may be that the different personal cues that make the hunt exciting to someone may be visual for some and emotional for others. The fact that similar reasons were given for using different media suggests that it may be the comfort level with the medium, as much as the theme chosen, that determines which one is preferred. As Ross, Rosser, and Stanton (2004) have already noted, people have preferences based on whether they use the Internet for cybersex or to make sexual contacts, and it is possible that these preferences for what they want to do may color their choice of the most positive characteristics for the most suitable medium. This is illus-

trated in the theme of staging of contact, in which positive reasons for making contact IRL are listed, largely preferences for getting to know people IRL first. These data suggest that person characteristics may play as important a part in the choice of medium as medium characteristics or that there is a person–medium interaction in operation.

Why it Depends Sometimes

There may also be a person–situation–medium interaction occurring. Table 4 illustrates the concepts and domains describing those whose use of the Internet or IRL for meeting depends on other variables. What emerges is a strong indication of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the two media in different contexts. The key concepts appear to be contextual ones: mood, time, setting, alcohol and drug use, sexual needs and urgency, and intentions. Mood commonly predicted whether or not an individual used the Internet. When people had lower confidence or depressed mood, they preferred to meet people on the internet. When people used alcohol and drugs, they preferred IRL meetings. Time and convenience were also mentioned, with the Internet being preferred for quicker, more “urgent” sex (and for a partner also wanting a quicker connection). Other situational variables included were actual physical location (traveling and where outdoor cruising areas or transport are unavailable). The other main contextual variable was intention: The Internet was preferred for quick sex, whereas IRL was preferred if the intention was to have a relationship or something more than sex. Choice of medium appears to depend on mood and sociability, timing, place, and intention. The Internet is preferred for quick, “take-out” sex or when one did not want to be bothered with too much human interaction. In this sense, the Internet appears as a potential substitute for other relatively anonymous cruising areas such as public toilets, bookstores, and bathhouses. Ross (1986) noted that choice of sexual venue depended on factors such as mood, with men cruising outdoors if they were in a relatively good mood and indoors if they were in a poor mood.

Discussion

These data must be interpreted with several caveats in mind. First, this is a study of Latino MSM and generalization to non-Latino MSM in the United States should await additional confirmatory work. Second, although the distribution of responses follows the Hispanic population of the United States, respondents were self-selected and there was a significant drop-out rate that may also bias responses. Ross, Rosser, Stanton, and Konstan (2004) analyzed the biases associated with drop out in this sample and reported that whereas there are no differences between English and Spanish language subsamples, drop outs are more likely to reject compensation, not to have met a man for sex on the Internet, and to be in a monogamous seroconcordant relationship.

Taken together, these data suggest that sexual contact between MSM on the Internet (compared with IRL) is driven by

a number of complex and often contradictory explanations. The importance of these explanations is that they are derived from the population of interest and not from informed deduction (Cooper & Griffin-Shelley, 2002; Ross, 2005; Ross & Kauth, 2002). Many of the previously postulated explanations in the quin-A engine (anonymity, accessibility, affordability, acceptability, approximation) are confirmed. Anonymity, experimentation, ease, plus cost (time and money) emerge. However, there are additional explanations. Market issues (the existence of a huge pool of accessible sexual partners as a form of e-sex) and speed of delivery, along with the ability to filter and select within this large range, was a major domain of the Internet. The excitement of the medium was also frequently mentioned.

The apparently contradictory themes of avoiding the interpersonal and getting to know someone better first were strong reasons for the use of the Internet. Such contradictory themes have previously been described by Davidovich, Kemp, bij de Vaate, and Haufe (2005) in Internet research, in which both sides of a construct are experienced positively, as “antagonistic advantages.” This antagonistic advantage is resolvable if one notes that the Internet allows both for avoidance of the “attitude” and social cues and conventions that slow down the progress to sexual interaction. The Internet also provides a platform for textual interaction that reaches greater depth more rapidly than it does in IRL. Building relationships on the basis of psychological rather than visual characteristics appeared to be a benefit of the use of the Internet, whereas pursuing the “chemistry” of interpersonal contact was an advantage of IRL meeting. Overcoming the barriers of environment and geography was also a frequent theme. Concerns about the control of visual presentation (and “truth” surrounding personal descriptions) were often mentioned, along with allowing for greater freedom for shy or less attractive individuals. Ross (2005) questioned what is considered the element of “real presence” in cybersex: It is apparent from these data that cybersex was distinguished from “real” sex and was often either an option for limited times or contexts or a form of audition for IRL sex. On the other hand, the Internet was also a medium for emotionally uninvolved take-out sex in what Tikkanen and Ross (2003) referred to as “technological tearoom trade.” It appears that cybersex contains not so much the “real presence” of a sexual encounter but enough of the content to make it an acceptable substitute or screening for an IRL encounter.

The mix of Internet interaction and IRL interaction was described by a significant number of men as depending on circumstances, including mood, time, place, substance use, what was being sought (sex or relationship), and the need for anonymity. The degree of urgency of sexual need was also mentioned. These data suggest that the Internet has become another option in the homosexual and homosocial matrix and fills a niche (and simultaneously creates a new sexual ecosystem) for MSM. It also, as Ross (2005) noted, allows for experimentation: “doing” without necessarily “being” in an anonymous setting.

Finally, these data further demonstrate that responses to open-ended questions on the Internet can be analyzed quali-

tatively (Mann & Stewart, 2002). They appear to be somewhat more condensed and staccato given the electronic medium, but the pointed and highly saturated text makes for easy coding and suggests that the Internet provides a rich and responsive medium for qualitative data. As Davis et al. (2004) suggested in their synchronous research online with MSM, the opportunity for reflection provided by on-line-elicited material does produce typically dense and rich material in terms of both content and syntax.

It is apparent that the Internet presents MSM with a previously unavailable niche in their sexual and social ecosystems to expand the range of sexual partners, to filter potential partners for greater specialization and selection, and to experiment or audition without the “real presence” of an IRL partner. The ability to overcome some of the disadvantages of IRL meetings, including compensating for shyness or less marketable attributes, and the potential to either provide quick release or greater depth, are important attributes. It is clear, however, from the themes that emerged, that the language of the marketplace and consumption (the Internet as access to a bigger market) was at least as strong as the language of desire (such as excitement and intimacy). The language of experimentation was relatively lacking, in part perhaps because this study recruited from sites that might have oversampled men who were more “out” as gay. Romanticism in getting to know partners better was balanced against the use of the Internet for quick and uncommitted sex. Further qualitative data on the use of the Internet in non-Latino populations are needed to confirm and extend these data.

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